

As the spouse or partner of someone working abroad, you are living an overseas lifestyle with all its advantages and challenges. In all likelihood, you are concerned about how to find work in a country that is not your own. You will have much in common with an independent freelancer, since both of you will require creative and entrepreneurial solutions for finding work. Don't despair, there are many spouses who have found work before you, under all kinds of daunting circumstances. The common traits of those spouses who have successfully risen above the foreign employment challenge are: persistence, boldness, flexibility and ability to network. This column will attempt to put a bit more logic into the specific employment aspects of spousal employment abroad.

Long-term Strategies to Improve Your Job Prospects

Here are a few tips for spouses who are interested in long-term career planning in order to minimize the ups and downs related to following their "working" spouse on international assignments over what might be a 30-year career.

- **Develop a portable career:** Imagine a career that you can apply anywhere in the world, such as teaching, accounting and nursing. Or think of a career where, because of the Internet, you can always bring your client list with you, such as in writing, translating, computer programming or web design.
- **Gain experience in training/teaching:** Training expertise can be applied in almost any environment and any field.
- **Be flexible and open-minded in terms of job choices:** As the "trailing spouse," you often have no choice but to switch career tracks to adapt to your new environment.
- **Always be current in two careers:** Being flexible is important, as you may need to change the nature of your work to better suit the local conditions when moving to a new country.
- **Become a specialist in cross-cultural communications:** This adds value to any career and these skills are entirely transferable from country to country.
- **Be prepared for career down-time:** If you decide not to work, or can't find work, give yourself permission to enjoy alternatives such as: studying abroad, learning a language, volunteering, developing a hobby, acting as an apprentice with an expert, or focusing on family, friends and/or regional travel. There can be some luxury involved in not working.

Job Strategies Before You Leave

There are many things you can do to help with your search for meaningful work before you leave your home country. Here is a short list of essential to-dos:

- **Start your preparations early:** Set time aside at least three months before your departure to make time for job searching.
- **Research employment laws:** If you are living common-law or in another non-traditional relationship, you will need to know what your local status might be for working.
- **Rewrite your resume:** This is best done before you leave, while you have easy access to colleagues who can help you.
- **Important documents:** Bring copies of your university transcripts and ask employers to prepare letters of recommendation to take with you. Assemble examples of your past work with an electronic portfolio or web site. Purchase job-hunting books and tools before your go.
- **Are you reachable?** Set up a permanent, professional e-mail address. Pre-arrange a cell phone/mobile account that will be activated the day you arrive.
- **Research country-specific information:** Read cross-cultural books about your field of expertise and write a short summary of local business practices to show potential employers your understanding of how to function in the local market place.

Networking and Job Hunting Before Departure

It is helpful to know that you are more likely to be employed or otherwise engaged professionally by "internationally-oriented" employers when abroad than with local or domestic organizations in your host country. This is especially true in developing countries, and in countries where the cultural or language divide is broad. Send out resumes before your arrival; it can be very impressive when you contact employers prior to your arrival in your new country and let them know of your upcoming availability.

Here are a few places to begin your job search:

- **Personal contacts in your home country:** It can be very helpful to talk to people who have been where you are going and are willing to give you advice and names of possible contacts.
- **Assemble names of North American institutions that operate in your host city:** The trade officers at the US or Canadian diplomatic mission are a good source for this information, which would normally take you months to track down. They will have lists of: home country firms or NGOs operating in the region you will be moving to, English-language associations, foreign missions and firms from other Western countries.
- **Make contact with national head offices located in your home country:** Contact the US or Canadian head offices of NGOs or private sector firms operating in your destination host country. Speak directly to the US or Canadian-based desk officer managing contracts abroad and offer your services.
- **Academic institutions and associations:** These institutions are often open to hiring foreigners, and often have international projects with international staffing needs.
- **Professional associations:** Check for the names of member companies based in the country you're headed for who may employ people in your field. You have knowledge that may not be readily available and/or there may be interest in your North American perspective.
- **Clubs and associations geared to foreigners:** These groups are always numerous, especially if you are based in a large city. They offer invaluable networking opportunities. There are also expatriate women's groups and sports clubs where you can network with other expatriates.
- **English-language schools:** Check out those offering evening courses for adults; they frequently need instructors, guest speakers, and volunteers for conversation groups.
- **Religious groups or networks:** Almost all denominations have a network or sponsor projects overseas.

Job Hunting on Arrival

Here is a shortlist of essential job-search tasks to undertake upon your arrival.

- **Start job hunting immediately:** Channel your "tourist-high" energies when you first arrive to look for work. Remain neutral to the "wisdom" passed on by other spouses who have not secured work and may discourage you. Set up your home office before anything.
- **Decide quickly what work issues are important and then focus:** Look for work that matches the type of work, work hours, family situation, and work style that you require. Set out with a clear and positive message about these when speaking to employers.
- **Start uncovering work-related cultural issues:** Learn 50 words in the local language. Spend a couple of days reading a few cross-cultural books on your host country and write up a summary of the local norms. You will then have an array of topics with which to impress employers about the local way of doing business.

- **Hundreds of job possibilities are open to spouses:** Your job search will be most effective if you choose to focus your search on one type of job. Expect that your strategies will evolve according to your level of experience and the amount of competition you face. Consider the following strategies and adapt them to your specific circumstances and personality. You could teach at a local university or training firm, become a regional representative for an international organization, offer your services as a freelance consultant, look for work involving regional travel to neighbouring countries, use your English writing skills in countries where English is not the mother tongue, offer to work as an intern to get your foot in the door, partner with senior international consultants as their local or junior consultant, teach English as a stepping stone to other careers, volunteer or mentor.
- **Self-employment is often a good job choice:** Certain skills and professions lend themselves to self-employment abroad more easily than others. The following are samples of the wide variety of skills that have brought in paid work for spouses abroad: writer, editor, translation, journalist, broadcaster, radio announcer, consultant, marketer, head-hunter, accountant, bookkeeper, consulting engineer, international law or human rights lawyer, policy analysis, computer programmer, web designer, software trainer, nutritionist, therapist, physiotherapist, massage therapist, program manager, logistician, disaster relief coordinator, gender specialist, governance specialist, cross-cultural trainer, travel writer, tour guide, conference or event organizer, virtual assistant, transcriber (court, medical, business), teacher/tutor in English and other languages, school administrator, university lecturer, teacher of music, singing, yoga, aerobics, art, flower arranger or craft-maker, sports coach, personal fitness trainer, filmmaker, artist, photographer, interior decorator, provider of services aimed at expatriates, includes investment advice, resume writing, tax planning, life skills coach, house- or pet-sitting service, daycare business, seller of your own creative products (e.g., stained glass, paintings, and quilts), provider of personal services such as picture framing, catering, aesthetic services, teacher of any of the above-mentioned arts and crafts, buyer of artefacts to sell in Canada or the US, home party sales representative.
- **Harnessing the power of the Internet to create a job:** The Internet is prompting a huge spike in international work opportunities, and this is a particular boon for spouses looking for work while posted abroad. Technology in the form of phone and electronic communications, including sophisticated computer linking and file transfer systems allow you to work from almost any corner of the world with considerable efficiency. Even the differences in time zones can be in your favour, whereby you are working all day while your employer on the other side of the globe sleeps. An added advantage is that many net-based businesses or consulting practices allow you to bring your clients with you anywhere in the world. So, when you move to your next posting, your net-based clients or employers may be able to move with you.

Overcoming Common Spousal Employment Hurdles

We can't outline all the challenges that you will face, but here are a few common hurdles and proposed solutions:

- **Local laws do not permit spouses to work:** While it's true that employment regulations tend to prohibit working spouses in many countries, the exchange of services among foreigners is usually not regulated. You can therefore develop business/consulting contracts with other diplomats, foreigners, and international organizations. Similarly, freelance work such as writing, research, and photography for international clients can be another option where the local regulators do not have a say. Another strategy for overcoming work permit hurdles is to become employed as an ad hoc consultant for an established organization who can provide you with a valid work permit when you channel all your consulting contracts/invoices through that organization.
- **Perception by employers that expat spouses will not always complete their assignments:** Employers may fear that spouses will leave their job when their expatriate spouse leaves, or that expatriate spouses don't want a real job or that their family responsibilities will intrude on their professional life. Reassure employers that you will make a solid time commitment and that you will be willing to train colleagues in your area to take over your work when you leave. State your willingness to sign a contract and indicate a commitment to staying past your spouse's posting to finish your project if necessary. If you do not want full-time work, then state it clearly on your resume, but be prepared to emphasize your flexibility.
- **Expatriate spouses live in a cultural cocoon and do not understand or are afraid of mixing with the locals:** This is often an issue with diplomatic staff or high-level executives working for multinationals. If you are looking to work with local organizations, you will have to take concrete steps to break out of your "expatriate ghetto" or cultural cocoon. Impress potential employers with your cross-cultural understanding and openness by interacting with locals and participating in events where you may be the only foreigner. Demonstrate by your actions that you have multiple interests outside the "expatriate compound."
- **Experienced international spouses already have international expertise and should have no problem landing an international job:** Your international experience is valuable, but it is only valuable if you can professionally articulate your cross-cultural skills in the workplace.

Good luck with your job search.



Read the
Extended Article

Want more advice?
Login or register for free access to
MyWorldAbroad.com

Your free subscription paid for by your school.