

Children And The Challenge of Relocation

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As the challenge and resistance to executive relocation increases during these recessionary times, companies are turning their attention to the family needs of transferred employees. In the 70's firms introduced spousal assistance programs, house search supports and financial subsidies to facilitate executive moves. In the 80's relocation policies introduced career counselling and fine-tuned job search assistance for the trailing spouse. In the 90's, successful relocation now necessitates an examination of the 'family' costs. For example, the question asked by parents in response to a real relocation proposal is "what about the children?". The question, in turn, for relocation consultants is "How do children fit into the relocation puzzle?"

Setting the Scene

According to the Canadian Employee Relocation Council, companies transferred over 22,000 employees and their families last year. The C.E.R.C. also estimates that the government transferred at least as many people during the same period. Dramatically, however, research indicates that up to 40% of transfers fail (Toronto Star, 1990). With rates like these, companies are understandably looking carefully at the reasons behind a relocation failure.

The time lag between an actual relocation and the discovery that it isn't working, however, makes determining the source of the failure difficult. One thing is certain, relocation has many costs.

The Cost of Relocation

From a corporate point of view, transfers make bottom line sense. Relocating an existing employee saves the cost of recruiting and training for the new position.

Roy Newman of Royal LePage Relocation Services estimates that the costs of hiring a new employee run half again as high as the executive's annual salary. This includes recruitment fees, advertis-

ing, training time and lost productivity. By transferring an experienced employee, the company saves these costs and places a proven candidate in the new position.

Transferring an existing employee has costs. Today most companies cover some or all of the hard, or direct, costs. These include transportation to the new location, temporary accommodation (up to \$400 a day in Tokyo or Toronto), cost of living adjustments, and home subsidies to cover discrepancies in the standard of living. For international transfers, some companies cover the cost of private tuition and trips home during school holidays (C.E.R.C. NEWS, September/October, 1990).

In contrast, the 'soft' costs of relocation are borne primarily by the transferred employee and his or her family. Most of these costs relate directly to the emotional stress of uprooting the family and moving to a new and unfamiliar environment.

Soft Costs: The Challenge of Change

Moving to a new community means adjustments in family routine and habits. There may be cultural and language barriers, available recreational outlets may differ. The family must find doctors and dentists. Even shopping for food and general household needs can pose major problems for a period of time. Often, the biggest challenge is dealing with loneliness and trying to make new friends. According to Dr. Patricia Nida, author of *The Teenager's Survival Guide to Moving*, it can take six months or longer to become acclimatized to these changes.

There are other considerations, too. For the transferred employee, the relocation may mean little more than adjusting to similar work in a new setting. Most of the demands and expectations will be familiar. This is not so for the spouse, who must either find new work or stay at home and tackle household duties in a new setting. If the spouse worked before

and is no longer working, this is yet an additional adjustment to make.

For the children, a transfer means changing schools and familiar neighborhoods. Relocation can be particularly stressful for teenagers, as confirmed by Dr. Nida. Transferring to a new school can mean entering a new educational system (public or private) with different standards and curriculum. Leaving old friends and having to make new ones can be a frightening prospect. It is no wonder families often approach proposed transfers with trepidation or outright rejection. Given the range of potential adjustments transferred families must make, one begins to understand how relocation failures can occur.

Failures have costs. The employee may choose to resign. In this case, the firm loses all the costs of the move as well as any investment in training that employee. If the employee transfers back home, the company retains the benefits of training that employee, but loses all costs associated with the move. Moreover, the company must start all over to fill the transfer position. It is, therefore, in the best interests of companies to make transfers work.

Making Transfers Work

Spousal assistance programs have clearly demonstrated their value in facilitating moves, particularly in light of the observed increase in 'spousal career conflicts'. According to Erv Wittrich, spousal consultant with Positive Moves Inc., greater numbers of high potential employees are refusing to relocate because the 'trailing spouse' objects to interrupting his/her career development (C.E.R.C. News, May/June, 1990). In response, companies offer such services as career counselling and job search assistance for the trailing spouse. The aim here is to satisfy both parties. Many companies also finance scouting trips to the new location to help the family find an

appropriate community to live in, one where all family members will feel comfortable.

Making the right choice, however, requires time and information relevant to the family's individual needs. Families want more than a Welcome Wagon's list outlining a community's 'best' shopping and schools. For this reason, more executives and their families are turning to relocation specialists for search assistance.

Fitting Children into the Relocation Puzzle

Finding the right house and community is one challenge. Relocating children and conducting a successful school search is a critical piece of the puzzle. There are several issues to consider in finding the right school.

The biggest challenge is matching the child and the school. Mismatches can occur when the family targets a specific community or house first and assumes they can send the children to the public or private school in that area. The local school may be a very good one, but it may not fit the particular needs of the child. Or, the opposite situation can occur. A family might pick a particular school, expecting to send their children there, only to discover that they cannot gain admission to that school after they move. Both situations create considerable stress for all concerned.

There are frequently differences in academic standards between schools. Such differences can disrupt the continuity of a student's education and need to be taken into careful consideration when selecting a school. For example, students moving to Japan find academic standards there are significantly higher, especially in math. Similarly, students moving from Ireland are often a grade level ahead in terms of language arts curricula and study skills.

Within Canada, students in Western Canada and the Maritimes qualify for entry into university with a Grade 12 diploma. In Ontario, six Ontario Academic Credits (replacing the now defunct Grade 13) are now required. A student in Quebec must complete 2-3 years of CEGEP (college) after Grade 11 before qualifying for university. These differences make it difficult for a Grade 12 stu-

dent from Ontario whose family must transfer out of province. One solution reached by a number of families is to leave the student behind to complete his/her education. In such a case, the company might provide financial assistance, such as reimbursement for boarding costs during the school year or travel costs during the school holidays.

Sometimes, however, adjustment difficulties have little or nothing to do with the curriculum. Just like people, schools have personalities. Sometimes, the 'best' isn't the 'right' school.

Children with special educational needs pose additional challenges. School boards usually require a recent psychological or educational assessment before admitting an exceptional (e.g., gifted, learning disabled) student into their system. This identification process takes time, requires sensitivity and a great deal of advance planning and paper work. Without this preparation, delays of several months can occur in some Boards before a child is appropriately identified and placed. For specialized programs, such as, French Immersion, determining whether the language of instruction reflects French from Quebec or from France can make a significant difference in the selection of a school setting.

Choosing the Right School First

Where does all of this lead? Relocation specialists have found that families who choose a school before they pick their new home experience considerable less stress. By adjusting their housing requirements to the family's education and social needs, parents can minimize the stress of changing schools and make sure that their children are getting the best possible education. Certainly, the fewer the problems, the easier the transition for the entire family. When the school is right, the children and the spouse are settled and happier. There is also an immediate impact on the well-being of the transferred employee in his or her new job.

Each relocation is different and each requires careful planning and research. Children and their educational needs have become an important piece of the relocation puzzle. The key to a successful transfer is making it work for everyone involved.