

Building a support community

Building a new life in a different country can be difficult. Social support is critical to settling in and maintaining wellbeing.

Employees, their partners and accompanying family members all need to develop social contacts and new friends to adjust effectively. Organisations can help via their relocation policy provision and service provider links.

THE NEED FOR SUPPORT COMMUNITIES

Research indicates that major changes in social activities and in the number of family get-togethers, along with loss of communication with previous work colleagues, are causes of stress experienced by international assignees when relocating abroad.

Suffering from stress is damaging to health and wellbeing. It also affects productivity. If individuals are unhappy and lonely, the assignment is unlikely to be successful.

Employees will be in a new work environment and should have the opportunity to build new networks and friendships there. However, assignees may find this difficult if there are language and cultural differences and if locals prefer not to mix socially with incomers. Non-working partners can find themselves isolated with very few local social contacts. Children will need to make new friends in schools.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT: SCHOOLS

For families with children, schools can provide an excellent source of support. Parents can initially bond with others through their shared understanding of relocating with children.

It is relatively easy to meet other parents. Many international schools have network groups and run regular events where parents can meet each other. Some run cultural and language classes specifically for the parents of their pupils. Parents can become involved in various school committees and activities.

Clubs that operate outside formal school lessons can help children to make friends with others sharing similar interests.

NETWORKS

Networking groups have been set up by the international assignee community across the world. These tend to operate in major city destinations and traditional expatriate locations. Some are aimed specifically at accompanying spouses and partners. These groups are especially helpful where accompanying spouses/partners are unable to work due to visa restrictions.

In remote and challenging locations, where local support initiatives are sparse, there may be networking groups for employees and their accompanying family within the expatriate community.

ORGANISATIONAL ACTION

Local club membership may be supported by organisations as part of relocation policy. Even if club fees are not paid by the employer, information on local activities can be provided.

Many organisations use destination services providers to assist with home and school search. These providers are a valuable source of local information on networks and activities in their area. Serviced accommodation providers can also provide information on local groups, clubs and activities.

Becoming involved in charitable endeavours can provide social support. Involvement in local community initiatives can help to forge friendships with local people and other volunteers. Employers and service providers can provide information on such organisations.

Employers can set up network groups and buddy systems for relocated employees and their families. Buddies can be identified in the host location that can help newcomers to settle in and make new contacts. Home country buddies can also link up with assignees to maintain communications with the home business.



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