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The Spouse Trail

By

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When Snigdha Mehra, 31, was informed that she had just been elevated about four rungs up the ladder and was to head an important division in the company, she was thrilled. But she was also troubled. Her husband, a high flying IT professional had just given up a lucrative assignment abroad so that he could be based in Delhi with his wife and infant son. And now, this promotion meant that Snigdha would have to move to Bhubaneswar where it was not really possible for her husband to find suitable employment. Snigdha's joy at her professional success is tempered with disquiet with the possible impact of her move on her marriage. Unfortunately for her company, Snigdha begins her new assignment having to deal with the realisation that her husband feels let down, and abandoned.

Transfers have always had a potentially disrupting effect on family life. Earlier, when the wives of officers in the merchant navy or the armed forces had to cope on their own for long spells, the women had to cope with loneliness of being without their men, and cope with bringing up the children single-handedly, points out psycho-analyst, Rotraut Roychowdhury. Often, when the man did come home, his presence was seen as a disruption and interference! But today, the problems are perhaps even more complex.

Corporations need to move individuals to give them a better understanding of the business, for career progression, and a host of other reasons. However, as the dual career family becomes increasingly more common, organisations have to figure out how to deal with the problem of the spouse. In a market-driven environment, much depends on the perceived value of the employee that the company wishes to transfer. Also, it would depend on the employee's attitude towards his/her spouse's career. "I think some men assume that it's the wife's duty to put her career on the back burner---it may even be taken as an indication of 'how much do you love me'", points out Dr Leena Chatterjee, Professor of Organizational Behaviour at the IIM, Calcutta. While it is still, the female spouse who is the trailing spouse, this is changing. Studies on the subject have been done in countries as diverse as the US and Japan. These show that while earlier, families invariably accompanied the transferred executive, the percentage of spouses who now choose not to re-locate is rising. As a consequence, executives are now more reluctant to accept a transfer. In the US, fifty percent of those transferred now decline to move because of the impact on the family, and especially on the career prospects of the spouse. When the spouse chooses not to re-locate, there are many

issues that have to be addressed by both couples. Fashion designer, Kiran Uttam Ghosh had a long distance marriage for many years as she had to stay in Kolkata to look after her business whilst husband Gaurav, an executive in a tea company was posted to Kochi. The couple kept in touch with daily phone calls, and frequent visits to Kochi by Kiran. "I used to worry about Gaurav adopting a bachelor lifestyle with none of the control on drinking and smoking that I used to enforce", Kiran says, adding that constant loneliness, and a feeling of never really being in either place were other things that she had to contend with. Some organisations help with the travel costs either spouse may incur in travelling up and down to have time together. Others show consideration in fixing meetings so as not to flow into weekends.

"In the old welfare state kind of economy we had in our country, banks, and those in government service, were often assisted in finding posting in the same place. But the assumption that the company wishes to do this now, may not be correct, it depends on supply and demand," says Vidyanand Jha of the IIM, Calcutta. However, since it is often the potentially more valuable employee who is transferred to give him or her, a broader perspective, and a more in depth knowledge of the organisation, this is something many companies will have to deal with even in a tight market. In many cases, it may not be possible for the spouse to re-locate because of a lack of suitable employment opportunities in the new place. In the case of the "trailing spouse", some companies attempt to employ the spouse while others attempt to help with information about job prospects in the new location, some even offering re-employment assistance in writing, and bearing the cost of re-training in the new environment, sometimes for a period of a year.

Every situation has an employment opportunity for someone. In the US, Jane Smith is the President of Options Resource and Career Centre, in Texas, and oversees the growth of the spouse/partner Employment Assistance which has grown from embryonic stages to its current national status encompassing a network of career consultants in more than 175 locations. How long before canny Indian entrepreneurs decide there is an opportunity in the job search, resume preparation, career counselling, and in the event of foreign assignments, assistance in obtaining work permits for the spouse of the transferred executive?

(A Press Fellow from Wolfson College, Cambridge, the author has written on the family for over 15 years.)