

The Trailing Family: An Overlooked Key to a Successful Relocation

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The critical importance of the "trailing spouse" to overall success of an expatriate assignment has been known for more than 20 years. Research has shown repeatedly that, among American expatriates abroad, spousal dissatisfaction is the leading cause of aborted assignments (early returns) as well as of expatriate "brownout" (expatriates performing poorly but remaining on assignment).

The reasons why spouses are critical to assignment success has long been well understood. She (and increasingly he) is fully and intimately involved with the employee in every facet of the overseas experience except the actual performing of job responsibilities. Spouse and employee select and organize a home together, explore the new community together, try to learn new customs and language together, socialize with others together, eat and sleep together, all on a continuing daily basis. So when the spouse is distracted or distressed, it affects the employee. When the employee is distracted or distressed because of the spouse, his (or her) on-the-job performance suffers.

For example, when confronted by the myriad differences of an unfamiliar community and culture, and in the absence of neighbors, friends, and relatives to whom she can turn for support, some spouses become quite upset. This unhappiness can be expressed in several forms, from constant complaining through deepening depression all the way to substance abuse and extramarital affairs. This is what the employee comes home to each evening; this is the person he spends his weekends with. As would be the case back in the States, such an on-going situation at home distracts the employee from being effective on his job.

The employee also is encountering the unfamiliar values and expectations of the new culture, which puts him under adjustment stress as well. But here is the crucial difference: Because he goes to an office almost every day, he has both a potential source of guidance and support and something productive to do with his time. Very often, the spouse has neither of these advantages. Most spouses are prohibited from working abroad. And if the spouse had been gainfully employed prior to the couple's transfer, the sudden absence of fulfilling daily work may require one of the spouse's most demanding adjustments.

A globalizing company invests \$300,000 to \$1,000,000 annually in each of its expatriates. Such a substantial investment gives the company a compelling interest in ensuring that each expatriate quickly becomes as effective and productive abroad as he (or she) was back in the States. A way of accomplishing exactly this has been developed and perfected over the last 35 years: intercultural training and support. Intercultural training professionals, recognizing the

critical role of the expatriate spouse, are as well prepared to train and support her as they are the employees.

What is the cost of intercultural training and support for expatriate couples? A useful rule of thumb is that a comprehensive, selection-to-repatriation package is likely to cost up to one percent (1%) of the total costs of the multiple-year overseas assignment. Quite often, the cost is often less than one percent.

Although American companies historically have been slow to embrace the productivity-increasing and investment-protection benefits of intercultural training and support, there seems to be an upsurge of acceptance in the last year or so. Taking pro-active steps in this area will only help your organization and the people involved.

Adjustments for the Spouse

1. New country
2. New community
3. New language
4. New customs
5. New school systems
6. New job status for spouse
7. New personal status or lack thereof

Spouse Involvement in Deciding to Relocate

- 30% never involved
- 36% involved after decision made
- 28% involved during the process
- 9% involved before the process begins

Major Issues for Kids/Teens

1. Insecurity
2. Loneliness
3. Identity crisis
4. Visibility
5. Conflicting values
6. Unresolved grief

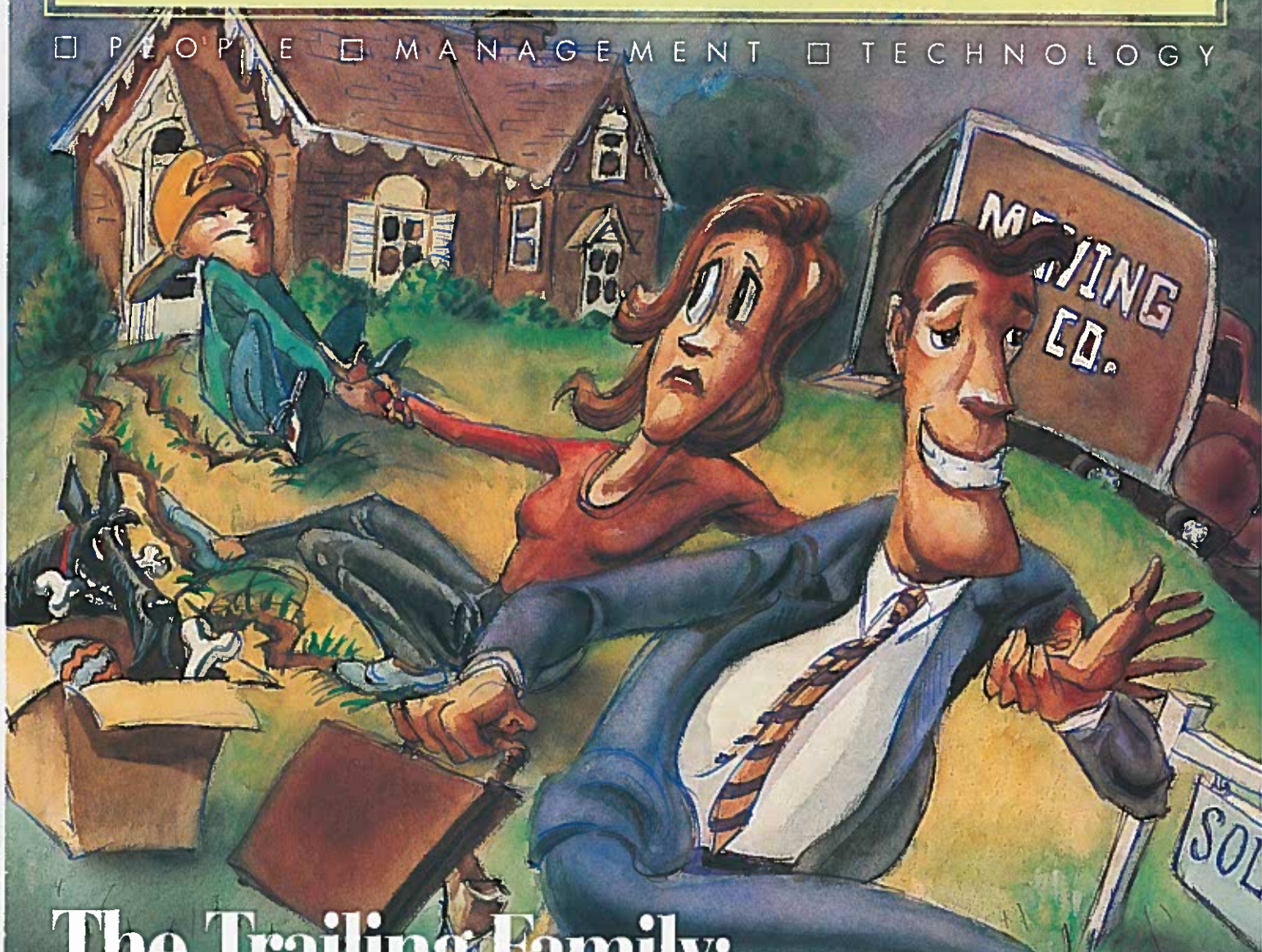
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