



**PERMITS**  
foundation

## **International Survey Summary Report**

### **Expatriate spouses and partners employment, work permits and international mobility**

This survey examined the views of 3300 expatriate spouses and partners of 122 nationalities, currently accompanying international employees working in 117 host countries for over 200 employers in both the private and public sector.

It provides evidence that a lack of spouse or partner employment opportunities adversely affects global mobility of highly skilled international employees.

A few focused and simple improvements on the part of employers and governments can make a triple win for families, employers and the countries in which they work.

*"In my experience most employers prefer to ignore spousal employment issues. However, from my personal observation how well a spouse settles is key in determining how an employee will perform. If spousal employment is important to that couple, then companies ignore it at their peril."*

**December 2008**

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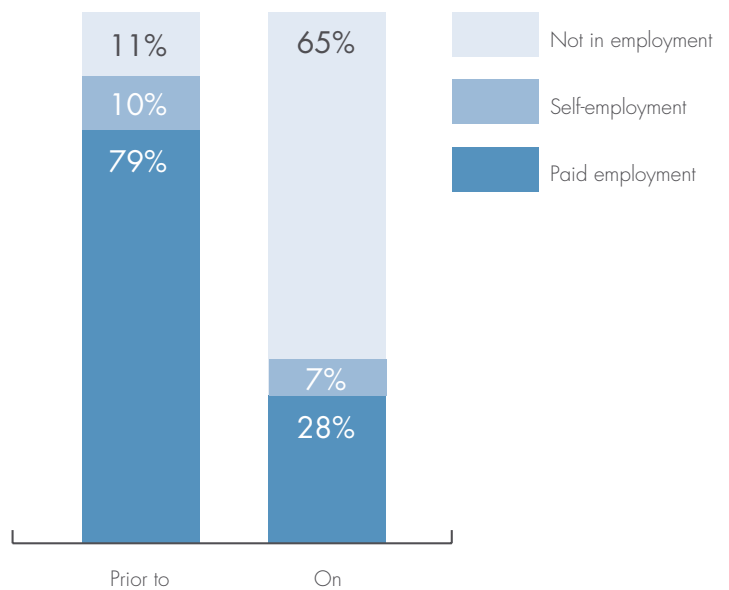
## KEY FINDINGS FOR EMPLOYERS

**A lack of spouse or partner employment opportunities adversely affects global mobility of highly skilled international staff.**

**The spouses and partners of internationally assigned staff are a highly educated and under-utilised talent pool, with diverse professional backgrounds and nationalities.**

**Acknowledging and supporting their employment needs and advocating more flexible work permit regulations will enhance international mobility.**

### EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF SPOUSES



Almost 90% of spouses and partners were employed before expatriation. This figure fell to 35% during expatriation. Three quarters of those who are not working want to work. This is particularly so among the younger age groups, men, graduates and unmarried partners.

*“Supporting partner employment is part of supporting your own staff.”*

*“Facilitating the partner’s career continuity would increase family satisfaction and therefore the employee satisfaction, which in turn affects their willingness to stay for the whole assignment or even an extended period.”*

*“There is a wealth of highly skilled expat partners out there who could add to your company at many levels.”*

**According to accompanying spouses and partners, nearly 25% of international staff had previously turned down an assignment (22%) or terminated an assignment early (7%) because of concerns about the partner’s employment or career.**

Moreover, the responses from the younger age groups and male partners indicate that the problem is likely to increase in future if nothing is done about it.

This is probably the tip of the iceberg since the survey questioned only those who are currently on assignment.

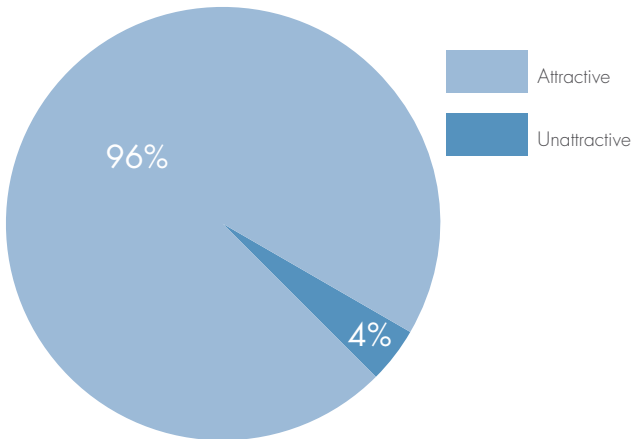
Over three-quarters of respondents would welcome help with finding employment and certainty of getting a work permit. Less than one fifth felt they had received adequate support in these areas.

## KEY FINDINGS FOR GOVERNMENTS

Work permits for spouses and partners are one of the keys to location attractiveness for highly skilled international staff.

Spouses who work will contribute both skills and revenue to the host country economy.

### HOW SPOUSES VIEW LOCATIONS THAT PERMIT THEM TO WORK

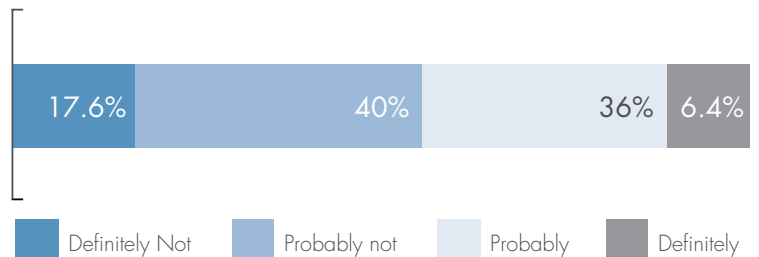


Countries that enable spouses and partners to work are attractive destinations for 96% of respondents.

This is an important signal to governments that want to attract top international talent to enhance inward investment.

Almost 60% of respondents said that in future they would be unlikely to relocate to a country where it is difficult for a spouse or partner to get a work permit.

### WOULD YOU GO TO A LOCATION WHERE IT IS DIFFICULT FOR A SPOUSE TO GET A WORK PERMIT?



*"Our current location, The Netherlands, was a great choice because it was clear from the start that the work permit was not a problem. We are both working here, contributing to the economy."*

*"Expatriate spouses are the most under-utilised talent in any foreign country."*

*"If I work, I will make best use of my skills, pay income tax and have more income to spend locally."*

*"We can contribute a great deal, bringing diversity and new ideas. And there is no long term obligation that the authorities need to consider."*

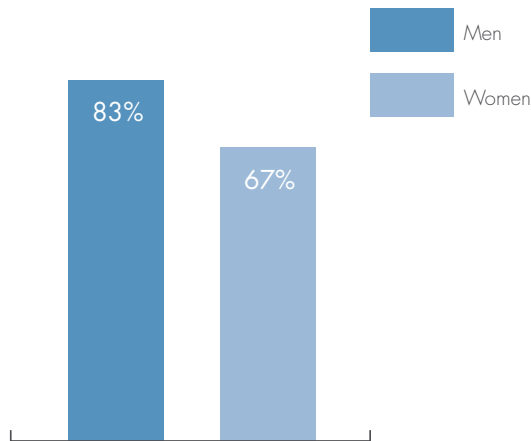
*"Getting a work permit is the most important thing. It is easier to find a job than to get approval to work."*

*"It's really important for me to be legally allowed to work. I would not want to do anything to jeopardize the position of my partner, his company or myself."*

*"Spouses with diplomatic visas are not allowed to work and getting a work visa requires giving up diplomatic protection. Allow people to hold both diplomatic visa as well as a work permit."*

# THE ROLE OF SPOUSE EMPLOYMENT IN THE RELOCATION DECISION

## MY OWN EMPLOYMENT OR CAREER WAS IMPORTANT IN THE DECISION TO ACCEPT THE CURRENT ASSIGNMENT

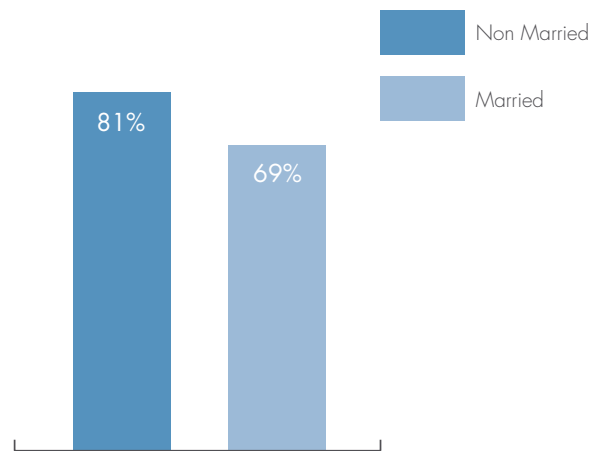
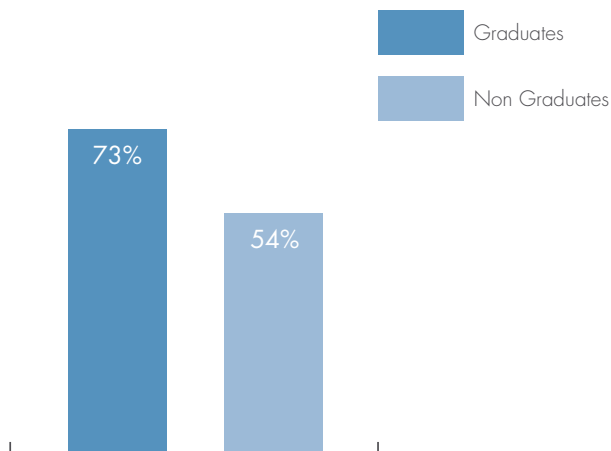
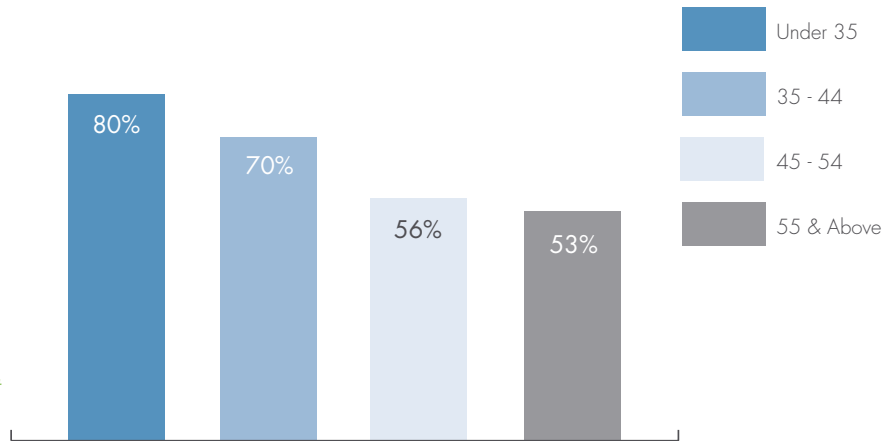


The majority of spouses and partners say that their own employment and career was important in the decision to accept the current assignment.

This is particularly so among the male spouses, younger age groups, unmarried partners and those with a university degree.

80% of the under 35s say their own employment is important...

*"It is important to have the choice to work. Even if we decide to focus on my spouse's career, it is very important for us not to neglect my own career."*



*"Both my partner and I have invested a lot in our education and career and either one of us can be offered an international job. We would only accept if we were fairly sure that both of us could work. As an absolute minimum we would need to know that whichever of us is 'accompanying' could get a work permit. Then we would trust in our ability to compete for a job."*

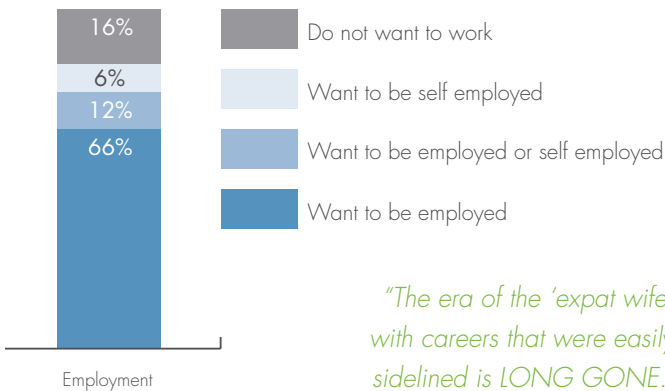


# HOW ASPIRATIONS AND EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS CHANGE DURING EXPATRIATION AND WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP

Spouses and partners in this survey are highly educated and worked in a wide range of occupations before relocation. On assignment, they show considerable flexibility in meeting the challenges of getting a job in an unfamiliar country.

Of those who are working, 25% are in a different field or profession and 40% state that their job is at a lower level than back home. The overall employment rate of 89% before expatriation falls to 35% during expatriation. (See chart on page 2.)

## EMPLOYMENT ASPIRATIONS IN THE HOST COUNTRY



*"The era of the 'expat wife' with careers that were easily sidelined is LONG GONE."*

*"I found a full-time job with a permanent contract, which wasn't easy, it took me a year. I seriously considered to go back home if the situation of being unemployed had lasted longer. I really missed help from the company."*

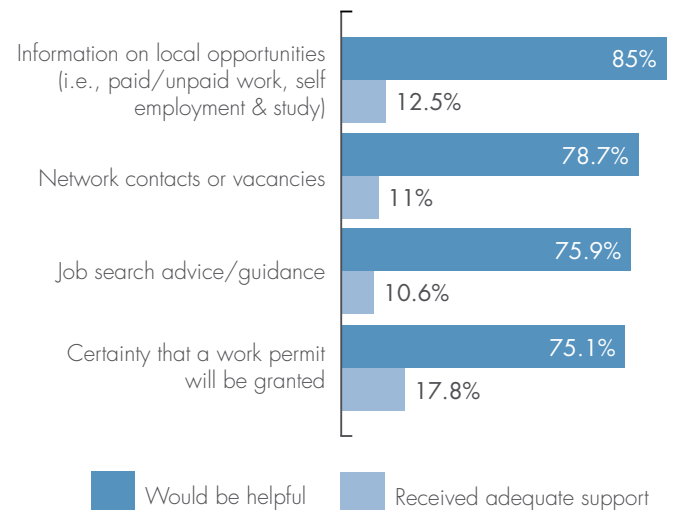
*"Even volunteer work is difficult to secure. I offered my services to a large creative business for the holiday period and after saying that they would welcome my assistance, they phoned to say they had reconsidered their decision. As I did not have a work permit, they could not risk getting into trouble with the authorities. So this creative opportunity that I was so looking forward to did not materialise."*

Combining the numbers of those who currently work with those would like to work gives an indication of the overall aspirations in this talent pool. In total 84% would like to work, which is only slightly less than before expatriation.

Interestingly, up to 18% of spouses and partners would like to be self-employed in the host country, by comparison with 10% before expatriation. Both governments and employers should take account of this in work permit and employment policies.

## SUPPORT SERVICES

Around 80% of spouses would welcome the following support but few received it:



## Problems with work permit procedures

- Work permit applications often require a prior job offer and are restricted to a specific employer
- Lengthy work permit application process, and the uncertainty of the outcome
- Local employers prefer to hire people who do not require a work permit
- Difficult to find information about work permit entitlement
- Regulations not always clear
- Applications have to be submitted from outside the country (in some locations)
- Unmarried partners not recognised.

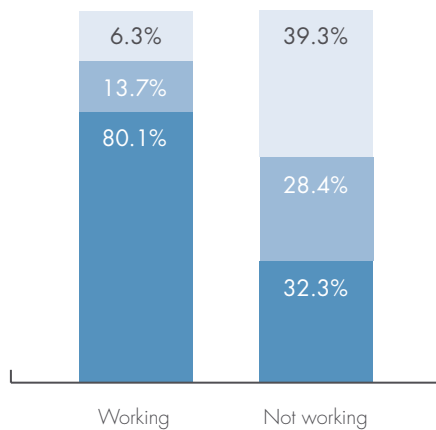
*"Permits for spouses should be flexible enough to allow new ways of working. I'm a self-employed consultant, working from home on short contracts for clients outside the host country. I am not sure if this is officially allowed."*

*"There is a lack of understanding of the value of small business, which would be ideal work for many women. The licensing/permits procedure is very difficult and expensive to navigate."*

# THE IMPACT OF BEING EMPLOYED IN THE HOST COUNTRY ON ADJUSTMENT, WELL-BEING AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS



## ADJUSTMENT



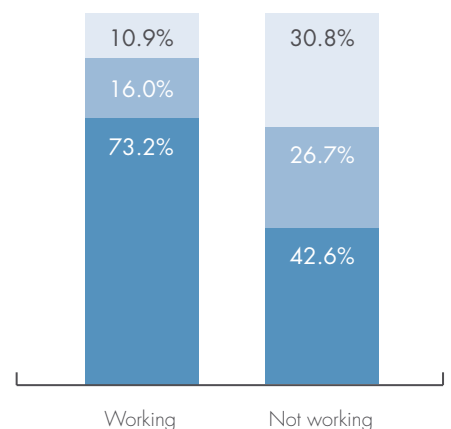
Not all spouses want to work and some are very happy to take a career break, for example to raise children. However, there appears to be a clear link between working and positive feelings about the assignment.

**Spouses who are working are more likely to report a positive impact on adjustment to the location than spouses who not working.**

*"I am definitely much happier when I am also working. It is the sense of self that makes life feel more balanced. I am a better wife, a better mother and a better person when I am juggling taking care of my family and working. The extra money earned is the icing on the cake... and makes a difference in our savings, loans and investments."*

**Spouses who are working are more likely to report a positive impact on family relationships than spouses who not working**

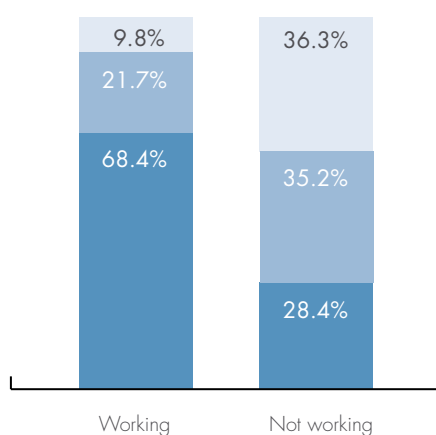
## FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS



*"I have been an expatriate for more than eight years. Being able to work and contribute is vital for me. Not having a job generates a lot of stress for me and therefore for my family. Not only for economic reasons, is it absolutely much more than that."*

*"It puts a tremendous strain on a marriage when one career is "more important" and that carries over to the employee's job performance when the home life is unhappy."*

## HEALTH OR WELL-BEING



**Spouses who are working are more likely to report a positive impact on their health or well-being than spouses who not working.**

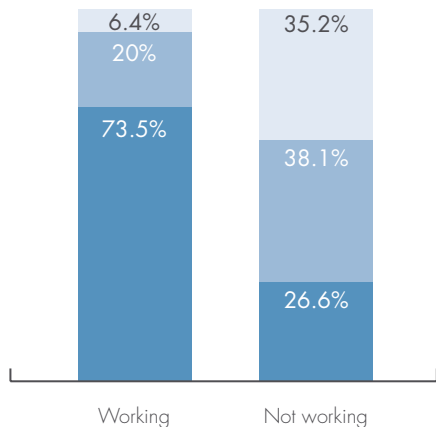
*"There is serious depression, insecurity, loneliness, boredom, and a feeling like no one understands - it takes the help of others who have been through it. No one prepares the employed spouse how to deal with or understand the misery of the unemployed spouse, which doesn't help."*

*"I decided to follow my husband to keep our family balance and I hoped to share my personal expertise in the host country. Now I now feel guilty because I cannot make my expertise available to local people and I cannot continue to grow in my own development."*

# THE IMPACT OF BEING EMPLOYED IN THE HOST COUNTRY ON ASSIGNMENT COMPLETION AND EXTENSION, AND WILLINGNESS TO GO ON A NEW ASSIGNMENT



## WILLINGNESS TO COMPLETE CURRENT ASSIGNMENT

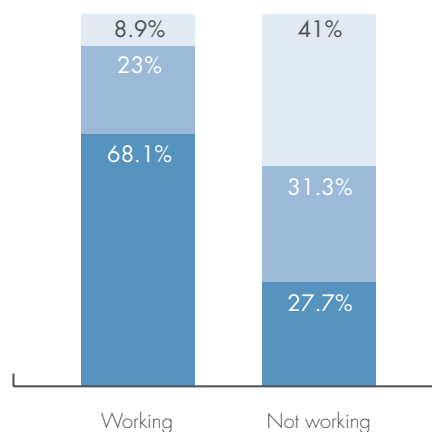


Spouses who are working are more likely to report a positive impact on their willingness to complete the current assignment than spouses who are not working.

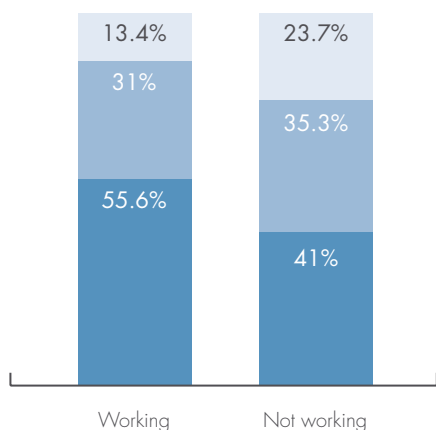
Spouses who are working are more likely to report a positive impact on their willingness to extend the current assignment, if given the opportunity, than spouses who are not working.

*"The implications of not working on my health (especially mental health) are so vast that I will never consider to relocate to such a country. I was unemployed for 1 year when I came here and that was the most miserable year in my entire life. I will not repeat that, and my husband stands by my decision."*

## WILLINGNESS TO EXTEND CURRENT ASSIGNMENT



## WILLINGNESS TO GO ON A NEW ASSIGNMENT



Spouses who are working are more likely to report a positive impact on their willingness to go on a new assignment than those who are not working.

*"I don't want to give up my career development any more. Therefore, I won't go anywhere I can't find a job as I can get one at my home country easily."*

*"As it is important to me, we would make the decision to relocate also dependent on working and career opportunities for me."*



## PROFILE OF ACCOMPANYING SPOUSES AND PARTNERS

A highly diverse population of 120 nationalities working in 117 host countries

### GENDER

85% women  
15% men

### MARITAL STATUS

93% married  
7% unmarried partners  
(2% registered partners or in civil partnerships; 4% common-law partnerships; 1% engaged)

### HIGHLY EDUCATED

8% hold high school diploma  
10% hold vocational college diploma  
36% hold bachelor's degree  
40% hold master's degree or postgraduate diploma  
6% hold doctorate level/PhD qualification

### PROFICIENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

21% speak one language  
34% speak two languages  
29% speak three languages  
16% speak four or more languages.

### STATUS OF INTERNATIONAL EMPLOYEE

86% are accompanying intra-company transferees  
11% accompanying new recruits  
3% accompanying locally hired foreign staff

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Permits Foundation wishes to thank Industrial Relations Counselors (IRC) for sponsoring the survey and ORC Worldwide for providing on-line web hosting and analysis of data. ORC Worldwide is now Mercer.

**IRC** | Industrial Relations  
Counselors, Inc.

We are also grateful to our sponsors and other employers who distributed the survey to "their" expatriate partners. Many other individuals, network groups and service providers helped along the way including Yvonne McNulty, Jo Parfitt, Shell Global Outpost Services, Partnerjob.com, Global Connection, Focus, Net Expat, Impact Group, REA, Expatwomen.com, ACIP, NFTC, GMAC and Magellan Network. Finally we wish to thank all the spouses and partners who took the time to reply to the survey.

The full report of the survey, which was conducted in autumn 2008, is available in [www.permitsfoundation.com](http://www.permitsfoundation.com)

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