

Avoiding the Pitfalls in Relocating Personnel

In 1967, Holmes and Rahe published their "Social Readjustment Rating Scale", to show how life events promote stressful reactions within individuals. If we add up those events on the scale, which are likely to crop up during a work related move from one area to another we get the following;

<i>WORK MORE THAN 40 HOURS PER WEEK</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>BUSINESS OR WORK ROLE CHANGE</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>CHANGE IN NUMBER OF ARGUMENTS WITH SPOUSE</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>MORTGAGE OR LOAN FOR A MAJOR PURPOSE</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>SLEEP LESS THAN 8 HOURS PER NIGHT</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>CHANGE IN RESPONSIBILITIES AT WORK</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>SPOUSE BEGINS OR STOPS WORK</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>CHANGE IN WORK HOURS OR CONDITIONS</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>MOVING TO NEW RESIDENCE</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>CHANGE IN SOCIAL ACTIVITIES (more or less than before)</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>CHANGE IN FREQUENCY OF FAMILY GET-TOGETHERS</i>	<i>10</i>

This list comes out at a total of 250 which according to the scale, places the individual in the category of being dangerously overstressed such that physical and emotional well being will suffer even in those with normal stress tolerance. That's you and me. We can clearly see from this research that asking an employee to move carries with it a responsibility on the employer to take the welfare of that employee seriously.

Therefore, the primary question any employer needs to ask is "Do I need to move this person?"

In the majority of domestic and international moves within the corporate sector, there is an inducement to move. That is, the employee is aware that his or her situation will improve as a result of this move, either through a better financial package, or promotion. These factors can make the idea of the move seem more attractive, but will not in themselves lessen the impact of relocating on the family.

If there is no inducement to move, a different set of factors must be taken into account. Where there will be no direct financial or status benefit associated with the move, will there be a cost of living difference? If an employee is being moved from the M40 corridor to Derbyshire, there will be a distinct increase in living standards and concurrent drop in living costs. This in itself may be the inducement to move. If the situation is reversed and you are asking an employee to move from Derbyshire to Reading, they will most likely have to live in a much smaller house and have an increased journey time to work. There is also no guarantee when moving either way, that school systems will be concurrent. Just moving within the M40 corridor from Berks to Bucks, and your children will be in two entirely different school systems, one Comprehensive and one Grammar.

All of these factors will affect whether or not the employee will consider moving without the direct inducement of promotion or a better package.

The impact on the family will be even more profound. If the partner is employed, s/he will have to seek new employment in the new area. If the children are happy within their school and peer group, they will not thank the employee for moving them away. These factors will have a direct bearing on whether the move is successful.

In the commercial environment, staff being relocated are generally able to go back to their old post should the move not work out. However, if an entire production site or department is being moved employees will not have this choice. This brings up an interesting difference between the type of moves undertaken between industry and government. In the corporate sector a group move may not get past the feasibility stage, if the disruption to the core business of the company would be too costly. In government, where keeping costs down is essential within the political climate of state controlled bodies, moving may not carry the same risks. We have all read of moves and system changes which have resulted in chaos and delays within government departments, a replication of which in the commercial sector would have caused the death of the company.

If then, it is decided that the move is necessary, and the employee decides after six months to return to their original home, they have to leave their job to do this. In this case the HR department has a moral duty of care to staff to ensure that the move is handled correctly. This means using specialist Relocation Service Providers, who are more than aware of the problems associated with relocating staff, and whose core business it is to prevent those problems causing disruption to the life of the family and ultimately to the productivity of the business.

One of the great Mantra's of management gurus is "Concentrate on your Core Business"

If your core business is administering the benefits system in a given area then your HR department's core business is recruiting and keeping the staff who will fulfil this remit. They will have as much knowledge of relocation issues as the Accounts Department will have about developing a website.

Only organisations relocating staff on a regular basis will invest in the development of a relocation team. For example Unilever have a dedicated division know as Unilever Peoplelink made up of specialist staff who have come out of the relocation industry. But the cost of a dedicated team can run into millions.

The relocation industry exists because HR Departments are more than aware that relocation is not their core business. The traditional solution for HR Department's relocating staff internally was to throw money at the employees but the relocation industry has proved that resources are better spent on specialist relocation support.

The Eight Priority Relocation Issues:

1. The family must be involved from the start.
2. Invite the whole family to a presentation on the move, involving timescales and information on the new area.
3. The relocation specialist will assess the family's current living situation and will act as a single point of contact throughout the process.
4. Employees and their family should be invited to the new area for orientation by the destination relocation specialist.
5. Where a group move is concerned, relocation specialists will create a resource centre in the existing location to provide help and information whenever it is needed.
6. The relocation specialist will provide help in selling an existing property, either through marketing assistance or through a purchase scheme.
7. A full range of destination services will be provided in the new location including home and school searches, career consultancy and orientation.

8. The creation of a drop in centre in the new location is a very successful method of settling employees and families subject to a group move. This will often be staffed by a combination of partners, relocation specialists and career and school consultants. This gives an initial point of contact for all those whose lives have been affected and can provide valuable peer group support during the transition phase. Some relocation companies will bring in specialist individual and family counsellors to try and get issues solved before they become a problem.

The only way to ensure the successful relocation of employees and their families is to minimise the stress relating to the move. By working with relocation professionals and making employees and their partners feel supported they may even be persuaded to relocate to an alien location without financial inducement.

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