



#### Articles:

- 2001 - Volume One
- 2002 - Volume Two
- 2003 - Volume Three
- 2004 - Volume Four
- 2005 - Volume Five
- 2006 - Volume Six
- 2007 - Volume Seven
- 2008 - Volume Eight
- 2009 - Volume Nine

## Expatriate Women Talk About Their Lives

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This article is about the experiences of expatriate women living in a provincial town in New Zealand. Eight women shared their experiences of living away from their home country. All were partners of men transferred to New Zealand or whose partners made a deliberate choice to join a company based in New Zealand. There is an extensive literature available on the experiences of expatriate assignments, but managers in companies transferring staff write most of these. Participants in such surveys may be reluctant to be completely open since their careers may depend on what they say. This project is an attempt to find the inside story about what it feels like to live and work in another country. While no firm conclusions are possible from these results because of the limitations of the sample group and the method of research, some useful insights from the perspective of the trailing spouses are identified. In this study it was found that some partners were the driving forces behind accepting an expatriate assignment or the decision to terminate or continue with the assignment. Interesting issues raised included the difficulty encountered by not being in control of your own destiny and the feelings of alienation from family and friends at home. The insights of these women highlight issues that companies could consider in developing strategies for relocating expatriate staff, including finding methods to increase choices and providing advice on involvement and support of parents back home.

### Introduction

There is an unspoken and undefined relationship that employers have with their employees' partners and families, which rarely needs to be managed by employers. When moving staff between countries, human resource practitioners will often develop special relationships with the employees' families. The success of the move is in part determined by experience of the whole family, not just the employee. The relocation of families for work presents special challenges to human resources in the management of this relationship for the mutual benefit of all parties.

Many organisations need to relocate staff between parts of their operations, job mobility being a feature of many contemporary management and professional careers. It is often used as an essential part of the career development of the manager in an international firm. For instance a pool of international, flexible managers is seen as important for corporations needing to do business across the globe. The need to send employees overseas has increased. At the same time as there has been an increase in the number of working women work and dual career couples (Kilgore & Shorrocks, 1991).

Increasing job mobility between national borders has been accentuated by the advent of the single European market and rapid changes in Eastern Europe. The opportunities of new regional markets (like Eastern Europe), and rapidly growing economies (like those in the Pacific Rim) will increase the need for expatriate managers in the future (Hodgetts, 1993). As New Zealand companies have become globalised there are many opportunities for managers to be posted overseas at least in the early set up phases (Hodgetts, 1993).

Meyer (1995) suggests that, despite downsizing within multi national organisations, the number of expatriate managers has not declined. The same research also concludes that length of assignments has become shorter with three and a half years the average length of time, and that non-married partners are recognised in 72 percent of company policies (with this applying to same sex partners in almost one quarter of the companies). This represents a significant change since the late 1980s where non-married partners had to marry before leaving on an overseas assignment. The major hurdle identified by Meyer (1995) reported by the majority of companies to future employee mobility is the dual career problem. The views of respondents were very strong on this issue, and yet only four percent of companies reported that they were considering introducing new policies to address this.

The story of Carol Leigh is typical of the difficulties of dual career families (Solomon, 1996). Carol was a financial analyst who left a career in New York to accompany her husband to Tokyo on an international assignment. She wanted to work but when she had completed establishing her family into Japan she found the legalities of acquiring a new job were almost insurmountable. Her self-identity was so central to her work that her self-esteem began to suffer. At first she was happy to explore and meet other expatriate wives but she found that people paid only a passing interest to her ideas. She began to suffer symptoms of depression. Following the visit from a friend from New York she began to feel envy and sorrow at what she had left behind and became angry. She began haranguing her husband to return early to the US since she felt she was wasting time and wasting away.

Most research on expatriate assignments is quantitative, focusing on the needs of organisations and based around data collected from questionnaires. While this type of research does provide some insight into issues, it does not get close to the emotion and feelings of people and their families. It allows HR departments to develop more appropriate policies, but does not reveal the extent of the life transformation through the expatriate experience. It is the stories behind the statistics that are the subject of this article.

### Job Mobility and Relocation

While job moves are often the door to promotion and career development, a traditional response to coping with relocation is seen as a private matter for employees and their families, and of no direct concern to employers (Forster & Munton, 1991). However, with high relocation costs and high costs of failed assignments, employers are no longer able to afford not to be involved. Forster and Munton (1991) suggest that many employees and their families would welcome more help with the personal side of relocation. Early research on relocation specifically focused on the employee in individual transfer situations; in more recent times family issues have moved to the forefront. The principal non-work reason given by employees for refusing job moves is the potentially disruptive effects on spouses and other family dependants (Forster & Munton, 1991). Eby and Allen (1998), in a study on types of services that should be included in relocation, reported that spouses rate this issue as being more important when considering future decisions to relocate than do the employees.

Employers generally are unaware of the disruptive effects of a move on their employees and dependants and few companies have formal policies to assist the relocation process. Usually, a generous financial package is offered but there is rarely practical support for the house hunting process, information on children's education or spouse employment. In particular, the stress ratings for dual career couples are higher than for families with one principal (usually male) salary earner (Forster & Munton, 1991).

## International Relocation

Forster (1991) identified four issues about the management of international relocation. The first relates to a difference in perceptions of the reason why companies move employees. Employers regard job moves primarily to fill vacant positions. Employees, however, see these primarily as career development steps. The second relates to the small number of women who relocate to take up new jobs. If career mobility and international experience are the way to senior positions, there will be a significant proportion of women who will not be able to compete for these positions in the future. The third relates to the short period of notice staff had for a move. Forster reported that in the early 1990s only a small minority of employees surveyed were given more than two months notice, and one third were given less than two weeks. The fourth issue relates to the poor support available to people in their new location. The majority of employees wanted more support while settling into their new jobs. The stress levels reported by relocating staff were a result of the disruption to family life and the children's education, rather than to the new job.

Brown (1992) highlighted the differences in perceptions between employer and relocating employee. He reported that the focus of the employer is on getting the person to the new assignment and starting work. However this is not the focus of the relocating family. There are four key issues that should be of concern to employer: the leaving home issue, in country settlement, candidate selection, and living internationally. These are useful headings around which to develop appropriate HR policies to manage expatriate assignments, but crucially Brown missed a fifth issue, that is the management of repatriation. This can be poorly managed with many expatriates leaving their companies on their return home.

Many overseas assignments are not successful (Tung, 1981; Black, Gregersen, & Menderhall, 1992), and failure rates average 45 percent (Fitzgerald, 1997). Generally failure implies the premature return or recall before the completion of the overseas assignment (Scullion, 1991). Companies waste money on failed assignments. Zeira and Banai (1985), however, suggest that the real cost of a failure is much greater, because there is invariably a negative impact on the relationship between the host country and the company. Companies can also waste money on successful assignments. Financial incentives are often given indiscriminately without considering the individual family circumstances of the employee.

The issue of staff selection is well documented with an understanding that a successful assignment begins with selecting the right candidate. A number of researchers have identified variables for the selection of a successful manager for an expatriate assignment (Harvey, 1996). These include the following variables: technical competence, environmental adaptability, appropriate personality traits, and a good family fit. The desire to undertake a foreign assignment and motivation to be successful are also important considerations (Harvey, 1996). Carolan (1991) also identifies the family as critical to the success of an assignment. His evidence shows that an employee, whose family is happily settled in a new location, adjusts more swiftly and suffers less impaired job performance.

Most expatriates are selected for their technical competence and professional experience. International experience and skills such as languages or cultural experience are often rated secondary (Solomon, 1994). Employers have high expectations of these selected managers who may find it difficult to discuss any problems they have because of the fear being perceived as not being able to cope.

There is a belief that the strongest predictor of a successful expatriate assignment is a prior successful assignment (Martin, 1995). It may be that employees who have already relocated know the issues and are less fearful of doing it again. The research of Martin supports the view that there is a link between the stress experienced in relocating and prior moves. Those who have had a number of prior moves will experience less stress.

Policies to manage expatriate assignments can range from being detailed and extensive, as found in some major international companies such as Shell and BP, to being non-existent in some smaller companies. Where comprehensive policies are developed, country of origin and destination, and also length and type of assignment usually classify them. Components of packages vary greatly but may include some or all of the following: accommodation management, freight and storage, healthcare, dual taxation, language and cultural training, spouse assistance, car, travel home, car, repatriation, education, salary and allowances.

A pre-assignment trip is highly rated as most important in predicting a successful expatriate assignment. A well-planned trip allows a family to assess whether they are happy to accept the assignment. A decision at this stage not to go can save financial and emotional costs later.

Trends in policies indicate that companies are increasing the flexibility of assignments and increasing documentation of policy to ensure standardisation. Spouse assistance and repatriation have historically been an obstruction for companies to persuade good candidates to take international postings and then return home and stay with the company. Freidman and Overstall (1996) concluded that most policies to manage expatriate assignments fall short of best practice but the increasing high costs of assignments are forcing a change.

Arkin (1993) reported that over one fifth of employers in the UK had contracted out relocation for domestic moves and one third for international moves. Reasons given for outsourcing these activities included cost management and

ensuring expertise. In the US, some companies are bringing relocation management back in house to offer a more personal service. It is important to give a personal service to relocating families. The role of the relocation agent has gone from traditional estate agency background with some communication skills to more of a counsellor. The relocation agent today is part estate agent, part marriage guidance counsellor, part-agonist aunt and probably qualified to write the good school guide (Bates, 1995).

Companies that regard both the employee and the spouse as a unit to be relocated have a far higher chance of a successful assignment, and increasingly spouse employment, in its various formats, is included in relocation packages. This is particularly important where the family relies on a dual income. In this situation, if the spouse cannot find a suitable job in the area, the employee simply will not relocate (Carolan, 1991).

There is also significant research on the effects of relocation on children. Most children do not seem to suffer from any undue effects from relocation but the health of spouses relocating does seem to be affected with increased health issues, anxiety, and negative attitudes towards their marriage and their lives. In traditional families that are expatriated, the divorce rate is higher than average; when both parents have careers the problem is exacerbated (Reynolds & Bennett, 1991). However, one of the most frequently cited reasons for the premature ending of an overseas assignment is the inability of the "trailing spouse" to adjust to the different physical or cultural environment (Tung, 1982; Black & Gregersen, 1991). This is because it is often the partner and family who have to interact most with the local environment.

## The Management of the "Trailing Spouses"

The management of the "trailing spouse" is, therefore, a major source of failure, and is an issue that is not well managed by most companies. The loss of a second income is significant. So too is the loss of the partner's career path. The trailing spouse can lose continuity of employment, promotional opportunities, and financial independence (Finn, 1992). Leonard & Sommer (1995) also found that employment assistance for the working spouse was critical. Although few spouses received employment assistance during the relocation, nearly all of those responding to the survey said they would want some form of assistance for any future moves.

Partners of expatriates are very cynical regarding what they call the lip service paid to their predicament (Fitzgerald-Turner, 1997). Focus, a resource centre for expatriates, surveyed its London members and found only 11 percent of partners received any career support. Assumptions are made that high allowances will solve the problem although Right and Associates found that 42 percent of dual income families reported a drop in living standards after relocating (Fitzgerald-Turner, 1997).

Some examples of programmes for trailing spouses include: an annual payment to enable the partner to maintain skills, attend relevant professional conferences and maintain certification (3M); or the offer of the trailing spouse a job, when both are employees (Mobil). The difficulties faced by spouses who want to continue with their career are extenuated by relocation to a different culture. Assistance on appropriate job search methods in the new culture and cross-cultural training could be offered. Many dual career families turn down expatriate assignments. The trailing spouse can experience not only job loss but also a sense of isolation. Where identity and self-esteem are related to work, the loss of career can be devastating. Some companies have introduced "Split expatriate assignments" which is really long distance commuting. This is where partners live in different countries and have regular visits (every weekend for example). This creates strains but can work in Europe or countries where travelling distances is not prohibitive.

Harvey and Buckley (1998) reported that dual career couples have unique needs that are exacerbated when one of the members is relocated overseas, because the career conflict of the trailing spouse is translated in to tension for the family unit, which in turn affects the ability of the employee to perform well in the overseas location. Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi, and Bross (1998), using an archival, longitudinal research methodology on entire families relocated overseas, concluded that there is a relationship between the characteristics of a family and the ability to make the cross-cultural adjustment to living in a foreign country. They also found that families who have a positive perception of moving internationally adjusted much better than families who did not. The research integrated the findings with appropriate theory and suggested practical implications for companies including extending organisational programmes available to the relocating employee to spouses, developing programmes that would benefit family members at their various stages of development, and re-establishing social support systems in the new locations.

Although most trailing spouses are women, there are some men who make the move with their partners. Trailing men often face loneliness and isolation (Greenbury, 1996), because most expatriate support networks are usually run for women by women. However since the increase in male trailing spouses, social groups for men have emerged. For instance in Brussels, Spouses Trailing Under Duress Successfully (STUDS) has over 40 members who are men, looking after children or those who are trailing (male) spouses.

Research to date has focused on the employer policies and costs of international assignments or on the cost of failure and the reasons for failed assignments. It has not focused on the experience of expatriate assignments from the partner and family's view point. Statistics describe what is going on; personal stories describe what it feels like and some of the reasons behind the statistics. Even with the best intentions, however, organisational representatives may be ill equipped to tell it how it is (Lawson & Angle, 1994).

## Research Objectives and Method

Given this focus on employer policies and costs associated with expatriate assignments at the expense of the assignee's viewpoint it was decided to undertake a qualitative study on the experiences of a small group of expatriate women with the following objectives:

1. to identify the personal experiences of relocating partners and the issues relating to expatriate families;
2. to examine the significance of dual career couples in the management of international staff; and,
3. to identify the issues that partners consider that companies should address in the management of expatriate assignments.

A small focus group was used to achieve these objectives because it was considered to be more appropriate than a questionnaire to capture the feelings and emotions of those living an expatriate lifestyle. This study took place in a small provincial town in New Zealand in an area where two major oil companies are located with a relatively high proportion of foreign nationals.

12 expatriate partners were invited to take part in a focus group. Partners were either members of a newcomers club (a club run by expatriate partners for new arrivals), or recent arrivals invited by other partners. Of these, eight finally took part in the focus group. There was high interest in participation. All partners had experience of expatriate assignments. To ensure the maintenance of confidentiality, names were changed, and specific stories were not used if this allowed individuals to be identified.

The participants were between 31 and 53 years of age and were married to men with international careers resulting in a need to relocate to foreign countries. All spoke English as a first language. The countries of origin represented in this group of women were Canada, the UK, the US, Australia and New Zealand. Seven had married men from their home country; one had married a man from a foreign country. All had children but none had used boarding schools. Three participants were currently working, the other five were full time home makers.

The sample was not a representative sample of the population of expatriate partners; it was a convenience sample. The researchers selected a qualitative methodology rather than a representative survey, because they wanted a sample of articulate and willing and available people, who could provide an "insiders" view by reporting their own personal concerns and feelings about the issues relating to expatriate assignments.

There are four sources of unreliable self-reported information as follows: the failure to understand a question, the failure to accurately recall the answer, indecision, and dishonesty (Ellis, 1994). These merit some comment with respect to our methodology: In this study the questions for discussion were not complex and none of the participants indicated any failure to understand. Studies on failure to accurately recall events have shown that memories differ greatly between people (Ellis, 1994). People sometimes change their minds about things during the course of an interview. There was no evidence of this during data collection. While participant dishonesty is always possible, volunteers in a study usually will try to be honest. There may be tendency to tell the researcher what they think they want to hear. In this study the participants were noted for the openness of responses and discussion. This was particularly notable around issues concerning length of stay in the current assignment.

Anonymity was assured by coding names in the final report and destroying tapes and no personal stories were used in a way, which could identify subjects. The participants were given questions to consider prior to the focus group meeting. The questions used are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Focus Group Discussion Questions

<p>Describe the process by which you and your partner/family first discussed the possibility of moving to New Zealand.</p> <p>Can you remember the issues of concern to you at this stage?</p> <p>Talk about what influenced the decision you finally made?</p> <p>Did you discuss any other countries? Why were they rejected?</p> <p>What were the family issues which concerned you in the choice of New Zealand?</p> <p>When you discuss your next move or the end of the assignment, what issues do you discuss?</p> <p>What would make you and your spouse/family stay in New Zealand?</p> <p>How much influence do you think you and the family has on decisions about expatriate assignments?</p> <p>How much influence does your spouse think these have?</p> <p>What does it feel like to be living like this?</p>
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The focus group provided interaction not only between the partners and the principal researcher, but also between partners. Groups were invited to begin by introductions and there was an informal atmosphere. The principal researcher participated in the group when invited to share experiences but these are not included in the results. The researcher actively directed the group when the discussion began procrastinating on issues but apart from this the discussion group was very unstructured.

All information gathered deliberately sought to record responses directly from subjects. Information was recorded and tapes transcribed. The term partner is used to refer to the expatriate wife and is used in preference to the term informant, more usually used in qualitative research. One of the objectives of the research was to personalise the feelings and emotions of people living an expatriate life style. For this reason, names were assigned to partners to personalise the research. From the responses to the questions in Table 1, the issues raised were grouped logically into seven broad themes, which emerged from the data. These themes, with a selection of actual statements by partners, are summarised in the next sections of the report.

## Emergent Themes

### 1. Expressed feelings on moving to New Zealand.

Most partners reacted positively to the news that they were to move to New Zealand. Two partners expressed the concern that they did not feel able to reject assignments for fear of reprisals from the employer in terms of a possible worse assignment location and their partner's career prospects. This lack of control was also cited as an issue for a third partner. One partner and her spouse made a deliberate choice to come to New Zealand for the lifestyle opportunities.

The location of an assignment was important to all partners and New Zealand was regarded in a positive light compared to the alternatives. New Zealand compared favourably against all third world locations and all countries with languages other than English. This would indicate that language is an important factor to the partner in the choice of assignment. New Zealand also compared favourably with the UK, Australia and Canada in terms of environment, climate, opportunities for recreation and relaxation, and with the US in terms of healthcare. All partners were positive about the education standards, which compared favourably with all home countries. Cost of living seemed only to be an issue where it was perceived as significantly higher than the home location. If the cost of living was lower than the home location, it was not perceived as a benefit of being on an overseas assignment.

The timing of a move was significant. As one partner put it: "...I wasn't ready to move. I had been vice president of a group for a year and just been talked into taking the presidency. Everything was working in my life and in order. My son was doing well in school, one of the best schools in the world. But, because I don't work, we move for his job. It was a great experience for him. The company makes the decisions. You just go along. If you say no, the next time something comes up they might not consider you. Coming to New Zealand wasn't a bad thing. It was just bad timing as far as I was concerned..."

The additional difficulties of medical cover, family support (particularly for an older child), and organising a move when pregnant were described as an additional stress.

## 2. The experience of moving every few years.

Those who already had experience of moving house and towns within their home country felt most comfortable with change and with moving to a foreign country. They reported feelings of anticipation at every move and were comfortable and looked forward to reinventing themselves. They saw moving as a positive benefit for their children. These partners talked about the excitement of reinventing their lives in a new location and the benefits and challenges of doing this. An illustration of this is in the following partner's comment: "...I like changes. When you move to a new community you have to make friends and it's like living lots of different lives. Each place you go it's like a renewal you can do something a bit extra each place you go to."

Three partners expressed reservations about moving often and two of these were making more permanent homes in New Zealand and felt moving was not good for their children. They did not welcome change and did not want to continue with a lifestyle of regular moves. The issue of children's schooling was raised by a number of partners. When children are in exam years this becomes difficult and became a priority for some in terms of location and timing of moves. So as one partner who was on the international circuit stated: "...You didn't have choices where you went, you were sent. We got fed up with it. Schooling was getting to be an issue and how long can you do postings with no control. We decided to leave the system and take control."

Those who moved the most often were the most comfortable about moving again. Those who moved the least often argued for the benefits of not moving often and found it most difficult. Children's ages and level of education were an issue although the three partners who were more negative about moving saw this as more of an issue than those who were positive about moving and change. There were no similarities or differences between the two groups ages of children or school grade which could be a factor explaining this difference in perspective.

## 3. Spouse influence on choice of assignment.

There were some considerable differences between the level of influence perceived by the different partners. For instance one partner said "...I don't think I have a lot of influence. He wouldn't change his mind just for me. I made his life miserable for the first 10 months here but he wouldn't give in..." This did not seem to be related to those who were also in work where it might have been expected that they would wield some economic influence. Two partners who were the drivers of the decision to move to New Zealand were clearly the most dominant in the group and confident in their opinions, although they were not in paid employment.

The issue of dual career partnerships did not seem to be important to this group in New Zealand. The partners currently working had "portable jobs", that is they could be transferred over different borders and were not country specific. Age or the ages of their children did not distinguish the four partners who were full-time homemakers. This is different from the indications in the literature review. If the dual career is the current issue facing employers in relocation at the moment this was not reflected in this study. One partner who had also worked in non-English speaking country said that learning a language was an extra hurdle in getting a job and cited this as one very positive reason to come to New Zealand.

## 4. Experience on arrival at a new location.

The experience on arrival at a new location was mentioned a number of times and was clearly remembered by partners. The first few weeks seemed to set the scene for the next few years. Poor experiences were remembered in detail. One partner stated: "...We were moving to our next assignment and I was pregnant with small children. I was pretty nervous but you think, oh it will be all right. When we arrived at the hotel they had no record of our booking. You can imagine, we had a four year old and a one year old and I was six months pregnant. We felt like Mary and Joseph. Anyway they made room for us. The other expatriates felt really sorry for us but no one ever came and said can I give you a hand. He was at work and no body sat down with us and said you need to do this and this. It was really frightening. No one came to see me and I know it sounds pathetic but it was really frightening. We couldn't find a suitable house and it took ages to find a Doctor who would take me on. I have a medical history so finding a Doctor was really important to me. In retrospect, I can't believe no body came to the hotel. No body rang and said how are you doing. There didn't seem to be anybody there. As it happened the baby had to spend 7 weeks in hospital. To have paid for that in the states would have wiped us completely."

Two partners discussed the difficulties of making a fulfilling life, when their partner had a life organised for him through work. The support network of other expatriate partners was important at all times but was particularly valuable during the first few weeks. This supports the issue identified by Brown (1992) where in country settlement was identified as one of the four key issues in the management of expatriates.

Specific issues related to this early experience on arrival included the problems in making friends with local people, and as one partner suggested: "...New Zealand people are very nice but as far as making true friendships, mine are with expatriates..." All felt it was easier to form relationships with other expatriate partners.

Homesickness was also exacerbated by those who had the most difficulty with travel home, and also with siblings or other interests in the parent country.

## 5. Continuing relationships with family and friends back home.

Partners talked about a lack of understanding from their families and friends who did not know how to be supportive, when to keep in touch and how to react to their very different lifestyle choice. Problems included dealing with jealousy and the difficulties in sharing experiences in a positive way with those who are not privileged to have similar experiences. One partner described her feelings on this as follows: "...I found that the family at home doesn't know how to deal with us. They kind of have this idea that because we live around the world, and we do so much, that we can't do their things anymore..."

Relationships with parents merits more detailed comment. The literature did not indicate any issues regarding the parents of expatriates. However, this group of partners discussed in some detail the alienation felt from parents as a direct result of living a different lifestyle. They described the problems of discussing what was happening in their lives and difficulties experienced when they were not included in family discussions. One partner described it well: "...I found the family at home does not know how to deal with us. They kind of have this idea that because we live around the world and we do so much, that we can't do their things anymore. They wouldn't invite you to things. There was this New Years party in this little hick bar that we all grew up in and they didn't even invite us. I was heart broken..." The whole group echoed this sentiment with some sadness and it clearly extended in some families to brothers and sisters who were no longer close due to the different life style choice. Only one partner did not express this as a significant issue and she indicated that her family was quite dysfunctional prior to her moving overseas.

## 6. The worst things about living as an expatriate.

The worst things were described as leaving behind elderly parents and missing out on experiences at home with friends and family. Three partners had experienced the death of a parent whilst living abroad and this was a difficult time to be at a distance both practically and emotionally. One partner described the after effects of this as "...Ever since Dad died I take the phone off at night. If you have a call at 3 am in the morning what are you going to do. I don't want to know until I can do something about it. Your heart stops when you get a call in the night"

All described the support they had had from the expatriate community when this happened. In one case this support came from the local community. As one partner explained: "...We were living right out in the sticks. It so happened that while the other expatriate women were all away, we received a phone call to tell us that my father had passed away. The call came early and my husband went to the office to fill out the necessary travel documents. Within 30 minutes eight of my friends were at my house. They came with their husbands and the men waited quietly on the front porch while the women came and sat in the living room with me. None of them spoke English. At that occasion it was not even necessary. They just sat and took turns holding my hand. It certainly was not a defined religious experience since they were all a different religion from me. All I know for sure is that the personal compassion of this small group of people shone through that day and words were just not needed to gain that result. It was an experience I shall relive forever..."

This situation reflects the close experience of living on a compound with other families, a life style experienced by two partners. One partner found support and strength from compound living; the other found the community insular and frustrating to deal with.

All partners had difficulties in assimilating with the local culture. This was a problem experienced by all to varying degrees and those who had lived in a number of locations and were experienced expatriates showed more maturity and acceptance of the time it takes to make friendships. Perhaps the difficulties of assimilation are illustrated in the following statement: "...The worst thing was being forced to live with people that you would not normally associate with which sounds pretty trivial but when you live on a compound and you're living it day in and day out it's really awful. It was creepy living where the political system was totalitarian and you could be thrown in jail if you put a foot wrong. It wasn't that we did, it was just the knowledge that things weren't the way they were in a democracy. I definitely would never go to live in Africa. I don't care how much money I was offered I would never go to a place where I felt our lives were in danger. If I had known about our last location I probably would not have gone there. The hospital was atrocious. I was pregnant and we weren't told that men were not allowed in to the delivery suite. It was terrible. We were lied to. I was terrified the baby would be born dead. I am a nurse so I knew what should happen. I was never checked. They did nothing. The Doctor discharged me and she had never even looked at me..."

All partners expressed a sense of alienation from the lifestyle of those who did not live abroad. This applied to families and friends in their home countries but also to local nationals. The partner who was a New Zealander by birth and who had lived abroad also found difficulty in assimilating with New Zealanders, choosing instead to socialise with other expatriates. One partner described this as being exacerbated by the economic differences. She had experienced living in a third world country and locals saw her family had so many material possessions that this in itself led to difficulties assimilating into the local culture.

Language was seen as a huge barrier by those who had experienced living in countries where English was not the spoken language. All had seen this as a positive benefit for living in New Zealand.

## 7. The best things about living as an expatriate

All partners were positive about the experience of living in different cultures and the opportunity to travel. They felt their lives were enriched by the experience and recognised that they were in a privileged position. Some had the opportunity to share this with family and friends who came to visit. Six felt their children had benefited enormously from travelling and living abroad and said this benefit far outweighed the disruption of changing schools every few years. As one partner put it "...Raising our children in an environment that was family oriented made our family very close. Being exposed to other cultures was a wonderful eye opener and teacher. We spent the majority of our married life in third world countries so we formed life long friendships. On third world assignments no one had any family around, only each other and we needed each other on a daily basis..."

The making of close friendships was a positive benefit. All partners had made friendships that were closer than many family ties. The following statement reflects the strength of these friendships: "...We have made some very good friendships. We still have friends that will be life long friends and I communicate more with them than I do with my family..." When partners had no family around them, the expatriate network provided friendships that replaced these. This was particularly relevant for the two partners who had lived on compounds. They described how they relied on friends to help them navigate round new social structures on arrival in a new country and also to support them during their daily living. The benefits of overseas living were described as close friendships formed and six partners felt it was good for their children. All felt the experience was enriching and they benefited from being more broadminded.

Two partners expressed reservations about continuing this lifestyle and cited their children as reasons for considering settling in one place. These partners had found change difficult and had not moved as often as the other six partners.

The four areas addressed in the research objectives were the dual career issue, the issues of concern to partners on assignment, the advantages and disadvantages of the lifestyle and finally issues which affect the decision to accept an assignment or not. These results showed no debate of any substance on the dual career issue. They clearly outlined some advantages and disadvantages, and gave some indication of issues, which would affect a decision on whether to accept an assignment, or not.

## Discussion of the Stories

Interpretation of the stories generated was difficult due to the sheer volume of information but the information was rich and it was a privilege to hear about the experiences. There were problems in collecting data through focus groups. Members may have been suggestible and fed on each other's experiences. The use of a phenomenological research method enabled a real understanding of the feelings and emotions behind the experiences.

The partners in the focus group quickly moved away from the set questions to talk about the parts of their experience that interested them. These issues included four topics, which will be discussed here in more detail. Firstly, the information on moving and reinventing yourself, secondly the experience of arrival at a new location, and thirdly, the difficulties of maintaining relationships with families and friends at home. These three areas had not been highlighted by the literature review as important issues. They do raise some interesting questions. A fourth area of discussion here is the lack of control over destiny. These will be discussed with respect to the objectives of the research.

### 1. Change orientation

Those who moved often were most comfortable about moving and found benefits to reinforce the positive aspects of moving and to support their lifestyle choice. Those who moved the least were the least comfortable about continuing this lifestyle and found reason to support this choice. The emotions of leaving and moving on to a new life over and again were discussed at length. Clearly this becomes habit forming for some people and they welcome the change and the opportunity to reinvent themselves. Comments such as "I feel an outsider" and "In some ways its as if you've passed on to another world" reveal that others are saddened by the experience. The language of bereavement showed an understanding that grieving over past lives and experiences was part of the life experiences of the expatriate. This supports the findings of Martin (1995) who found that the strongest predictor of a successful expatriate assignment was a prior successful expatriate assignment. From a management perspective this is an important issue with respect to the third objective of the study.

### 2. The first few weeks

The experience of arrival at a new location is an area not discussed in any detail in the literature yet this group clearly indicated that this was an important time in any assignment. Two partners spoke passionately about the arrival in a new destination. This was years after the event but clearly had an impact later on their stay. This suggests that companies can make a significant difference in paying attention to details at during the first months of an assignment. This also has implications for the management of expatriate assignments (Objective 3)

### 3. Alienation from family and friends

Maintaining relationships with family and friends at the home location was the third new area raised by the focus group as an important issue for them. All partners expressed feelings of alienation from families and friends due to the experience of expatriate living. Comments such as "The family at home does not know how to deal with us" and "It was hard to speak to people when you got back home" reveal the difficulties of sharing experiences with those who have not had them. This also partly explains the need to seek out expatriate communities for friendships.

Three partners had experienced the death of a parent whilst living abroad. Support by companies and friends at this important time were remembered years later. The literature had not identified this as an important issue but clearly it was for this group, and is clearly an issue relating to the intense personal experience identified through the first objective of the study.

### 4. Lack of control

A fourth area raised by two partners, one on the focus group and one in the interview, was the issue of being in control of your destiny. The lack of control over where you would live next was frustrating for these two partners. They said that the company made the decisions and you go along with it. Some partners in the focus group agreed that they felt disempowered by the international circuit of large multinational company's. One partner had been the key driver behind her partner leaving a large multinational company because she was frustrated by the lack of control or ability to influence her next move. In this case this clearly showed that the spouse did have a significant influence over the decision to remain in an assignment. Forster (1991) identified the lack of control as a key concern in the management of expatriates.

With respect to the second objective of the research, much has been written on the dual career couple and the literature review indicated this was the next significant issue for companies relocating staff abroad. The partners in this research did not express this as an issue. This may have been due to the age profile, family structure, and the

selection of the sample or the fact that dual career couples are not widely represented in the expatriate community. Four partners had maintained their careers whilst living abroad and having children. They discussed briefly the issue of maintaining a career with children and the issue of relocating abroad appeared less significant than this. Only one partner said that having a career was not possible for her living this lifestyle. The other four had made deliberate choices not to be in paid employment.

The research explored in some detail the emotional responses to the experience of expatriate living (Objective 1). Some partners felt they were the driver behind the decision to accept an expatriate assignment. One felt she had no influence and the majority felt it was a joint family decision. Those who felt they had influence were not those partners in paid employment but they were more dominant than the others who felt they had less influence.

## Limitations

This study does serve to confirm the findings of Brown (1992), that the successful handling of change in the past is a strong predictor of ability to handle change in the future. Forster (1991) found that a lack of control was a key concern in the management of expatriates and this is confirmed by a number of the partners in this study.

The numbers involved were a limitation of this study. One country (Canada) was disproportionately represented and all the partners' first language was English. All partners involved were female. It would be interesting to compare the experiences of male expatriate partners or those whose first language was not English. While the dual career issue was not significant among this group of partners, this cannot be generally applied to expatriates, as a group since the sample used here was very small.

One of the partners had a case study of a failed assignment. This has not been discussed further due to the constraints of confidentiality. However this would make an interesting direction for further study and provide valuable insight into those assignments that do not go as planned. One partner had terminated an assignment early and again this has not been discussed due to the constraints of the report.

## Concluding Observations

While definitive conclusions are not possible, given the sample limitations, a number of observations can be made. First, the openness to change was important to those who liked moving. It would be possible to research previous lifestyle to determine if this was a factor in current lifestyle choices. From this small sample it would appear that in selecting staff for expatriate assignments, employers could possibly examine past lifestyle to predict those families that would relocate successfully. This corroborates previous research that has focused on the family as an influence on the outcome of overseas assignments (Caligiuri et al, 1998; Harvey & Buckley, 1998). This could assist in determining better choices and saving the costs of failed assignments. More focused selection resulting in a better fit between the applicant and the position is important in controlling costs for expatriate assignments. This area could merit further research, concentrating on past lifestyle choices to predict future lifestyle behaviours, as discussed by Martin (1995).

Second, the first few days of an expatriate assignment are important in setting the framework for a successful assignment, so there is the potential here for a company to do a number of things during this time to ensure the employee and the family feel settled. This is probably an extension of the special needs of any employee during the induction phase with a new company. Special attention could be given by employers to ensuring that these days and weeks are well planned.

Third, the level of alienation from parents and friends at home was unexpected. Employers could seek ways to develop programmes to involve the extended family in the process and could look for literature for families to assist them in understanding the needs of their children. Practical advice on how to support families abroad could be extended to include siblings and parents. Further research in this area might reveal that this is an issue for other groups of expatriate partners.

Fourth, employers could look for ways to increase the choices offered to expatriates and their families to try to negate the effects of lack of personal control. This could include an early intervention to assess possible family issues restricting mobility to some countries. Some large companies offer visits to the country prior to accepting an assignment and this would increase the feeling of control by providing more information prior to making decisions. Vacancies could be advertised rather than offered to employees so that expressions of interest rather than appointments became the first stage in the recruitment process.

Finally, the issue of the dual career couples identified in the literature as the issue for the 1990s (Harvey & Buckley, 1998) did not appear to be an issue in this research. It may be that social change still has to manifest itself in the expatriate community in New Zealand.

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## APPENDIX ONE

### *Information on partners*

CCode name	AAge	CCountry of bBirth	Countries lived in	TTime in New ZZealand (This aassignment)	NNumber of cChildren
JJulie	443	CCanada	Indonesia, New Zealand	3 3 years	1 1
LLucy	553	CCanada	US, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia,	11 year	33

			Libya, New Zealand		
K Kristin	443	CCanada	New Zealand	1 1.5 years	44
Y Yvonne	338	EEngland	Netherlands, US, New Zealand	33 years	42
R Rachel	331	UUSA	New Zealand	22 years	22
L Lynette	444	AAustralia	England, New Zealand	6 6 months	22
SSusan	339	EEngland	Netherlands, USA, New Zealand	5 5.5 years	33
A Amanda	335	N New Zealand	Australia, Qatar	2 2 years	22

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