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An expat job can be a move too far

By Jessica Twentyman

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When PR executive Michelle Brown left London in 2000 to take up a new job in Hong Kong, she was looking forward to immersing herself in a new culture. The move, however, threw up challenges she had not anticipated.

"I suppose I was quite naïve, but Hong Kong was a complete culture shock," she says. "The humidity was insane, the smells made me ill, there was just so much to take in and not all of it pleasant."

But the most difficult thing Ms Brown had to contend with was the local reaction to her as a young black woman in a community where the expatriate population has long been overwhelmingly white.

"People would literally fall over or bump into things in the street, because they were staring so much. I could stop traffic just by walking down the street," she says.

"You have to remember that this was just three years after the hand-over, and Hong Kong was attracting a lot of people from the Chinese mainland who had simply never seen

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a black person before."

On more than one occasion, she adds, she was asked to pose for photographs alongside Chinese tourists excited by their "discovery".

In spite of it all, Ms Brown thoroughly enjoyed her two years in Hong Kong, choosing to live in Tin Hau, a largely Chinese district, instead of the more usual expat enclaves. She made Chinese friends and learnt basic Cantonese.

"In the end, because I made an extra effort to fit in, and learnt to handle the differences, the experience I had was really rewarding," she says.

Many other expatriate workers, by contrast, find the adjustment to a new culture too much to cope with. Dr Raymond Hamden, a clinical and forensic psychologist, sees a steady trickle of them at his practice in Dubai, often through corporate referral by their employers.

"What I've seen in recent years is that new technologies and the availability of transportation have made life abroad much easier for many expats, because they have more consistency of contact with their former lives and with the friends and family they've left behind in their home country," he says.

"But what I also see is that there are still certain personality types who simply do not adjust well to expat living. The change in culture requires them to move beyond their comfort zone in a way that can trigger intense emotional distress."

For these people, psychological intervention can sometimes help. "But from time to time, it doesn't. Expat living isn't for everyone," says Dr Hamden.

That view is supported by figures from the Brookfield Global Relocation survey, an annual study of global relocation data and trends carried out by Brookfield Global Relocation Services. This year's report shows a 6 per cent failure rate for international assignments (up from 4 per cent in 2009), with "inability to adapt" cited as a main reason behind almost half (47 per cent) of these failures.

An even bigger cause, however, is spouse/partner dissatisfaction with the new location, cited in almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of failed assignments.

The issue of the "trailing spouse" is one that Iain Wilson, chief executive of internet retailer shopping.com, has experienced in his own career and witnessed among his colleagues.

As a senior manager in business development at the UK operations of Yahoo, the internet services company, he was posted back to his native Canada in 2006. The transition was fine for him, but "very tough" for his wife, who experienced intense homesickness for the first year of the two-year posting.

"I think a lot of employers forget the family piece, and turn a blind eye to the impact that a spouse's transition can have on an employee's performance and ability to contribute," he says.

Whatever its cause, a failed international assignment can cost an organisation a great deal of money. Sean Drury is international mobility partner at consultancy firm PwC, advising global businesses on the best way to move groups or individuals between countries.

He estimates that an expatriate worker costs an employer between three and four times as much as an equivalent local worker, after taking into account financial incentives offered to employees to relocate, the costs associated with physical relocation, cost-of-living allowances and any local tax differentials that the employer is required to meet.

"For that reason, there's a growing trend for many of the companies we work with to offer cultural awareness training ahead of a planned move abroad, and a range of assimilation activities when an employee arrives in the new location, which are increasingly extended to spouses and children, too," he says.

When asked to rate the value of cross-cultural preparation, 83 per cent of contributors to the Brookfield survey – including companies such as Accenture, Kraft Foods, Nokia and Intercontinental Hotels Group – rated these programmes as having great value, the highest rating given in the report's 15-year history.

Others balk at the costs involved, says Simon Price, a director at Interdean, an international relocation company. "Recent economic pressures have persuaded many companies that attending to the emotional well-being of expats and their spouses in a new culture is a costly 'soft option', regardless of the substantial medium and long-term dividends associated with cultural awareness training and assimilation help," he says.

Geert Hofstede, an influential organisational psychologist, observes that some courses have more value than others: "It's an industry that has attracted a lot of

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understand their own culture and the way it influences their behaviour, rather than focusing exclusively on the differences that they are likely to encounter in a new location.

What is vital is that expats find their own strategies to cope with cultural differences, says Sean Truman, a clinical psychologist.

He uses Skype to provide mental health services to people living and working overseas from his practice in St Paul, Minnesota and his work is strongly influenced by a childhood spent in Kenya.

For many of his clients, he says, it's valuable to speak to someone with whom they share a common language and culture, but who is removed from the immediate geography and who can take a more objective view of the challenges they face.

"The main goal for anyone facing these kind of adjustment issues should be achieving some balance in their new life," he says.

"Of course it's true that many expats are in a new culture in order to work – but work can't be the only thing in their lives.

"Establishing meaningful relationships and finding activities to do that they find interesting and enjoyable outside of the work environment is key to making a much better adjustment."

Above all, he adds, recent arrivals need to be patient: "For the first 90 days of any major change, you can't know anything about whether you're going to enjoy a new culture or not, however well-adjusted and accepting you are. So the key is not to panic."

In fact, he adds, many expatriates take up to a year truly to settle in and start to enjoy life in a new culture. "Give it time and you might actually end up happier than you were at home," he says.

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