

Re:locate

FOR HR, GLOBAL MANAGERS & RELOCATION PROFESSIONALS

Permits Foundation celebrates 10th anniversary

by Fiona Murchie, Managing Editor [Re:locate magazine](#)

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This highly commendably not-for-profit organisation has been fighting the corner for expatriate spouses and partners to work since 2001. At Re:locate, we have been following its progress since the early days, and Fiona Murchie was delighted to take the opportunity to catch up on developments by attending a celebratory symposium, held at the BT Tower, in London, on 22 November.

There were some heavyweight speakers, including Andrew Gould, chairman of Schlumberger, and Doug Baillie, chief HR Officer of Unilever, putting the business case.

Government challenges were highlighted by Professor David Metcalf, Chair of the UK Migration Advisory Committee, Kristina Lindahl von Sydow, Member of the Cabinet of Commissioner Malstrom, representing the European Commissioner responsible for Home Affairs, and David Wilden, Minister-Counsellor (immigration), Australian High Commission, and Anne Arnott, Minister (immigration), Canadian High Commission.

When international assignees come to the UK, their husbands and wives are thrilled, because they can work here if they want to. This means that, provided they can find a job, their careers can continue, and chances are that both partners in a dual-career couple will have a happy and fulfilled stay in the UK.

However, the opportunity for the spouse to work when their partner takes up an international assignment is far from common when moving to other countries.

According to major surveys from organisations such as Brookfield, ECA, Mercer and PwC, concern about partner employment is one of the main reasons for an employee to turn down an international assignment.

The Permits Foundation's 2008 global survey of 3,300 partners revealed that 25% of international staff had turned down or terminated because of concerns about the partner's employment or career. 70% of partners said that their own employment was important in the decision to relocate, with almost 60% stating they would be unlikely to relocate to a country where it was difficult to get a work permit.

The preliminary findings of the Permits Foundation's new 2011 survey of 200 truly global organisations employing, between them, 7.5 million people, were revealed by board member Siobhan Cummins. There was a clear message – 74% of companies felt it was important for the partner to be able to work, and 93% felt it would be negative if unable to transfer owing to work-permit limitations.

The new survey reveals that employers very much recognise that partners not being able to work impacts on the ability to recruit expatriates for international assignments. 95% agree that a partner should be allowed to work in the host country.

All participants said there were countries where they had had difficulties. Countries most cited included the BRIC countries, also Zimbabwe, Nigeria and South Africa.

Although very few companies keep a proper matrix, 28% have experienced families coming home owing to partner concern, with 91% not measuring the cost of assignment failure, and 87% did not evaluate return on investment.

35% have a formal dual-career support policy in place, with a further 10% having an informal policy. The reasons for offering support ranged from increasing staff mobility to being more family friendly, being a more attractive employer, or to meet corporate social responsibility goals.

In summary, 70% recognised dual-career and partner concerns are important, and 71% believe their company should be doing more. But what would convince companies to do more? According to Siobhan Cummins, probably analysis of cost benefit, matrix on tracking assignment failure, plus valuable benchmarking and shared experiences of multinationals, as well as sharing Permits Foundation success stories.

So there is plenty more to be done. But I would urge you to look at the good work the Permits Foundation is doing and try and get involved. Medium and smaller-sized organisations should also consider joining in, because they are the ones who have, perhaps, most to gain.

Although the official closing date has passed, there is still time to contribute to the survey at www.permitsfoundation.com

Why this matters to me - expatriate spouse perspective

It was great to have input from an expatriate employee and two expatriate partners, which really made the case compelling from the human perspective. Their individual human stories made all the difference, and it might be good idea, as a first step, for HR contemplating getting involved with the Permits Foundation to speak direct to employees and their families to understand their viewpoint.

On the agenda

The Permits Foundation obviously focuses its attention on the countries of most interest to its sponsoring organisations, and, therefore, it is no surprise that Brazil, as a leading emerging market, is high on the agenda.

In April, the foundation held an initial networking meeting in Rio de Janeiro, with an excellent turnout of representatives from 35 organisations. The consensus reached was that the time was ripe to set up a network to promote regulations allowing spouses and partners to work in Brazil. As a result, a local steering committee is developing a strategy and action plan.

A powerful case study given at the conference by Supriyo Gupta, adviser to the India steering committee, of how the Permits Foundation had worked within India with local partners clearly illustrated the effectiveness of this approach.

The Permits Foundation is currently working via local sponsor networks in Brazil, India, Japan, Indonesia and Russia to bring about visa changes. Contact them via contacts@permitsfoundation.com to lend your support.

Recent achievements

India – Representation to the Government of India resulted in a change of regulation, permitting spouses of intra-company transferees to apply for an employment visa in India.

UK – Successfully argued against a tightening of regulations for dependants of intra-company transferees.

European Union – Provisions for non-European family members to work were included in the Blue Card Directive due for adoption by Member States in December 2011.

USA – Supports an extension of employment authorisation to all skilled work-permit holders, as well as recognition of unmarried partners

The legal expertise behind the Permits Foundation is of the highest calibre. Julia Onslow-Cole, Partner and Head of Global Immigration at PwC, is a founding board member. Answering questions at the event, she emphasised the importance of focusing on the right countries where the Permits Foundation could have most success.

Sponsors obviously want to see the organisation getting to more countries more quickly. The way forward is possibly developing the notion of a global immigration treaty – apparently, project work is afoot in the immigration world over the next 12 months. As Ms Onslow-Cole pointed out, once you get to a global level and attach to human rights, this makes everything much easier.

There is a lot of time effort and expertise behind the Permits Foundation working towards improving global mobility, and board members such as Kathleen van der Wilk-Carlton and Gill Gordon, Chair of the Board, deserve recognition for their huge contribution behind the scenes.

Happy 10th anniversary, and it will be interesting to see which organisations are sharing their global birthday cake in another five or ten years' time!