

Voices from Home: the Personal and Family Side of Unaccompanied Short-term International Assignments

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The view of the transferee away from work is murky to say the least. And how the family copes with an international assignment is not always crystal clear, either. Copeland presents the findings of a recent survey to give a more transparent picture of the personal side of an international assignment.

By Anne P. Copeland, Ph.D.

“Kathleen,” a fictitious married Canadian in her early 40s, is dashing home from work to have dinner with her two teenage sons before she goes to her photography class at the community center. She quickly reads the e-mail from her husband who this week is in Caracas, Venezuela. His message includes details about their plans for her to accompany him on his next two-week stint in Puerto Rico, which his company pays for every year or so and is one of the perks of the lifestyle they have accepted.

His job in international development sends him out for two weeks, then home for two weeks. During the 10 years he has had the job, she has found a way to make it work, enjoying the time she has alone to pursue her passion for photography and appreciating the good times she and her husband have when they are together.

“It’s a hard way to raise a family and it requires commitment from both spouses to make it work. Family time is key and must be made top priority when you’re all together,” she said.

But, taking stock of the whole experience, she says that “I have grown as a person, and am much more independent than I used to be. I have a career now to keep myself busy, and two great teenagers. There have been times where we have missed him, but we are a very close-knit family. He makes us his number one priority when he is with us.”

Bottom line, she describes her marriage as strong, her children and herself as happy, the assignment as “the best solution,” and says that if her husband were offered another job like this one, she would encourage him to take it.

Across the globe is Stephen, a fictitious married Australian in his mid-40s. His teenage daughters have just spoken to his wife, a consultant who is living in San Francisco, CA, for 12 months, before she goes to bed and they start their homework. His wife has just said she will have to postpone her visit home because of a delay in one of her projects, and that she will miss one daughter’s school play and the wedding of their cousin. Stephen slumps in his chair and considers what will happen next.

He has been urging her to make more frequent visits home, but she has gotten nowhere with making this happen. Reflecting, he acknowledges having learned some new skills during her absence— “doing laundry, cleaning, financial management.” And he is happy that he has gotten to know his daughters better—“our relationship has gotten much better—we talk more and spend more quality time together.”

But, he says, bottom line, “our relationship is more strained, I am exceedingly lonely, and am suffering from depression.” When asked directly if he thinks taking the assignment was the right thing for their family, he replies, “Personally no. It has been very stressful for both of us and probably will cost us our marriage.”

Why So Different?

The names of these characters are made up and some of the details imagined. But their words and the stories of their lives as spouses of people on unaccompanied short-term international assignments or extended business travel are real. What accounts for the difference in their experience? What factors make it more likely that an assignment will succeed? While they may be less expensive for the sponsoring organization, and may avoid the disruption of spouses' careers and children's schooling—all commendable family benefits—they are not without family stress, as both Kathleen and Stephen illustrate. How do the traveling parents stay connected to their children? How do the household and child care tasks of a busy home get accomplished with one fewer adult around? What is the impact on marriages?

That is what we set out to understand in our study, "Voices from Home: the Personal and Family Side of Unaccompanied International Short-term Assignments and Extended Business Travel," conducted by The Interchange Institute and sponsored by Relocation Support Services, LLC (RSS). A parallel survey, sponsored by Full Circle, an RSS company, was available for employees on short-term assignments themselves, "Voices from Home," and the report is available at www.interchangeinstitute.org.

Summary and Recommendations for Organizations Considering Short-term Assignments

- **While these assignments may be cost effective for the sponsoring organizations**, they are not necessarily so for the employees and families themselves. Only about one-third felt they were being adequately compensated in light of the additional costs they encountered— communication, food, household help, transportation, and child care.

- **On the other hand**, those who did feel adequately financially supported said that they, their children, and their traveling spouses were all more positive about the assignment. Discern and address any financial costs families face and be creative about how to minimize the sacrifices families make. Compensation for costs can be small in size but large in family impact.

The more couples felt coerced into accepting these assignments, the more negative the outcome—the children had more behavior problems and the at-home spouses were more depressed, more likely to have considered divorce, and more likely to see the assignment as a mistake. Those who had input into things like when visits would occur and how long they would last had significantly better outcomes. It was particularly hard on couples for the length of the assignments to be ambiguous. Give couples as much input into the assignment as is feasible, as early and as often as plausible, and be as clear, open, and flexible about assignment length as possible.

- **Consider shorter assignments**, alternating overseas with at-home assignments, and more frequent visits home or family trips. These can all address the impact on employees' personal and family lives.

- **Those who managed to find ways to participate in household tasks while absent** (e.g., electronic banking, elder care via telephone) and who actually did more tasks than usual when they returned home had spouses who were happier with the assignment and their marriages. In a similar vein, participants whose ideas about marriage remained

fundamentally the same during these assignments were more positive all around. While organizations may be reluctant to advise employees on these kinds of family matters, ensuring that employees have the time to stay connected with their families while they are gone, and have the time, space, and energy to re-connect with them while home, is clearly within the purview of organizations. In addition, employers should support and facilitate couples seeking professional counseling and/or connections with support networks of others in a similar situation. Tips from peers and guidance from experts can help couples manage the challenges these assignments pose.

• **Employees' personal and work lives are highly interrelated.** When one is positive, so is the other, and vice versa. Provision of support to families clearly can have a positive effect on work outcome

Voices From Home

The 68 participants of the “Voices from Home” study were the at-home spouses of employees who were on or recently had been on one of these kinds of assignments:

Short-term assignment. Defined as an international assignment, unaccompanied by any family member, lasting 60 days to 12 months (66 percent of the sample fit this category).

Extended business travel. Defined as an unaccompanied assignment involving international travel for 10 or more work days per month, with returns home every seven to 10 days, for a period lasting at least three months (34 percent fit this category).

The final sample of participants in this study:

- were mostly female (88 percent) and married (88 percent); others lived as domestic partners;
- were fairly evenly distributed over the age range from 26 to 50;
- were citizens of one of 20 countries, 28 percent of whom were from the United States;
- were spouses of employees on assignment in one of 27 countries, 16 percent of whom were on assignment in the United States.

We first asked participants to describe the assignment and their family lives. What were the financial implications for the families? Did they feel they had any input into the assignment? How did they manage their household and child care tasks during their spouses' absence? Besides the challenges, did the assignment provide any advantages to them and their families? We then asked how these factors were related to their view of the work assignment and their own and their family's adjustments. Following are some of the key findings.

In general, the assignment was given mixed reviews by the participants. Only 41 percent said that they would encourage their spouses to accept another similar assignment, assuming the terms and conditions would be the same. Slightly more than one-third (34.6 percent) said they now considered this assignment to have been a mistake.

When asked to rate how they felt about the assignment on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being “terrible” and 7 as “delighted,” 33 percent rated it a 5 or 6; there were no sevens. The most common rating (41.2 percent) was a 4, or “mixed.”

In short, there was quite a range of response to the assignments. There certainly were many like “Stephen” with very negative reactions, but also many like “Kathleen” for whom the assignments were working well. We set out to discover how these two groups differed, especially in ways organizations could control.

Financial Support

In general, survey participants did not view these assignments as being particularly financially beneficial. Thirty-five percent said they saved money as a result of the assignment; only 9 percent said their spouse's employer had done everything it could to financially protect them. Only 35 percent said that they were being compensated adequately.

In fact, 35 percent said they had new financial costs as a result of the assignment. These included costs for:

- communication, such as extra international telephone calls;
 - food, mostly to cover costs that exceeded the traveling spouse's per diem;
 - household help, such as a handyman or a tax preparer;
 - transportation and travel—one participant described the subtle but persistent problem of having to pay for taxis and meals out of pocket, coupled with the challenge of keeping up with reimbursement requests—
- filing the paperwork often fell between the cracks leading to a financial loss for them; and
- child care, with one woman writing, "I must have a babysitter to do the smallest errands. My youngest child must accompany me everywhere while the oldest is in school. We have no family in the area, so there is no 'free' care."

In addition to these tangible costs, others noted a harder-to-quantify income loss:

"I have decided I will not work again until we are all overseas, as otherwise our children would never have time with either one of us."

When asked directly if they had received any compensation for these extra costs, almost all respondents indicated that they had not. A few reported bonus pay or a per diem or travel reimbursement that they were able to stretch to cover family expenses ("My compensation has been that we share five flights between the two of us to see each other," said one respondent.).

The level of financial support made a difference to participants. Those who did feel adequately supported financially reported many positive benefits. They said their traveling spouses were more positive about their employer and job—they were more likely to say their spouses enjoyed the work and co-workers, and could work at maximum efficiency. They also rated the assignment more positively from their own and their children's points of view.

Participants' Advice to Families or Couples Considering a Similar Assignment

We asked participants for any advice they would give to others considering an assignment like theirs. Advice fell into these categories; a sample response is given for each.

1. Communicate with spouse.

Get a web camera so that you can talk to each other, free of charge, and to be able to see one another. Also, sit down together and calmly talk about what this will mean to you and your relationship.

2. Consider the assignment carefully.

Don't even consider it unless you have a rock solid, strong marriage. Any problems of trust in the marriage will be magnified tenfold during the absence. You must be able to feel at ease with not knowing the whereabouts of your partner or what he's doing.

3. Take care of yourself.

Stand up for yourself first. As long as you feel comfortable with yourself everything is going to be OK. You will be like the sun with sunbeams

around you: being happy yourself you will be able to make your partner and family happy, too, and manage everyday's problems tremendously well.

4. Create and maintain a support system.

Make sure that you have a support system in place. It is very important. If family is not nearby and their presence is not stressful have them pay a visit while the spouse is gone.

5. Exercise independence.

The spot to avoid is to bother the partner with every single little problem occurring at home and, to the contrary, by not discussing the important decisions with him makes him feel excluded from the life at home and makes him resentful because he will feel worthless except as a wealth's provider: a very explosive situation.

Having a Voice

Almost 60 percent of the participants said their spouse felt it would be detrimental to his or her career to refuse this assignment; about one-third felt they themselves had no choice but to agree to accept the assignment. Those who felt more coerced were more depressed and said their children had more behavior problems than those in which coercion was not a factor. Interestingly, in a kind of "we're in this together" finding, when both spouses either agreed that they had been pressured into accepting the assignment or agreed that they had not been pressured, participants felt more positive about their marriage.

Most participants said they had very little input into how the assignment would work. Only at the point of the initial planning of the assignment, in deciding whether this would be an accompanied or unaccompanied assignment, did about one-half of the spouses say they had any input.

When asked what they wished they could control, by far the most frequent response concerned the length of the assignment and, in particular, the ambiguity in length—"I wish we had some say in when he is to go away, for how long he will be gone, the next time he will be home, and for how long that will last," said one respondent.

Participants who did have more input into these aspects of the assignment were significantly more positive about the assignments, complained less about the amount of their spouse's travel, and reported being able to perform their own jobs better.

At the personal level, those who had more input into the assignment, trips home, and family visits were significantly less likely to have considered divorce. And those who discussed the assignment in detail with their spouse were more satisfied with their marriages, both in general and during the assignment. Early buy-in and involvement from the at-home spouse clearly makes a difference.

Household Tasks and Child Care

One of the practical challenges of unaccompanied assignments involves getting the day-to-day household and child care tasks completed. What may under other circumstances be shared between spouses now may fall to the at-home spouse, although some aspects of these tasks may be able to be done by the traveling spouse. For example, 28 percent said their traveling spouse did "most or all" of the bill paying, even while on assignment, presumably electronically; 27 percent said their spouse did "most or all" of the elder care needed, even while on assignment; and about one-third said their spouse did "a little bit" of organizing of their mutual social and leisure activities, even on assignment. In another way of handling the absence, about one-third of the participants said car and home repairs were simply left until the traveling spouse was home on visits.

Those who said their traveling spouses did more housework and paid more bills while away were more likely to call the assignment the “best solution” rather than a mistake, and claimed their spouses saw it that way, too.

Participants also were asked to compare how these tasks got done before the assignment with how they got done during home visits. Did they do less (perhaps out of deference to his or her limited time at home) or more (perhaps to make up for time gone)? Most said their traveling spouses did “about the same.” An exception was that about one-quarter said their spouses played with their children more while home on assignment than they had before the assignment started.

Increased levels of housework and child care paid off. Participants who said their spouses did more repairs, bill paying, and social organizing than they used to gave a more positive rating to his or her job, rated their marriages more positively, and were less depressed.

Changes in Marriage

When one family member is absent for extended periods of time, his or her role in the family can understandably change in significant ways. Sometimes this phenomenon is called “boundary ambiguity,” that is, ambiguity about whether the member is “in” the family in usual ways or not. Between 30 and 40 percent of the participants said that their view of what it means to be married had changed.

Changes in views about marriage were related consistently to poorer outcome, both in terms of the assignment itself, the at-home spouse’s mental health and, not surprising, marital satisfaction.

On the other hand, some weathered the absence with views of their marriages; in fact; one wrote, “It was his job when I married him and it will be his job until he retires. In return, I get to travel and live abroad, my children get to attend wonderful schools free-of-charge, and my husband will get an early retirement. It is not always easy and it is lonely even when all my friends are in the same position, but it is still a good life.”

Participants’ Advice to Employers

Participants were asked for any advice they would give to employers considering sending an employee on such an assignment. Advice fell into these categories; a sample response is given for each.

1. Offer pre-departure services.

Pave the way with training. Give more information on what to expect. Provide information on the country. Hook us up with people who have been through it.

2. Communicate directly with family.

They should have been more proactive in contacting me, instead of my spouse. They rely on him to communicate to me they are reaching out, which does not mean the information gets to me. Days are very busy for my husband, and when we do get a chance to talk, we talk about our children and us, not that someone from his company called to ask how things were going. Also, I think an employee is more apt to show his employer that things are running smoothly, that he or she is moving along successfully.

3. Assist in employee maintaining family contact.

Make him accountable for the time he is away—that he not travel more

than the parameters they suggested. Make him take his comp time—he works seven days a week when gone—AND his holiday time.

4. Offer job and career planning for the traveling spouse.

Be more effective in their ROI planning and efficient usage of the resource that they train, develop, grow. I get frustrated that my partner is seen as indispensable but that the organization is unable to plan what they can do with him for a permanent role. There is no role to return to in his home country that matches the role he does now. He also is still paid the basic salary from prior to beginning the assignment despite the fact that his experience has developed him and the organization has restructured including him at a higher level.

5. Be generous with compensation.

More days free to share with us, extra money for vacation, provide and pay for DSL connection and web cam to interact with the spouse through Internet, give more allowance to communicate with one's spouse or partner.

Advantages and Benefits

Clearly, some couples perceive enough advantage to these assignments that the balance weighs in favor of a positive perspective. The most frequently-claimed advantage (by 64 percent of participants) was that the unaccompanied assignment meant that the at-home participant did not have to leave his or her job or career. A majority (60 percent) also reported that the time they did spend with their spouse was now especially positive, although sometimes this was described with a bittersweet twist: "Our marital relationship is much more honest and raw than ever before. I have pushed and pushed for long and deep discussions because with him being gone, we need to look for other means to stay closely connected. My husband has made tremendous effort to develop closer and more connected relationships with our children."

Another frequently noted advantage was the participants' increased independence although, even in noting this advantage, some participants reveal a degree of ambivalence about it: "I am able to live in a foreign country on my own and manage my day-to-day life. However, this is not the life I want to lead. I left my home and job to move to be with my partner and I have ended up being on my own with our child more often than I wanted or indeed he wanted. Yet he is unhappy to be on his own hence the need for me to follow...."

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