

# Voices From The Road

The Personal and Family  
Side of International  
Short-Term Assignments

A Research Report from  
The Interchange Institute



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# **VOICES FROM THE ROAD: The Personal and Family Side of International Short-Term Assignments**

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## **Executive Summary**

Unaccompanied short-term assignments and extended business travel are increasing in frequency, in the face of high expatriate costs, security issues, and family resistance to moving. We examined the factors that were related to positive outcomes in a sample of 1471 employees on such assignments. Personal (mental health, marital, substance abuse) and work (attitudes about their work, willingness to take another assignment, ability to get work done) outcome measures were strongly and consistently inter-related, emphasizing the importance of family-friendly policies. Employees reported more positive work outcomes and personal outcomes when they felt better support financially and had clear and helpful HR policies; more family support services; more choice about their assignments; when they were less worried about their families and the impact of their absence; and when there were more benefits to the assignment.

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**Statistical Note:** We have written this report with non-statisticians in mind. To make complicated bi- and multi-variate findings easier to visualize, we have presented bar graphs rather than tables of statistics. All the charts in this report refer to statistically significant differences. Questions about methodology and statistics should be addressed to The Interchange Institute.

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# Goals of Study

The goals of this study were to:

- ♦ Understand the impact of unaccompanied international assignments on the lives of employees and their families.
- ♦ Understand the work and personal factors that are related to more successful unaccompanied international assignments.
- ♦ Offer data-based recommendations about how to maximize the chances of a successful assignment in the context of a satisfied employee and family.

## Participants

Participants were on, or had recently been on one of these kinds of assignment:

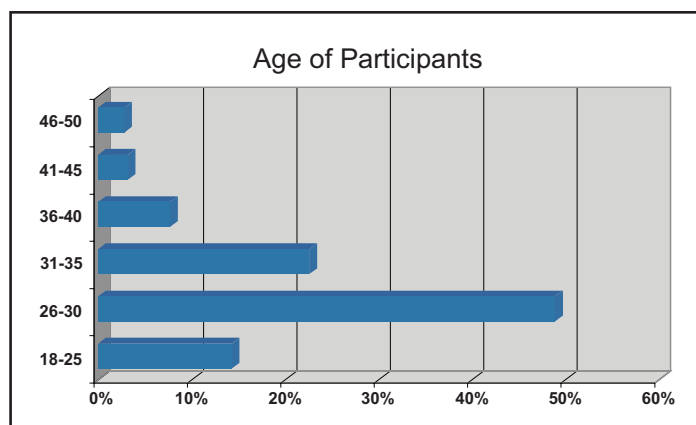
- ♦ **Short-Term Assignment:** an international assignment, unaccompanied by any family member, lasting 60 days to 12 months (89.9% of the sample fit this category)
- ♦ **Extended Business Travel:** an international assignment, unaccompanied by any family member, involving travel between home and the destination country, for 10 or more work days per month, with returns home every 7-10 days, for a period lasting at least three months (10.1% fit this category)

One thousand four hundred sixty one (1461) eligible employees completed the survey. Participants came from several sources, as a link to the survey was distributed on expatriate websites and was sent to employees of a major consulting firm\*. A parallel survey was available for spouses/partners of these employees. Results from

the spouse version of the survey are reported in a separate document.

The majority of participants were male (71%) and single (55%), although females (29%) and those who were married or living with a domestic partner (45%) are well-represented in the sample.

	Female	Male
<b>Married/ Partner</b>	11%	34%
<b>Single</b>	18%	37%



Almost half of the participants (48.9% ) were in the 26-30-year-old range.

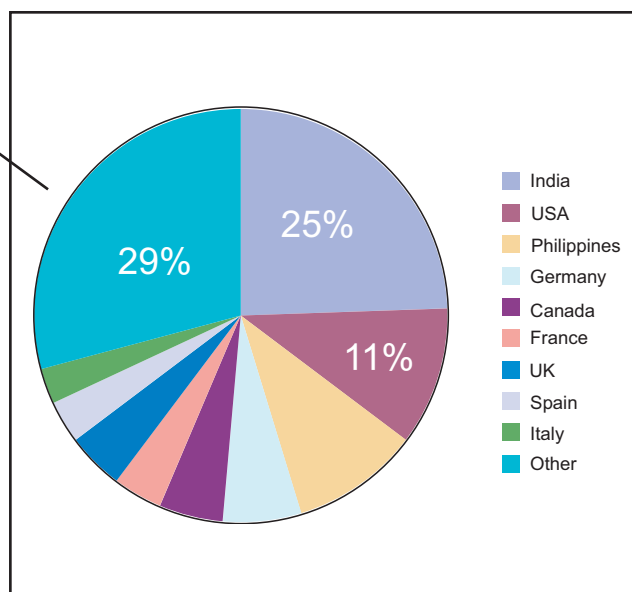
\* The majority of participants came from a single company. While a single corporate culture might have some bearing on the results, it is important to note that that company's employees and assignments are very diverse on many dimensions — nationality, job focus, location and nature of assignment, for example. This report focuses exclusively on relationships among dimensions, which, given this diversity, we believe have generalizability beyond any single company.

## Country of Citizenship

One quarter of the participants were Indian citizens. Eleven percent were US Americans. Forty-eight other nationalities are represented in the sample.

### “Other” included:

Chile	Mexico
Croatia	Poland
Israel	Finland
Korea	Ireland
Lithuania	Thailand
Morocco	Argentina
Peru	Switzerland
Taiwan	Austria
Turkey	Norway
Cyprus	Sweden
Hong Kong	Singapore
Venezuela	Australia
Colombia	Czech Rep
Hungary	Slovak Rep
Latvia	Malaysia
South Africa	China
Denmark	Netherlands
Greece	Portugal
Mauritius	Belgium
Romania	Brazil
Japan	

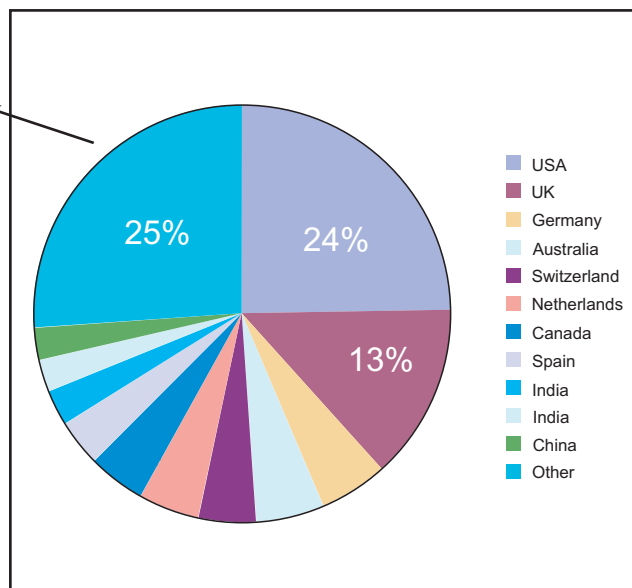


## Country of International Assignment

About one quarter of the participants' assignments were in the USA. Another 13% were in the UK. In total, the participants were working in one of 57 countries, on five continents.

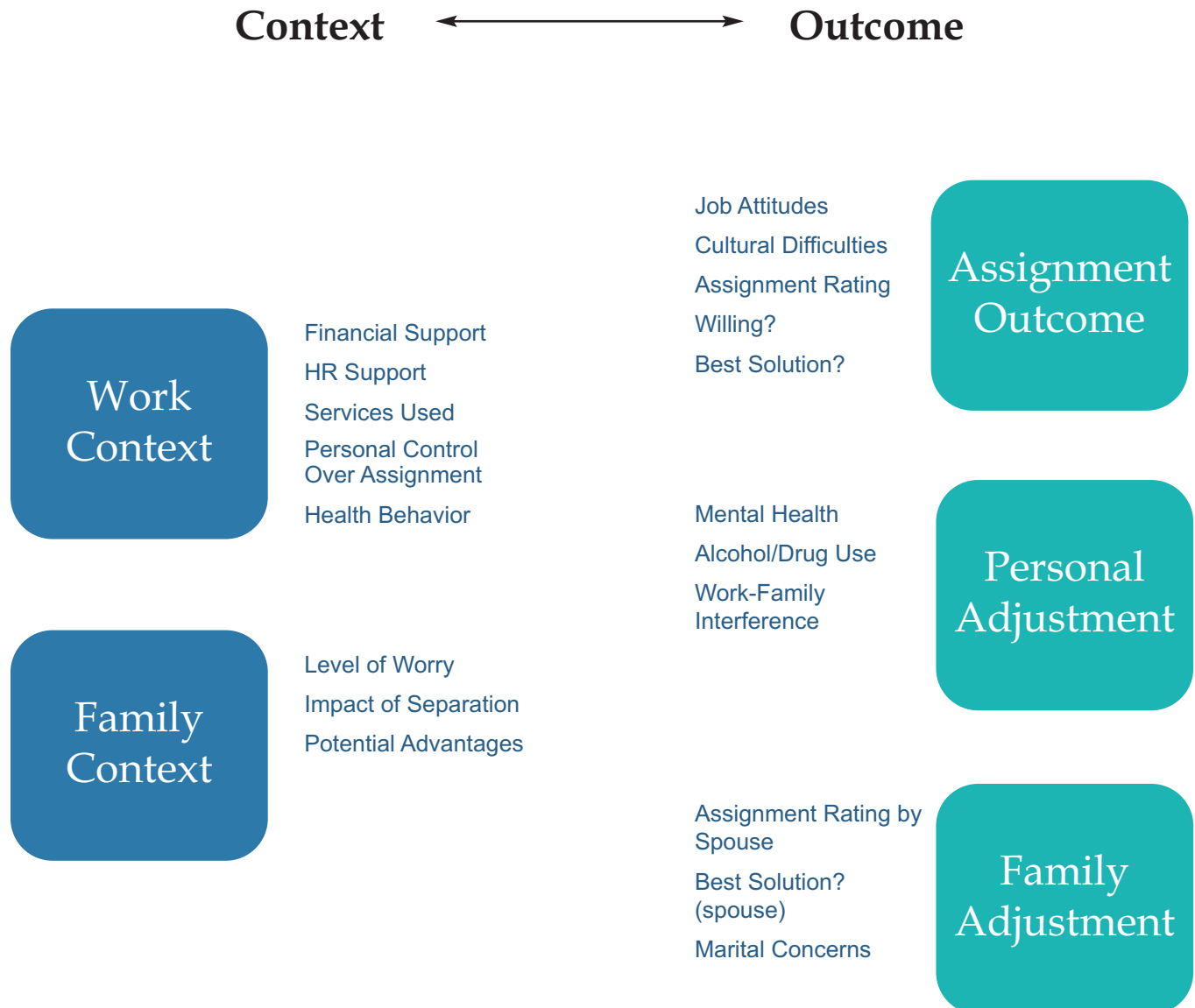
### “Other” included:

Andorra	Korea
Angola	Kuwait
Argentina	Latvia
Austria	Luxembourg
Brazil	Malaysia
Bulgaria	Mexico
Chile	Morocco
Colombia	Nigeria
Cyprus	Norway
Czech Rep	Panama
Denmark	Slovak Rep
Egypt	Russia
Finland	Scotland
France	Senegal
Greece	Singapore
Hong Kong	South Africa
Hungary	Sweden
Indonesia	Thailand
Ireland	Tunisia
Israel	Turkey
Italy	Uganda
Jamaica	Ukraine
Japan	Venezuela
Kazakhstan	
Kenya	



# Analysis Model

A simple Context-Outcome model was used to analyze the results of the survey — that is, we asked “What Contextual factors in the employees’ work and personal lives were related to better Outcome?” The relationship between each Contextual dimension and each Outcome dimension is reported, in order to understand the complex factors that surround and potentially influence short term assignments and extended business travel.



# Work Context

First we examined those aspects of the employees' work environments that might be expected to be related — as cause or effect — to the work and personal outcome of an assignment. Specifically, we looked at:

**Financial Support:** Did the employee feel adequately financially supported while on assignment? (Items rated on five-point scales from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*)

Items: Financial Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ My employer has done everything it could to ensure that this Assignment is not financially hurtful to us.</li> <li>♦ In some ways we save money when I am on the Assignment.</li> <li>♦ The Assignment will be financially beneficial to us.</li> <li>♦ I feel I am being adequately compensated for this Assignment.</li> <li>♦ There are no financial costs to this Assignment that we do not have when I live at home.</li> <li>♦ This Assignment presents positive tax consequences for us.</li> </ul>

**Human Resources Support:** Did the employee feel adequately supported by his/her HR department or sponsoring organization while on assignment? (Items rated on five-point scales from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*)

Items: Human Resources Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ From the beginning of this Assignment, I have had the appropriate kind of visa and work permit.</li> <li>♦ I carefully track the number of days I spend out of the country.</li> <li>♦ My work and travel pattern falls neatly under a particular corporate HR policy.</li> <li>♦ It is very clear to me what my company HR policy will and will not cover, given the kind of work and travel I am doing.</li> <li>♦ My HR department carefully tracks the number of days I spend out of the country.</li> <li>♦ My HR department has a clear understanding of the kind of work and travel I am doing.</li> </ul>

**Support Services:** What family or cultural support services were used by the employee? (Participants checked items used.)

Items: Support Services
<p><b>Cultural Support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Cross-cultural training</li> </ul> <p><b>Family Support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Telephone budget to facilitate communication with family</li> <li>♦ Computer support to facilitate email communication with family (technical support, internet access fees, etc)</li> <li>♦ Pre-move session(s) with professional about marital/personal challenges that might be faced</li> <li>♦ Access to networks of other couples in similar situations (for social support)</li> <li>♦ Career support and advice for at-home spouse</li> <li>♦ Ongoing personal contact between employer and family (check-in to see how they are doing)</li> <li>♦ On-going session(s) with professionals about marital/personal challenges</li> </ul>

**Personal Control:** What aspects of the assignment did the employee feel he/she had some control over? (Items rated on five-point scales from *No Control* to *Total Control*)

Items: Personal Control
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ How long the Assignment will last</li> <li>♦ Where I would go on the Assignment</li> <li>♦ Whether family members can have expenses reimbursed for travel to my work location in place of my going home</li> <li>♦ How long each trip home will last</li> <li>♦ How many trips home I will make during the Assignment</li> <li>♦ Whether family members can travel to my work location</li> <li>♦ When the trips home will occur</li> <li>♦ Whether I would go on the Assignment</li> </ul>

**Health Behavior:** How easy was it for the employee to eat, sleep and get medical care in a healthful way? (Items rated on three-point scales: Harder than at home, About the same as at home, and Easier than at home.)

Items: Health Behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Meals</li> <li>♦ Exercise</li> <li>♦ Medical or Dental Care</li> </ul>



# Family Context

Next we asked about the family context of the employees who were married or living with a domestic partner. Specifically we focused on those aspects of family life that might be expected to be related to the assignment outcome for these employees:

**Level of Worry:** How worried about the spouse, children and home was the employee? (Items rated on five-point scales from *Not at All* to *All the Time*)

Items: Level of Worry
<b>Spouse/partner's</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Physical health</li> <li>♦ Physical safety</li> <li>♦ Mental health</li> </ul> <b>Children's</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Physical health</li> <li>♦ Physical safety</li> <li>♦ Academic progress</li> <li>♦ Mental Health</li> </ul> <b>Home</b> (maintenance, yard)

**Impact of Separation:** When couples face repeated or extended absences from each other, it is common for there to be a re-adjustment in their relationship. What was the impact of prolonged or repeated separations on the couple? (Items rated on five-point scales from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.)

Items: Impact of Separation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ I feel angry when I am not able to go to community events with my spouse/partner (like school meetings, sports events, parties).</li> <li>♦ My idea of what it means to be a spouse is different than it used to be before the Assignment.</li> <li>♦ Things do not run smoothly at home while I am gone.</li> </ul>

**Family Advantages:** Were there benefits to the assignment in addition to any potential challenges? (Items were rated on two sets of five-point scales, from *Not at all True* to *Very True*, and *Not at all Important* to *Very Important*.)

Items: Family Advantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ The time I do spend with my spouse/partner is now especially positive.</li> <li>♦ It means my children didn't have to disrupt their lives.*</li> <li>♦ It means my spouse didn't have to leave her/his job/career.</li> <li>♦ It means our lives aren't as disrupted as if we had all moved with me.</li> <li>♦ It means my spouse and/or children didn't have to leave our extended family.</li> <li>♦ I have discovered new skills and abilities that I never knew I had.</li> <li>♦ My relationship with my spouse/partner is now more equal than it was before.</li> <li>♦ My spouse/partner had no interest in living in the host country, and is happy to avoid it.</li> <li>♦ It means we are better off financially than we would be if we had all moved.</li> <li>♦ My spouse/partner and I communicate better than ever before.</li> <li>♦ I was going to be gone/traveling most of the time anyway, so the Assignment is the better choice.</li> <li>♦ Parenting is easier because my spouse/partner is the sole decision maker.*</li> <li>♦ The new location feels unsafe for us go along, so we avoid that threat.</li> </ul>

\* Data reported from married/partnered participants with children only.

# Assignment Outcome

Having tracked the work and family context of these assignments, we next examined several indicators of the “success” of the assignments. We focused on the following dimensions:

**Job Attitudes:** How does the employee rate his/her job and employer? (Items rated on five-point scales from *Not True* to *Very True*.)

Items: Job Attitudes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ I enjoy the people I work with.</li> <li>♦ I feel very loyal to my employer.</li> <li>♦ I enjoy my work.</li> <li>♦ I am happy I accepted this Assignment.</li> <li>♦ I am able to work at maximum efficiency.</li> <li>♦ I believe that my employer will be very loyal to me</li> <li>♦ My stress level is high.</li> <li>♦ I have too much responsibility.</li> </ul>

**Assignment Assessment:** Three single-item measures of participants’ view of the assignment were used:

Items: Assignment Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ <b>Assignment Rating</b> – In a general way, how do you rate the assignment? (Rated on a seven-point scale from <i>Terrible</i> to <i>Delighted</i>).</li> <li>♦ <b>Willingness</b> – Would you be willing to take another assignment like this one? (<i>Yes</i> or <i>No</i>)</li> <li>♦ <b>Best Solution</b> – All things considered, do you now view the assignment as the <i>Best Solution</i> or <i>As a Mistake</i>?</li> </ul>

**Cultural Difficulties:** Is the employee able to work effectively across potential cross-cultural challenges?  
(Items rated on five-point scales from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.)

Items: Cultural Difficulties
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ I sometimes have a hard time knowing what to do in social situations in my host country.</li> <li>♦ Cultural differences have gotten in the way of my being able to work productively.</li> <li>♦ The way people write e-mail (the tone, the level of formality, the level of detail, for example) in my host country is not similar to what I am used to at home.</li> <li>♦ I have had a hard time making friends in my host country because of my “temporary” status.</li> <li>♦ The fact that I am seen as “temporary” has gotten in the way of my being able to work productively.</li> <li>♦ My home office does not understand the realities of what the work conditions in my host country, and doesn’t accept that cultural differences may influence my work.</li> <li>♦ I am not able to speak the host language well enough to do everything I need to do on my job.</li> <li>♦ I have had a hard time making friends with host nationals because of cultural differences.</li> <li>♦ I have not been able to develop or maintain strong relationships with people on this Assignment.</li> <li>♦ My host country supervisor on Assignment and I do not communicate or understand each other very well.</li> <li>♦ My host country peers/team members on Assignment and I do not communicate or understand each other very well.</li> <li>♦ I am not confident that I will be able to reach the objectives for this Assignment in the time allotted to it.</li> <li>♦ I have not been able to work effectively with host nationals on my Assignment.</li> </ul>

# Personal and Family Adjustment

In addition to assessments of the assignment, we asked a number of questions about the employees' own personal adjustment and that of their families. Specifically:

## Personal Adjustment

**Mental Health Inventory\*:** How much of the time during the last month had the employees felt in particular ways? (Items rated on six-point scales from *None of the Time* to *All of the Time*)

Items: Mental Health
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Been a very nervous person</li> <li>♦ Felt calm and peaceful</li> <li>♦ Felt downhearted and blue</li> <li>♦ Been a happy person</li> <li>♦ Felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up</li> </ul>

**Profile of Mood States\*:** How had employees been feeling in the past week? (Items rated on five-point scales from *Not at All* to *Extremely*). This questionnaire yields a measure of **Depression** and of **Vigor** (a sign of psychological health.)

Sample Items: Mood States
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Full of energy</li> <li>♦ Unhappy</li> <li>♦ Content and sunny</li> <li>♦ Sorry for things done</li> <li>♦ Sad</li> <li>♦ Full of pep</li> </ul>

\*These are well-normed research tools designed for assessing mental health in a non-clinical population. Mental Health Inventory-5: Berwick, Murphy, Goldman, Ware, Barsky & Weinstein, 1991. Profile of Mood States: McNair, Lorr & Droppleman, 1971)

**Alcohol or Drug Use:** Did the employees use more alcohol or medication/drugs than was healthy? (Single item rated on a five-point scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.)

Item: Alcohol/Drug Use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ I used more alcohol or medication/drugs than was healthy while on assignment.</li> </ul>



**Work-Family Interface:** Did the employees' work assignments interfere with their personal lives and vice versa? (Items rated on five-point scales from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*).

**Items: Does the work assignment interfere with personal life?**

- ♦ I work longer hours when I am away on Assignment.
- ♦ I feel pressure to be productive while on this Assignment.
- ♦ When I am on Assignment, I don't have access to the non-work activities I really like to do (e.g., sports facilities, clubs, musical instruments, friends, family)
- ♦ After work I am too tired to do some of the things I would like to do.
- ♦ On the job I have so much work to do that it takes away from my personal interests.
- ♦ When I am on Assignment, I have time to do leisure activities but I don't have anybody to do them with (e.g. socializing, sports, music, movies)
- ♦ I find that I don't enjoy the time alone that I have while on Assignment.
- ♦ I have not been able to work effectively with host nationals on my Assignment.

**Items: Does one's personal life interfere with the work assignment?**

- ♦ I am often too tired at work because of things I have to take care of at home.
- ♦ My personal demands, dealing with things at home, are so great that it takes away from my work.
- ♦ My superiors and peers dislike how often I am preoccupied with my personal life while on Assignment.

## Family Adjustment

**Spousal Assignment Assessment:** How did the employees think their spouses/partners would assess the assignment?

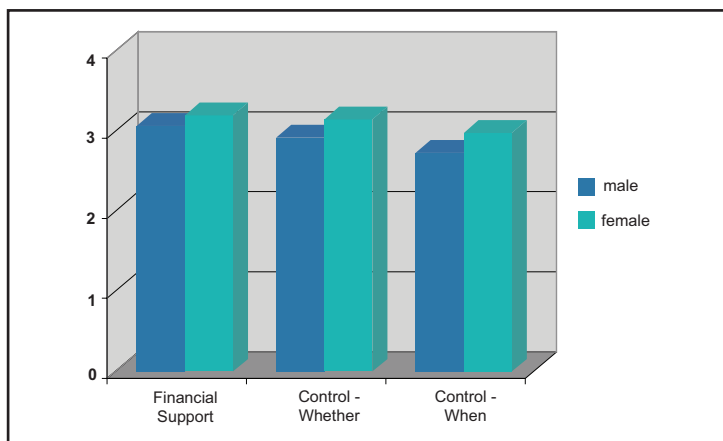
**Items: Spouse Assignment Assessment**

- ♦ **Assignment Rating** — In a general way, how would your spouse/partner rate the assignment? (Rated on a seven-point scale from *Terrible* to *Delighted*).
- ♦ **Best Solution** — All things considered, do you think your spouse/partner now views the assignment as the *Best Solution* or *As a Mistake*?
- ♦ **Marital Concerns:** Did the employee worry about his/her marriage while away? (Single item rated on a three-point scale from *Not at all True* to *Very True*.)

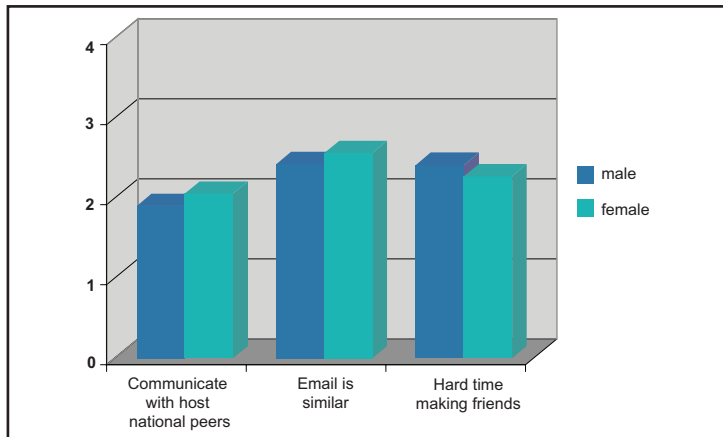
# Demographic Background

We first asked whether there were any sex, age or marital status differences in outcome or context measures. Sex, age and marital status were intertwined in this sample. That is, the single participants tended to be younger and female, so the role of each dimension was isolated statistically.

## Gender Differences

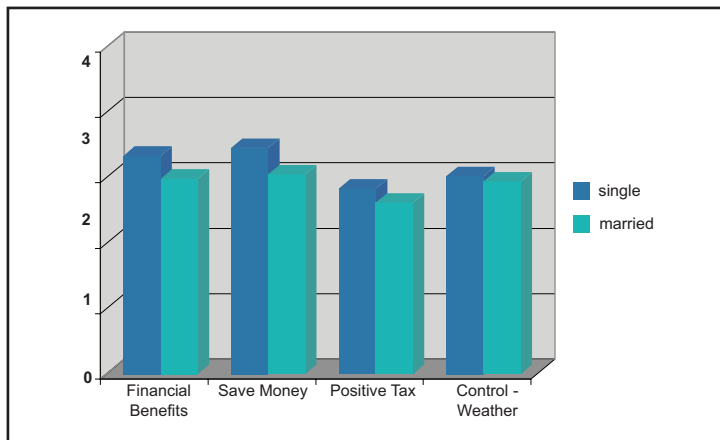


Regardless of age or marital status, women felt significantly better supported financially, and reported having more control over whether they would take an assignment and when it would occur, compared to men.

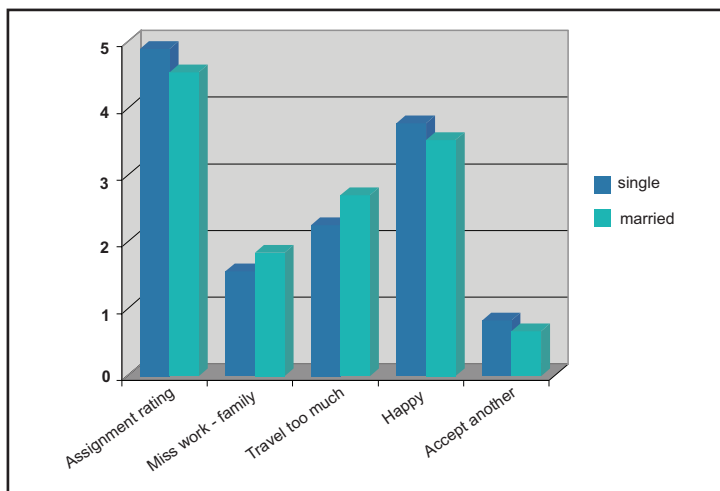


Regardless of age or marital status, women felt significantly better able to communicate with their host national peers, said that email styles were more similar to their home style, and had an easier time making friends on the assignment compared to men.

## Marital Status Differences

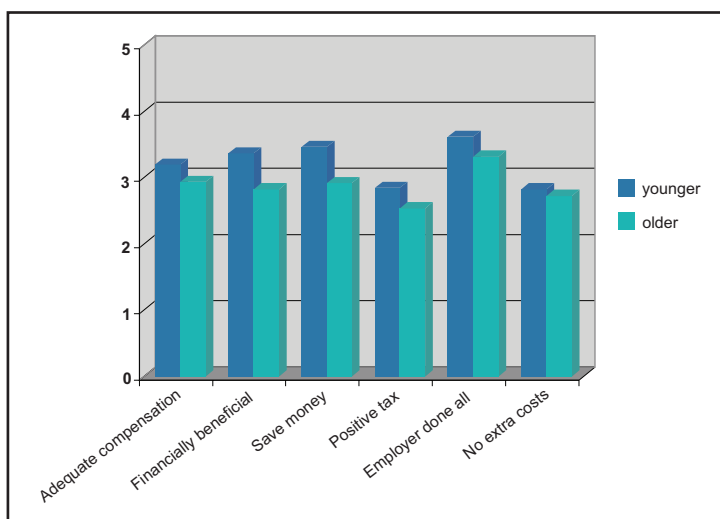


Regardless of age, single participants felt significantly better supported financially than married ones — that is, singles felt the assignment was more financially beneficial, said they saved more money while on assignment, and said the assignment brought more positive tax consequences for them than married participants. Singles also reported having more control over whether to take the assignment.

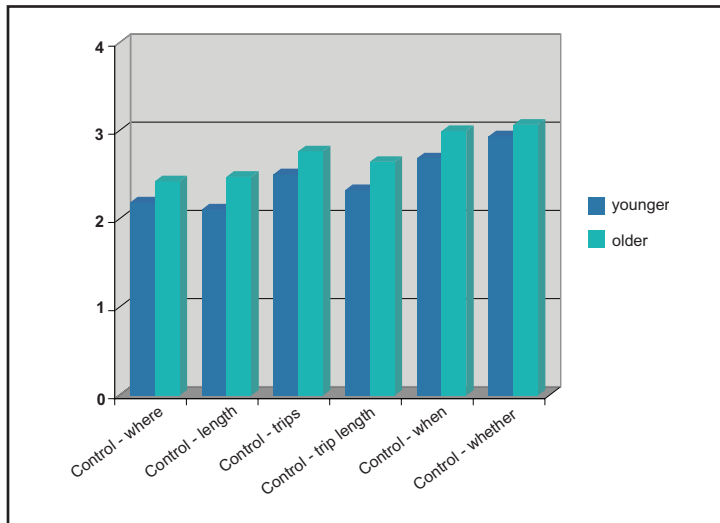


Regardless of age, single participants felt more positive about the assignment than married participants. They gave it a higher overall rating. They said they missed less work because of family matters, were less likely to say they traveled “too much,” were happier they accepted the assignment and were more likely to say they would accept another assignment than married participants.

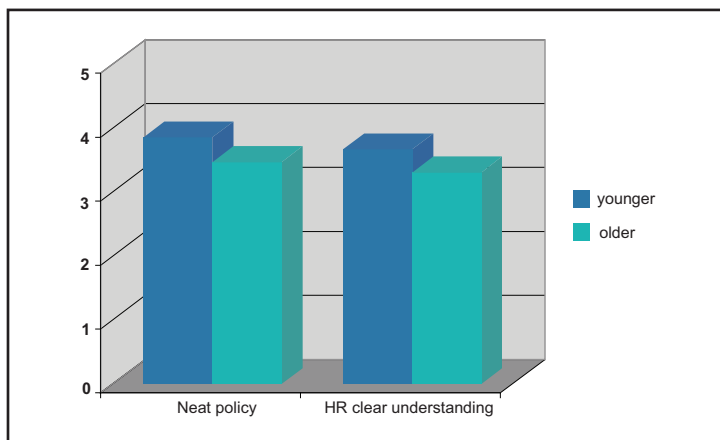
## Age Differences



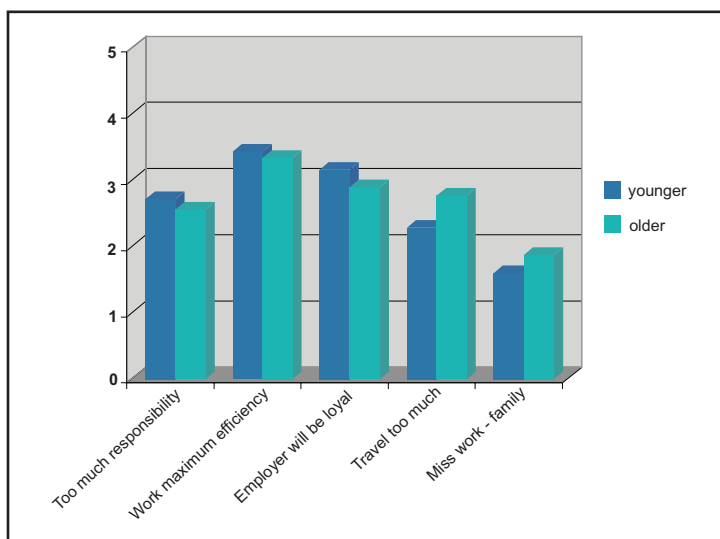
Regardless of marital status, younger participants felt better supported financially than older ones. That is, they were significantly more likely to say they were being compensated adequately, that the assignment was financially beneficial to them, that they were saving money during the assignment, that the assignment had positive tax consequences for them, that their employers had done all they could to be sure the assignment was not financially hurtful, and that they had fewer extra costs while on assignment.



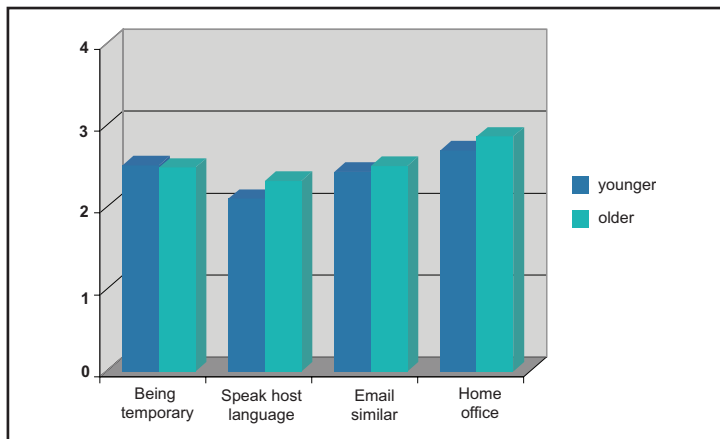
Regardless of marital status, younger participants reported having less control over most aspects of the assignment – where they would go, how long the assignment would last, the number of trips home they could make and how long and when these trips would last, and whether they would go on the assignment at all.



Regardless of marital status, younger participants reported more HR support, specifically that their work and travel pattern fell neatly under a particular corporate HR policy, and that their HR department had a clear understanding of their work and travel.



Regardless of marital status, younger participants were significantly more likely than older participants to say they had too much responsibility, could work at maximum efficiency, and that their employers would be loyal to them. Younger participants were significantly less likely to say they traveled too much or that they had had to miss work to deal with family matters.



Regardless of marital status, younger participants were significantly more likely than older ones to say that their “temporary” status interfered with their ability to work productively. Younger participants were less likely to say they spoke the host language well enough to do their jobs, that email in the host country was very similar to home, and that their home offices understood the realities of their work and the cultural differences that may influence it.

## Summary of Demographic Differences

Women reported feeling better supported financially and reported having more control over various aspects of the assignment than men. They also felt better able to communicate and make friends with their host peers than men.

Single participants reported feeling better supported financially and reported having more control over whether to take the assignment than married participants. They also felt more positive about the assignment than married participants did.

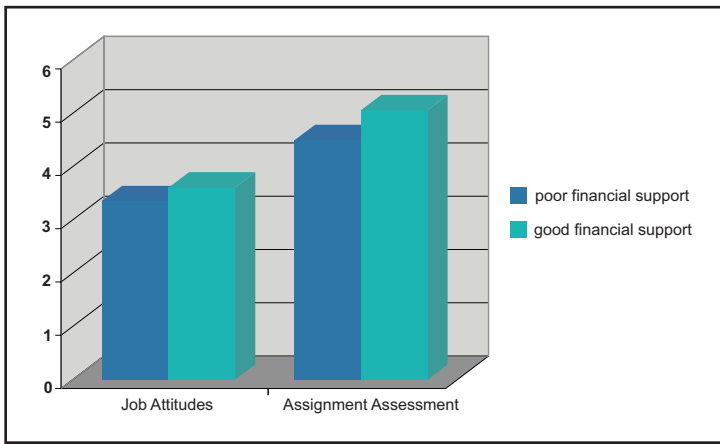
Younger participants reported feeling better supported financially and by their HR department than older ones. However, they reported having less control over most aspects of the assignment, compared to older ones. Younger participants reported generally feeling more positive attitudes about their jobs and employers than did older ones. However, they reported more difficulties stemming from cultural, language and temporary status than older participants.



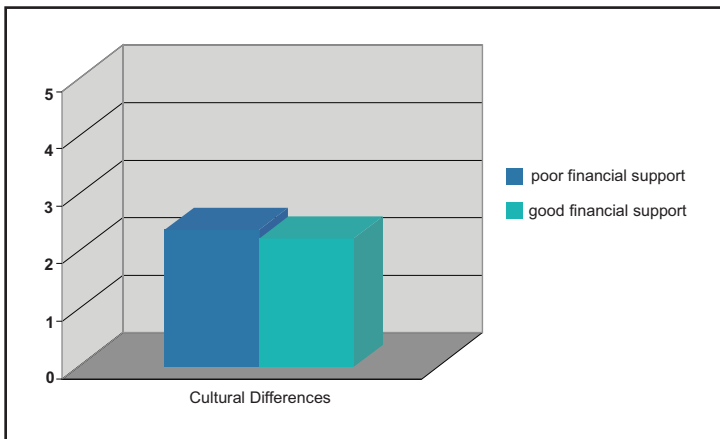
# What Work Context Factors are Related to Assignment Outcome?

In this section, we ask whether the work context (financial support, Human Resource support, services used, personal control and health behavior) was related to employees' various ratings of the assignment (job attitudes, assessment, and cultural difficulties). For these and subsequent analyses, items concerning financial support, HR support, job attitudes and cultural difficulties were combined into overall scale scores in those domains.

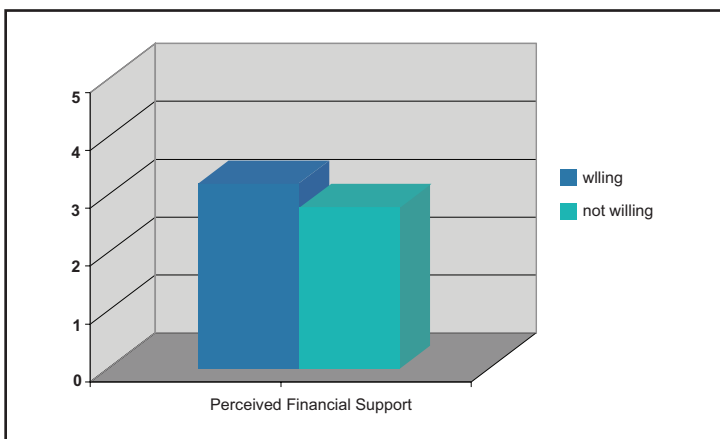
## Is feeling well-supported financially related to better assignment outcome?



Participants who felt better supported financially had significantly more positive attitudes about their jobs and employers, and they assessed the assignment significantly more positively.

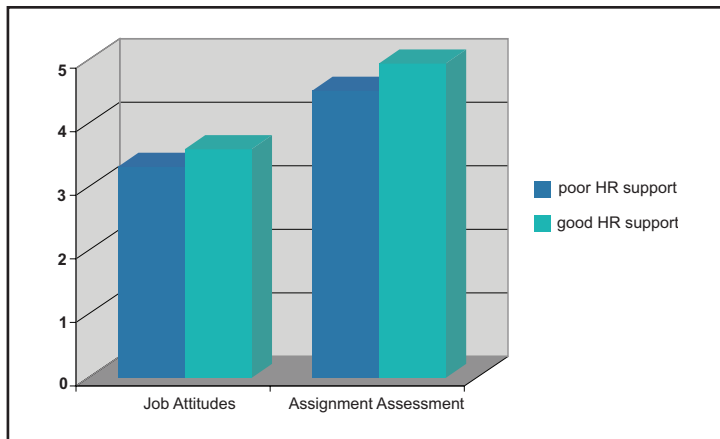


Participants who felt better supported financially had significantly fewer cultural difficulties while on assignment than those who did not feel as well supported financially.

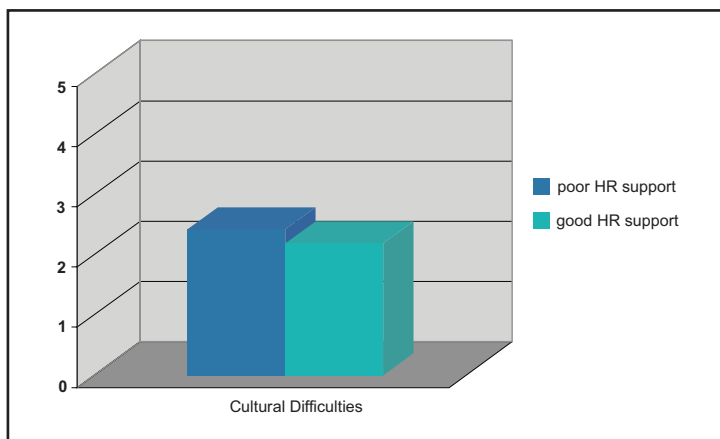


And, put another way, participants who were willing to consider taking another assignment like the one they had been on felt significantly better supported financially than those who were not willing to consider another assignment.

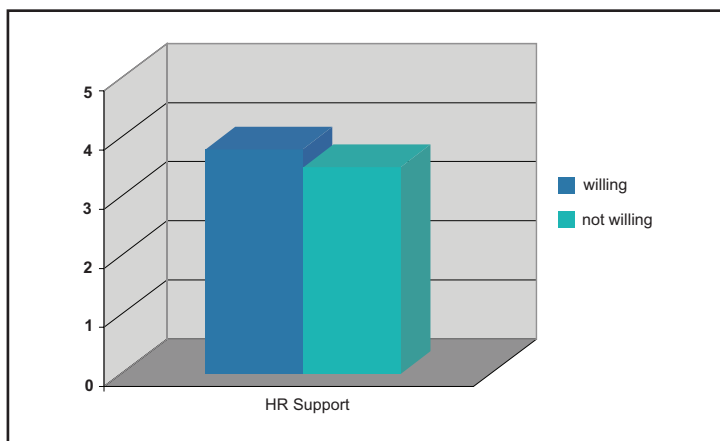
## Is feeling well-supported by one's sponsoring organization related to better assignment outcome?



Participants who felt better supported by their sponsoring organization's Human Resource department and policies had significantly more positive attitudes about their jobs and employers, and they assessed the assignment significantly more positively.



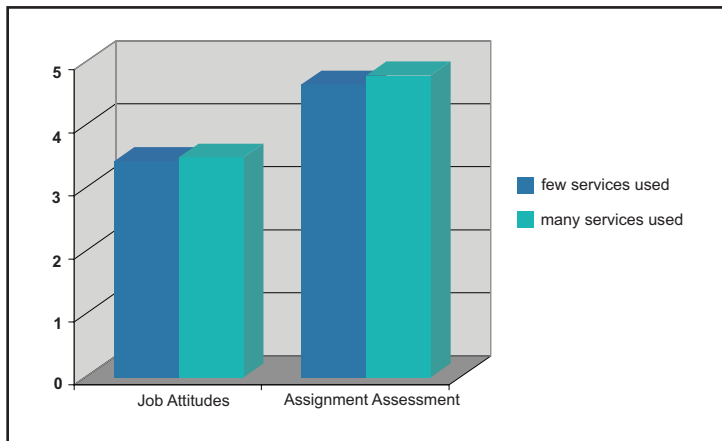
Participants who felt better supported by their HR departments had significantly fewer cultural difficulties while on assignment than those who did not feel as well supported by their organizations.



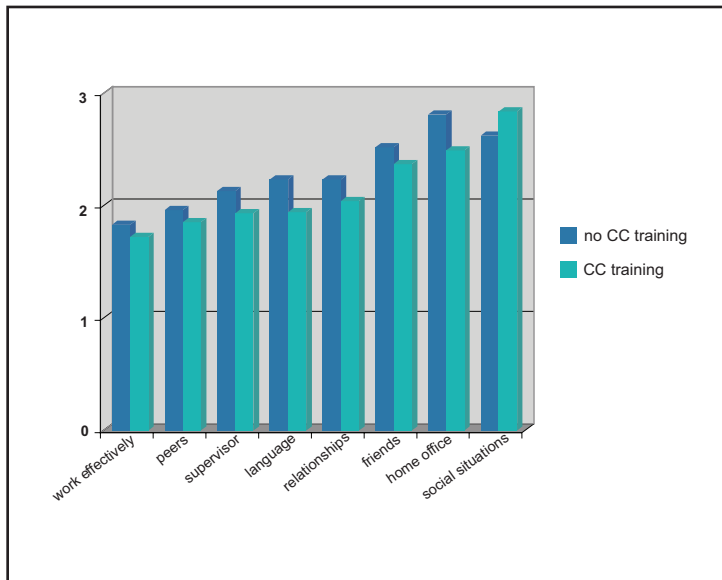
And, put another way, participants who were willing to consider taking another assignment like the one they had been on felt significantly better supported by their sponsoring organizations than those who were not willing to consider another assignment.

*"Have a defined HR support policy available prior to starting the assignment. Defining the policy during the assignment has been the biggest problem for me so far."*

## Is the use of more support services related to better assignment outcome?



Participants who used more family-related support services had significantly more positive attitudes about their jobs and employers, and they assessed the assignment significantly more positively.



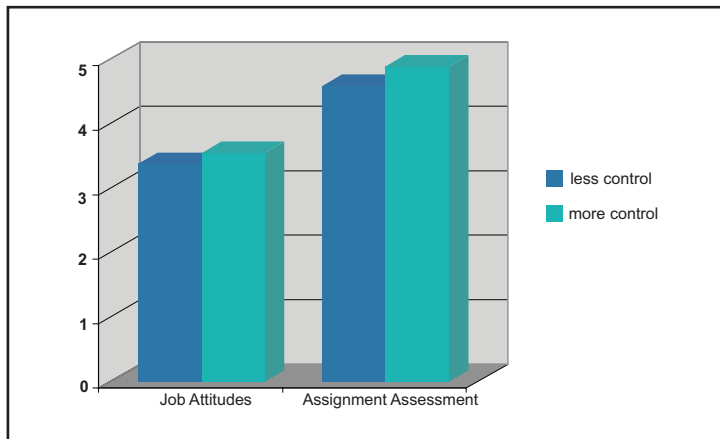
In addition, those who received Cross-Cultural Training reported less trouble with:

- ♦ working effectively with host nationals
- ♦ communication with host country peers and supervisor
- ♦ language facility
- ♦ building strong relationships
- ♦ making friends
- ♦ home office understanding cultural differences

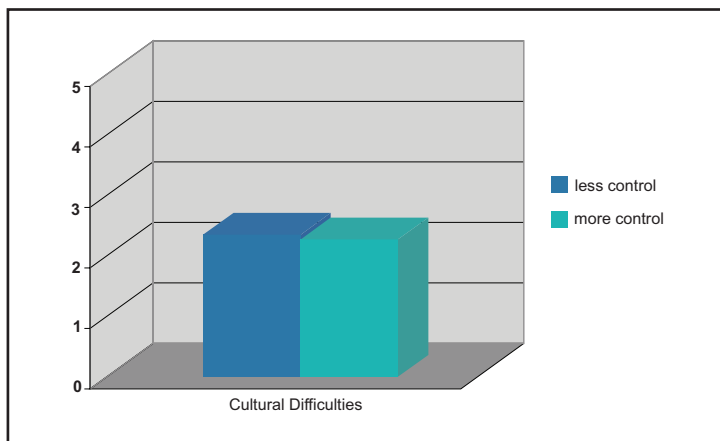
Interestingly, however, those who received Cross-Cultural Training reported *more* trouble knowing what to do in social situations in the host country. It is likely that they were simply more aware of the pitfalls as a result of their Training.

*“One of the things that takes time is looking up policies to find out what allowances/privileges we are entitled to while we are on assignment. This takes time, and we are not always sure if we have covered everything. Our employer could be proactively making sure we have everything covered. One good example is that even though policy talks about the employer doing our taxes, it doesn't mention where to go for that. Now we have to spend our own time figuring that out.”*

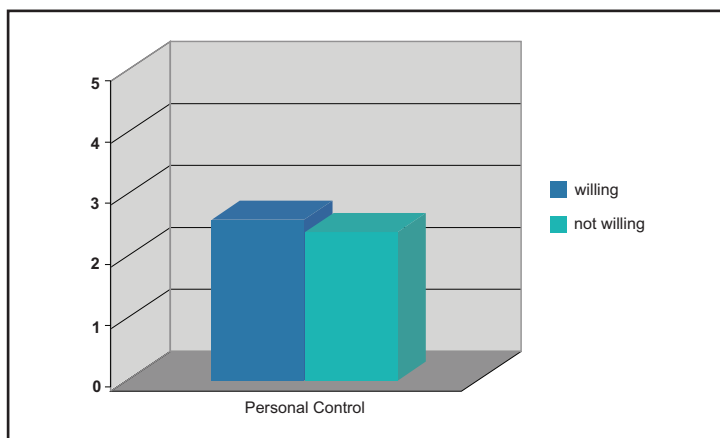
## Is having control over aspects of the assignment related to better assignment outcome?



Participants who felt more control over various aspects of the assignment had significantly more positive attitudes about their jobs and employers, and they assessed the assignment significantly more positively.



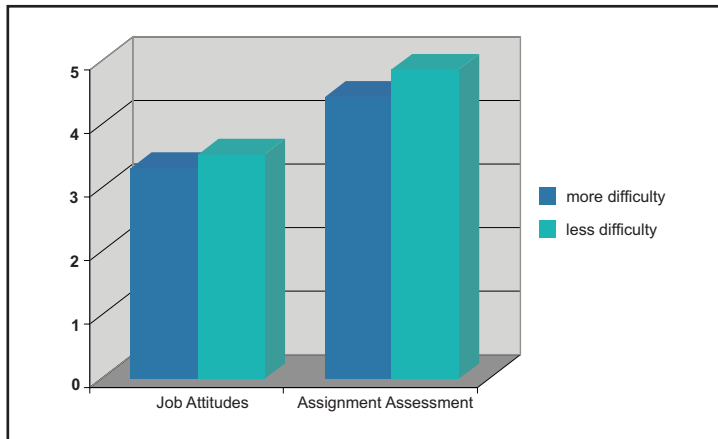
Participants who felt more control over various aspects of the assignment had significantly fewer cultural difficulties while on assignment than those who felt less control.



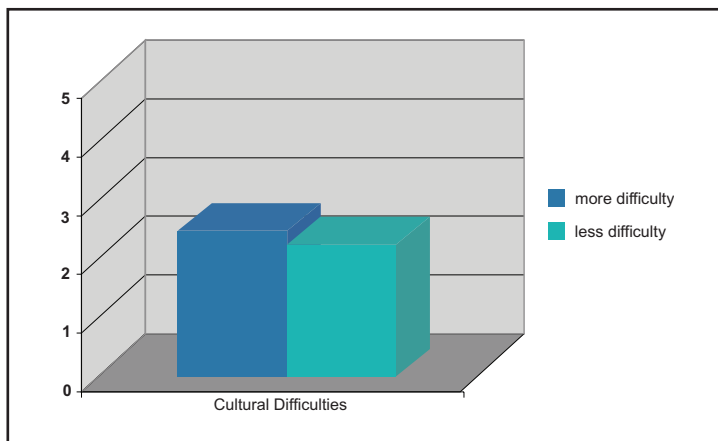
And, put another way, participants who were willing to consider taking another assignment like the one they had been on felt they had significantly more control over various aspects of their assignment than those who were not willing to consider another assignment.

*"Be flexible to an individual's needs rather than sticking to policy regardless of outcome."*

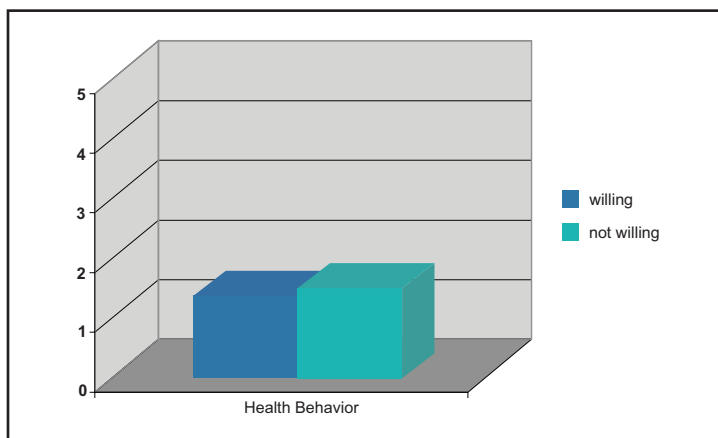
## Is having an easier time getting meals, exercise and medical care related to better assignment outcome?



Participants who had less difficulty getting meals, exercise and medical care had significantly more positive attitudes about their jobs and employers, and they assessed the assignment significantly more positively.



Participants who had less difficulty getting meals, exercise and medical care had significantly fewer cultural difficulties while on assignment than those who had more difficulty.



And, put another way, participants who were willing to consider taking another assignment like the one they had been on reported significantly less difficulty getting meals, exercise and medical care than those who were not willing to consider another assignment.

*"Project hygenics (nice accommodation, gym memberships, access to cars) are very important. Being away from home is difficult enough as it is; these factors should not make matters worse."*



# Summary of Findings about How Work Context and Assignment Outcome are Related

In this chart, an asterisk denotes a statistically significant relationship between the variables.

	Job Attitudes	Assignment Assessment	Willingness	Cross-Cultural Difficulties
Financial Support	*	*	*	*
HR Support	*	*	*	*
Family Services	*	*		
Cultural Training	*	*		*
Control	*	*	*	*
Health Behavior	*	*	*	*

- ♦ Participants' **attitudes about their jobs and the assignment**, whether they would **consider taking another similar Assignment**, and whether they believed they could **work effectively across cultures** were strongly and consistently related to aspects of their jobs that their employers could affect. Most clearly, those with more positive views of their jobs:
  - ♦ reported being more adequately **supported financially**
  - ♦ said their **HR departments** understood their work better and they, in turn, understood the HR policies that applied to them better
  - ♦ reported more areas about the Assignment that were **under their own control**
  - ♦ had an easier time engaging in a **healthy life style**
- ♦ Less dramatically but still consistently, those who used a number of **services** were also more positive about their jobs. **Cross-cultural training**, in particular, was related to more positive job ratings, more willingness to take another assignment, and more effectiveness about working in an intercultural setting.

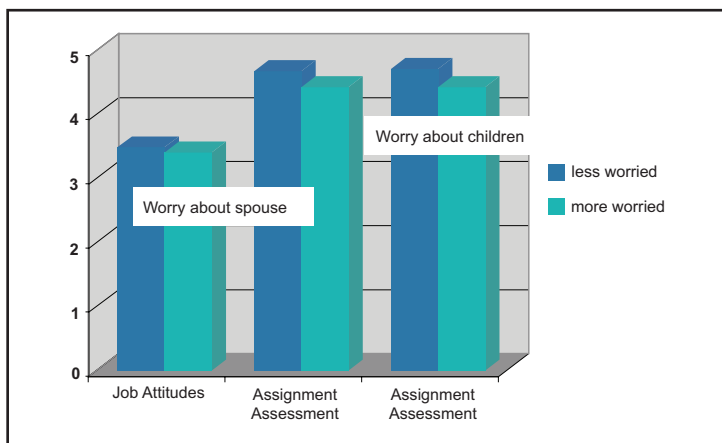
# What Family Context Factors are Related to Assignment Outcome?

In this section, we ask whether the Family Context (level of worry, impact of separation and potential family advantages) was related to employees' view of the assignment (job attitudes and assessment). (There was no particular reason to suppose family context would have a direct relationship to cultural difficulties at work, so these analyses are not included here. In fact, though, the domains were significantly and consistently related, suggesting a generalized effect of context and outcome.)

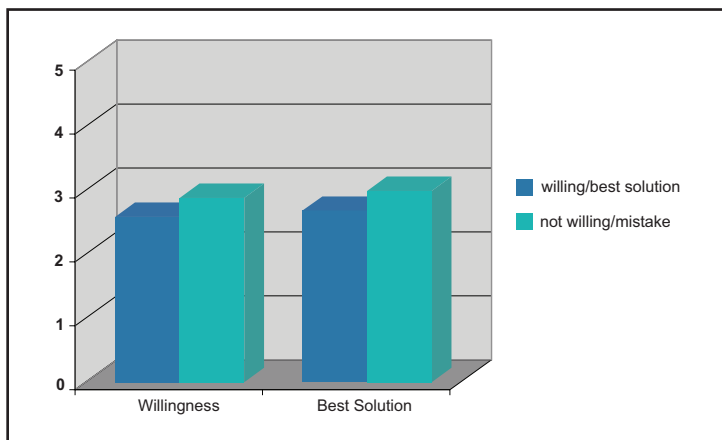
These analyses were conducted with married/partnered employees only.

## Do those who are less worried about their families have better assignment outcome?

For these analyses we combined the various domains of concern (physical health, physical safety, mental health and academic progress) into a single concern score.

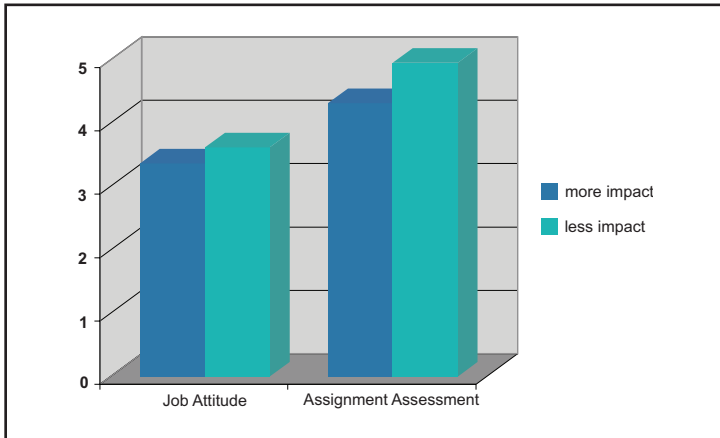


Participants who were less worried about their spouses had significantly more positive attitudes about their jobs and they assessed the assignment significantly more positively. In addition, those who were less worried about their children assessed the assignment significantly more positively than those who were more worried about their children.

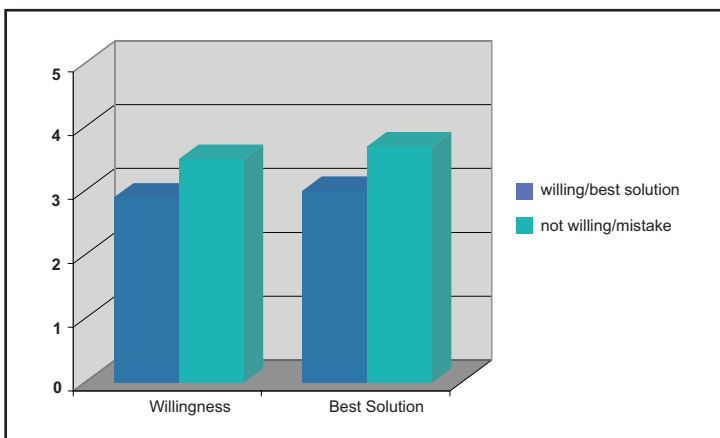


And, put another way, participants who were willing to consider taking another assignment like the one they had been on, and those who felt the assignment was the best solution, were significantly less worried about their spouses' mental health than those who were not willing to consider another assignment or who saw it as a mistake.

## Do those who describe a higher impact of their separation on their relationships at home have poorer assignment outcome?



Participants who described a higher impact of the separation (that is, more change in their ideas about being a spouse, things running less smoothly, and more anger about missing events) had significantly less positive attitudes about their jobs and they assessed the assignment significantly more negatively, compared to those who described a lesser impact of the separation.

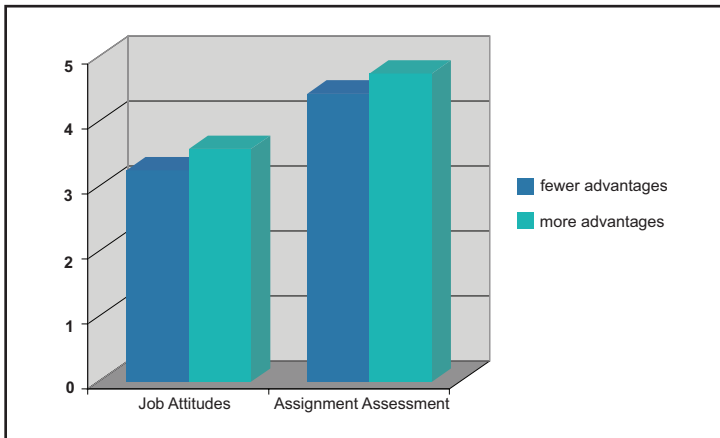


And, put another way, participants who were willing to consider taking another assignment like the one they had been on, and those who felt the assignment was the best solution, described significantly less concern about the impact of their separation than those who were not willing to consider another assignment or who saw it as a mistake.

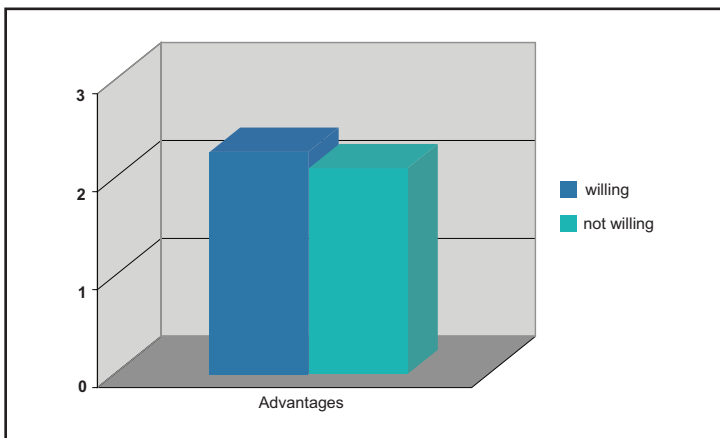
*"If she was sad it impacted my ability to be productive."*

## Do those who describe more advantages to the assignment have better assignment outcome?

We combined the potential advantages of such an assignment (see list earlier in this report) into a single score, such that a higher score denoted more perceived advantages for the employee and family.



Participants who described more advantages had significantly more positive attitudes about their jobs and they assessed the assignment significantly more positively, compared to those who claimed fewer of the advantages were true for them.



And, put another way, participants who were willing to consider taking another assignment like the one they had been on reported more advantages to the assignment than those who were not willing to consider another assignment.

*"Help out the family left behind. Allow them some support to get done the things I usually did. Now they have to pick up the slack, or [when I get home] I need to choose between spending time with them or doing the things that are on my list that NEED to be done."*

# Summary of Findings about How Family Context and Assignment Outcome are Related

In this chart, an asterisk denotes a statistically significant relationship between the variables.

	Job Attitudes	Assignment Assessment	Willingness	Best Solution or Mistake?
Worry about Spouse	*	*		
Worry about Children		*		
Impact of Absence	*	*	*	*
Advantages to Assignment	*	*	*	

- ♦ Participants who were **less worried about their spouses** had more **positive attitudes** about their **jobs** and the **Assignment**. Those who were less worried about their **children** had more positive ratings of the **Assignment**.
- ♦ The perceived **impact of participants' absence from their family** was especially strongly related to Assignment outcome — those who felt the impact keenly had more negative attitudes about the job, rating the Assignment more poorly, were less willing to consider another Assignment, and viewed the Assignment as a mistake.
- ♦ On the other hand, those who perceived some **family-related advantages and benefits** to the Assignment were more positive about their jobs and the Assignment.



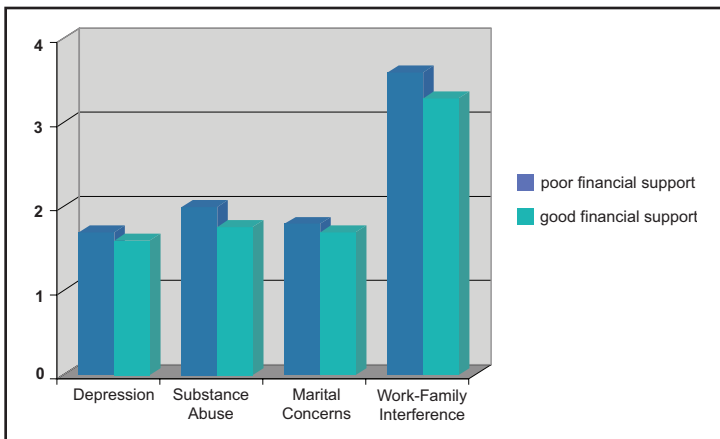
# What Work Context Factors are Related to Personal and Family Adjustment?

In this section, we ask whether the Work Context (financial support, Human Resource support, services used, personal control and health behavior) was related to employees' personal (mental health, alcohol or drug use, and work-family interface) and family (spouses' view of assignment and marital concerns) adjustment.

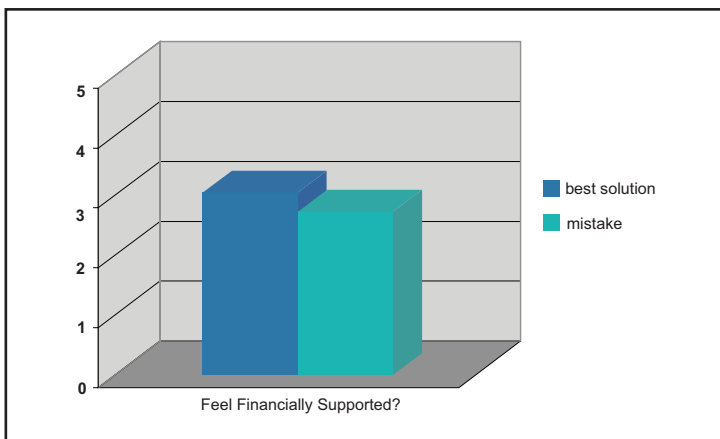
## Is feeling well-supported financially related to better personal or family adjustment?



Participants who felt better supported financially had significantly better mental health and more psychological vigor, and said that their spouses rated the assignment more positively.

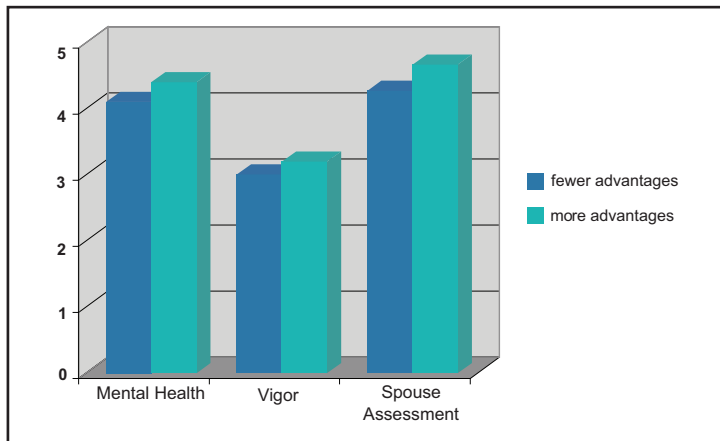


Participants who felt better supported financially reported less depression, less alcohol/drug use, fewer marital concerns, and less work-family interference than those who felt less well supported financially.

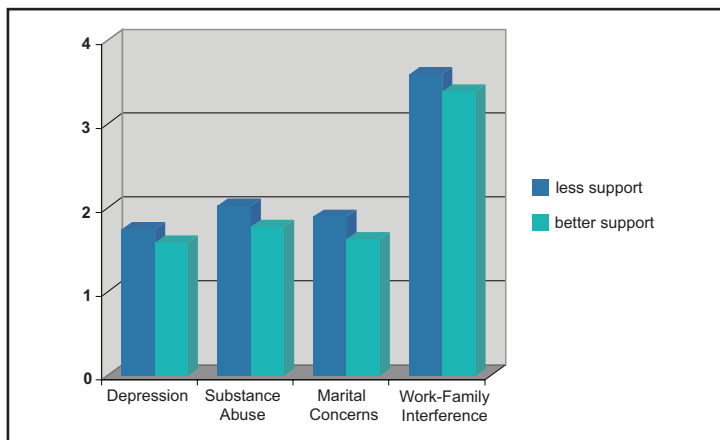


And, finally, participants who said their spouses felt the assignment was the best solution were more satisfied with their financial support than those who said their spouses considered the assignment a mistake.

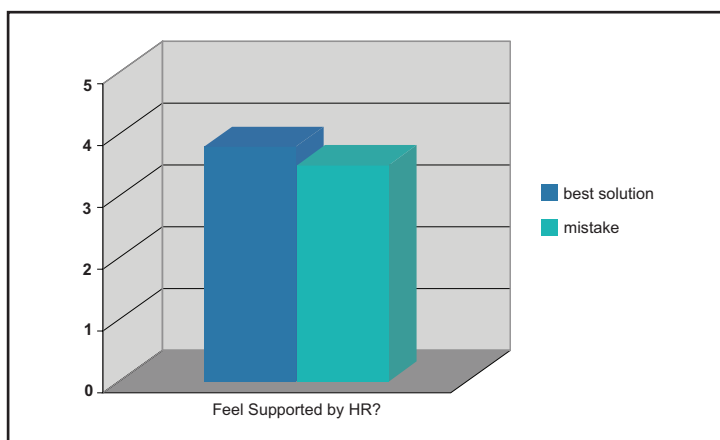
## Is feeling well-supported by one's sponsoring organization related to better personal or family adjustment?



Participants who felt better supported by their sponsoring organization's HR function had significantly better mental health and more psychological vigor, and said that their spouses rated the assignment more positively.



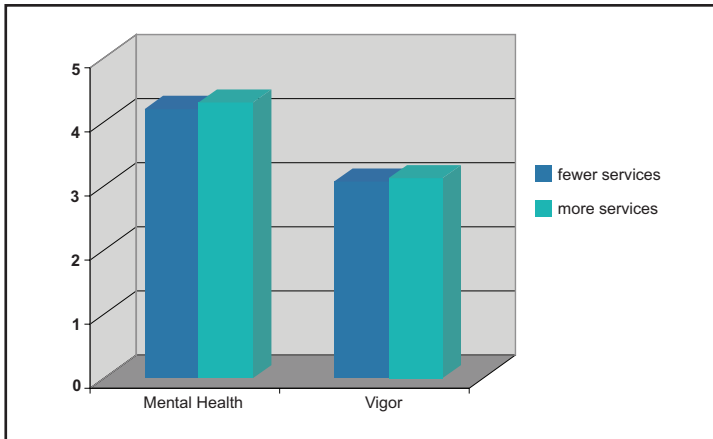
Participants who felt better supported by their HR departments reported less depression, less alcohol/drug use, fewer marital concerns, and less work-family interference than those who felt less well supported financially.



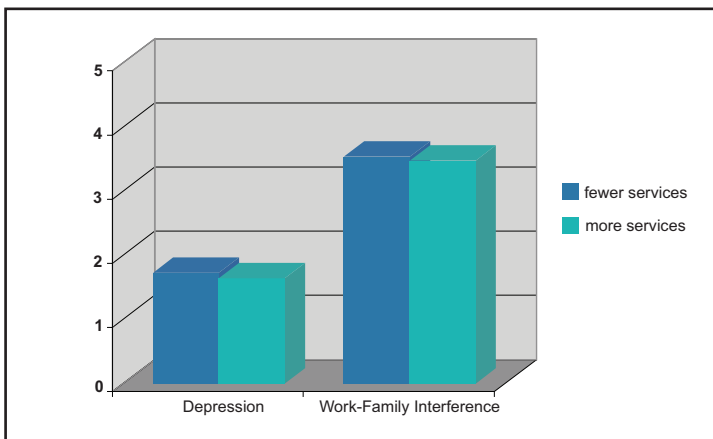
And, finally, participants who said their spouses felt the assignment was the best solution felt significantly better supported by their HR department than those who said their spouses considered the assignment a mistake.

*"I am being asked to do more and I feel it will jeopardize my future if I don't do it. I work very long hours while here and in addition am putting in many more hours on the weekend to complete my assignment. The rest of the team is doing the same thing. We are burning out."*

## Did those who used more family-related support services report better personal or family adjustment?



Participants who used more family-related support services had significantly better mental health and more psychological vigor than those who used fewer services.

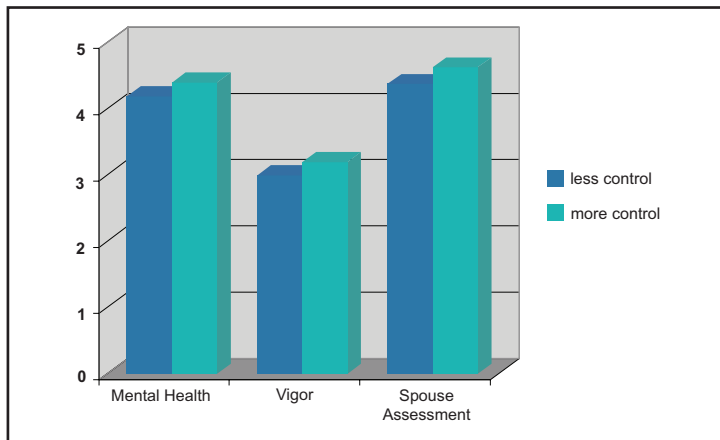


Participants who used more family-related support services reported significantly less depression and less work-family interference than those who used fewer services.

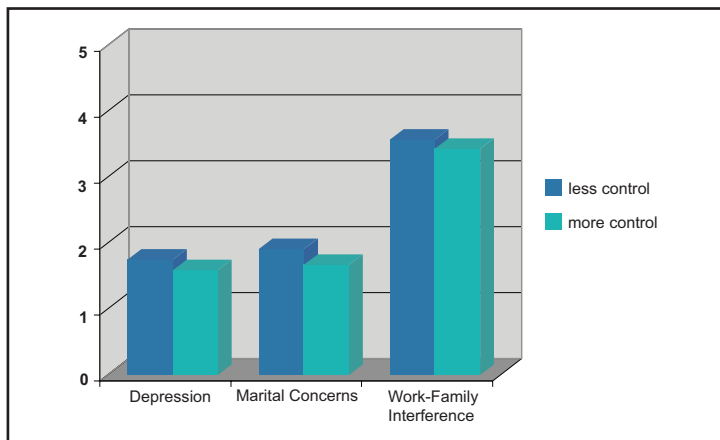
These findings are striking because those participants with personal or marital difficulties might have been expected to seek more family support services; that psychological adjustment was higher among those using services highlights the value of these services.

*“Ensure that your employees, when they come home, have plenty of ‘catch up’ time with their family – say 3-4 days.”*

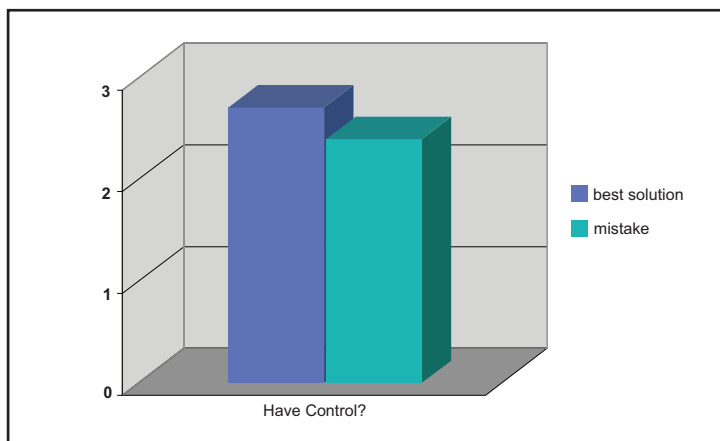
## Is having control over some aspects of the assignment related to better personal or family adjustment?



Participants who reported more control over aspects of their assignment had significantly better mental health and more psychological vigor, and said that their spouses rated the assignment more positively, than those reporting less control.



Participants who reported more control over aspects of their assignment reported significantly less depression, fewer marital concerns, and less work-family interference than those reporting less control.

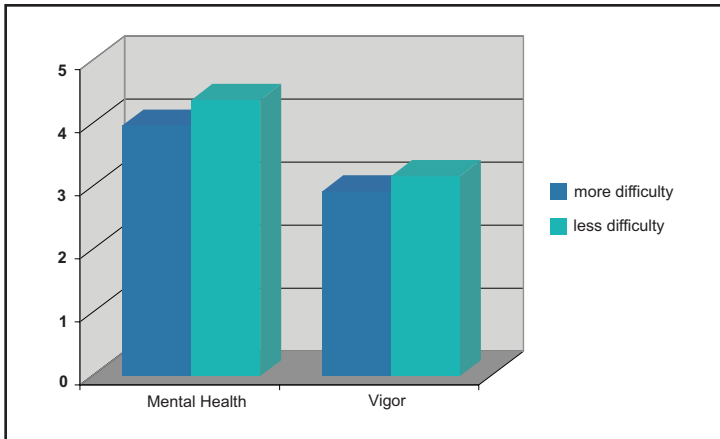


And, finally, participants who said their spouses felt the assignment was the best solution reported significantly more control over aspects of the assignment than those who said their spouses considered the assignment a mistake.

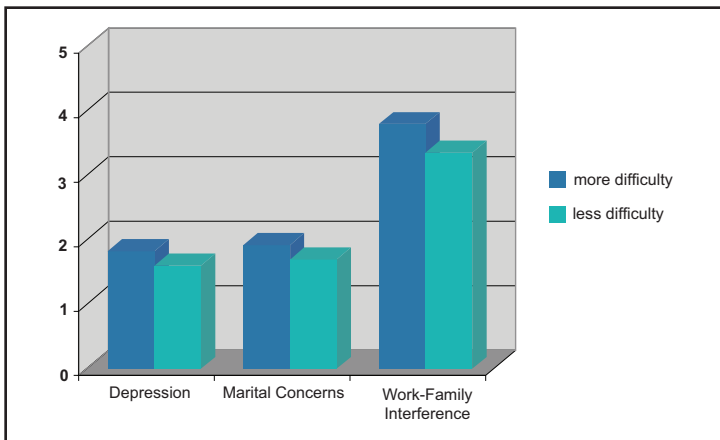
*"Allow family members to fly-in or have fly-out benefits to catch up with family matters and life."*



## Do employees who have a harder time engaging in health-related behavior have poorer personal or family adjustment?



Participants who reported more difficulty preparing meals, getting exercise, and getting medical or dental care had significantly poorer mental health and lower levels of psychological vigor than those reporting less difficulty.



Participants who reported more difficulty with health-related behavior reported significantly more depression, more marital concerns, and more work-family interference than those reporting less difficulty.

*"I am putting on weight due to an unhealthy lifestyle - unhealthy food, eating too late, very few sport activities. (I am used to doing a lot of sports at my home; I do not have partners for sport activities here)."*

# Summary of Findings about How Work Context and Personal/Family Adjustment are Related

In this chart, an asterisk denotes a statistically significant relationship between the variables.

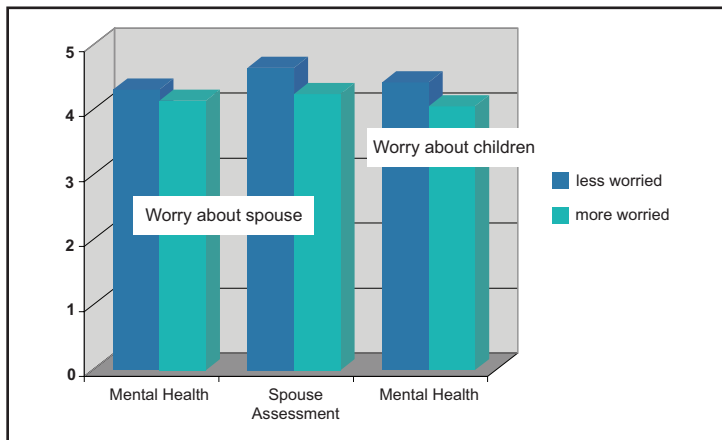
	Mental health	Alcohol/ drug abuse	Work-family	Spouse: Assignment rating	Spouse: Best solution?	Marital concerns
Financial support	*	*	*	*	*	*
HR support	*	*	*	*	*	*
Family Services	*		*			
Control	*		*	*	*	*
Health behavior	*		*			*

- ♦ Participants' personal and family adjustment are consistently related to the way in which their jobs and Assignments are supported. In particular:
  - ♦ Feeling **well supported financially** and by one's **HR department** was related to every single adjustment measure included in the study: those who felt supported had **better mental health**, were **less likely to abuse alcohol or drugs**, and had fewer **problems with work interfering with personal** lives. In turn, they viewed their **spouses** as having more **positive views** about the assignment, and had **fewer concerns about their marriages**.
  - ♦ Having some level of **control over the assignment** (length, trips home, family visits) was similarly consistently related to **better mental health**, **fewer work-personal conflicts**, better **spouse views**, and **fewer marital concerns**. Control was not significantly related to substance abuse.
  - ♦ Those who used more professional family services had **better mental health** and **fewer work-personal conflicts**. Note that those who were having significant marital concerns and whose spouses were least satisfied might be expected to have sought out professional help. Thus, it is difficult to interpret the lack of statistical relationship among these variables.
  - ♦ Those who were able to **get meals, exercise and medical care easily** had **better mental health**, **fewer conflicts between work and personal demands**, and fewer **marital concerns**.

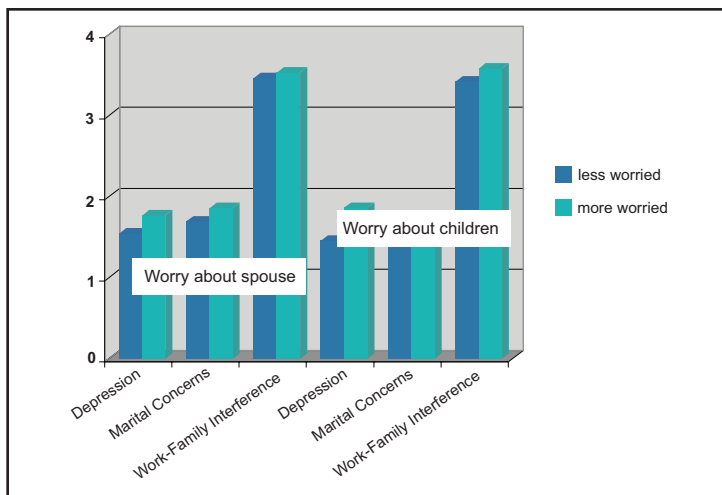
# Are Family Context Factors are Related to Personal and Family Adjustment?

In this section, we ask whether the Family Context (level of worry, impact of the separation, and potential advantages) was related to employees' personal (mental health, alcohol or drug use, and work-family interface) and family (spouses' view of assignment and marital concerns) adjustment.

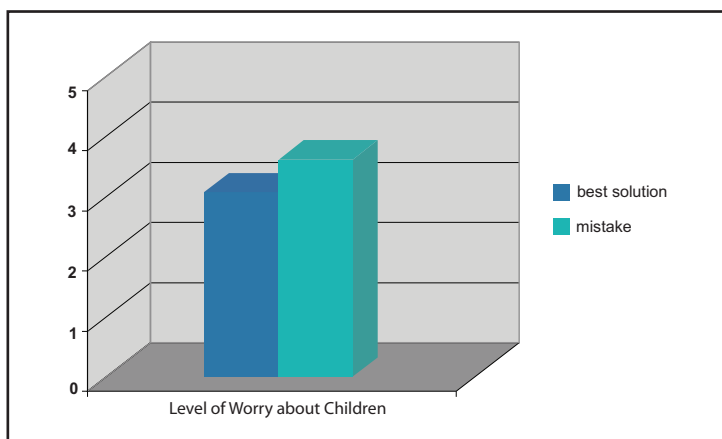
## Is level of worry about spouses and children related to better personal or family adjustment?



Participants who worried less about their spouses had significantly better mental health and said that their spouses rated the assignment more positively than those who were more worried about their spouses. Those who worried less about their children also had significantly better mental health than those who were more worried about their children.

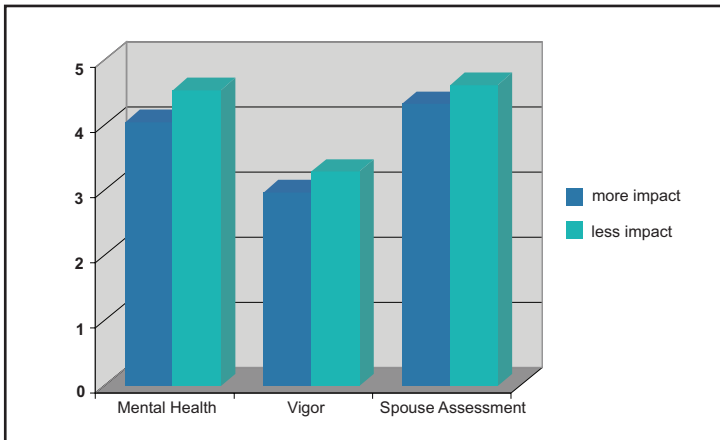


Participants who worried less about their spouses or their children reported less depression, fewer marital concerns, and less work-family interference than those who worried more about their spouses or children.

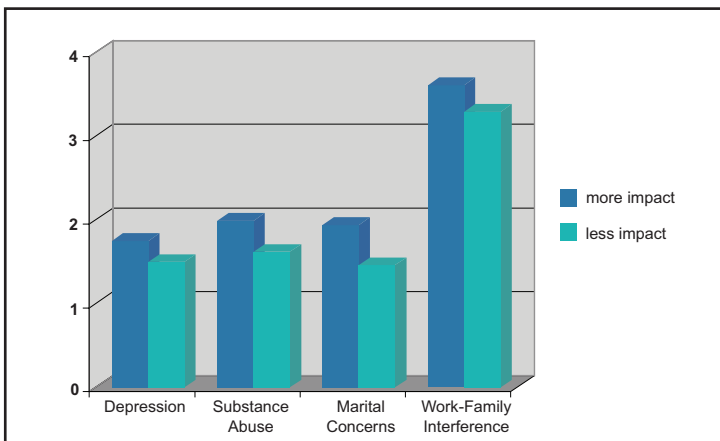


And, finally, participants who said their spouses felt the assignment was the best solution were less worried about their children than those who said their spouses considered the assignment a mistake.

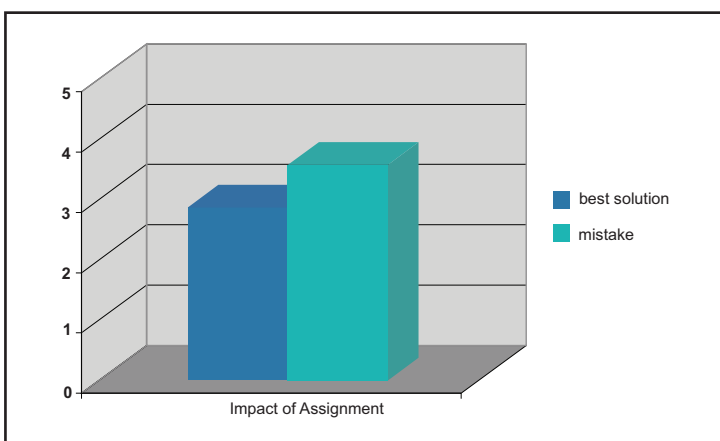
## Is feeling less impact from the separation related to better personal or family adjustment?



Participants who reported more of an impact of the separation had significantly poorer mental health and less psychological vigor, and said that their spouses rated the assignment less positively than those who reported less of an impact.



Participants who reported more of an impact of the separation reported more depression, more alcohol/drug use, more marital concerns, and more work-family interference than those who felt reported less of an impact.

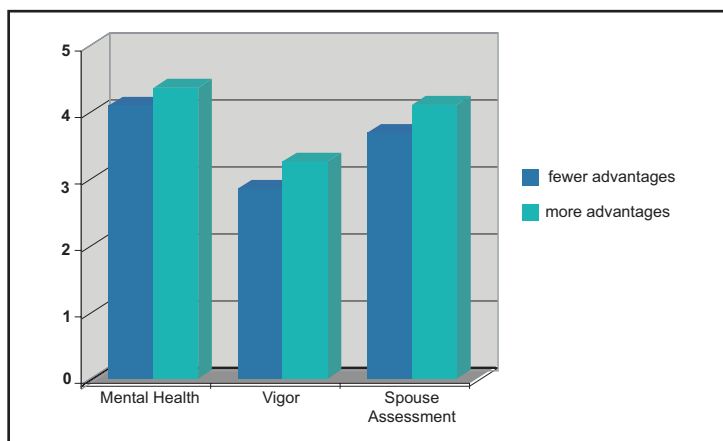


And, finally, participants who said their spouses felt the assignment was the best solution said the assignment had less of an impact on their relationship than those who said their spouses considered the assignment a mistake.

*"In the short term, my son pulls away from me and wants Mom to do continue doing things like story time, etc. even after I return. Long term, I'm afraid he's becoming resigned to me leaving, and sometimes becomes clingy."*



## Is realizing more advantages to the assignment related to better personal or family adjustment?



Participants who reported more advantages to the assignment had significantly better mental health and more psychological vigor, and said that their spouses rated the assignment more positively than those who reported fewer advantages.

*"Being away from my spouse and 'life in general' was much harder than I expected it to be, just because of not being around to enjoy the day to day things like being around home, meeting friends, etc."*

# Summary of Findings about How Family Context and Personal/Family Adjustment are Related

In this chart, an asterisk denotes a statistically significant relationship between the variables.

	Mental health	Alcohol/ drug abuse	Work-family	Spouse: Assignment rating	Spouse: Best solution?	Marital concerns
Worry about spouse	*		*	*		*
Worry about children	*		*		*	*
Impact of Separation	*	*	*	*	*	*
Advantages to Assignment	*			*		

- ♦ The family context factor most consistently related to family/personal outcome is **impact of separation**. Participants feeling the impact of the absence more keenly showed more personal and family distress on every measure included in the study: **poorer mental health, more alcohol and drug abuse, more conflict between work and family demands, a view that their spouse would rate the assignment more negatively, and more concerns about their marriage**. Of course, the “impact of separation” measure is closely related to these personal and family measures, so this relationship is not surprising; the personal/family adjustment troubles were likely to have resulted in the high impact-of-separation scores.
- ♦ Similarly, those who were **more worried about their spouses and children** had **poorer mental health, more conflicts in work and family demands, more marital concerns, and had spouses with more negative ratings of the assignment**. Again, these domains are closely related and each is likely to affect the other in intricate and interactive ways.
- ♦ Participants who claimed more **family advantages to the Assignments** had **better mental health** and described their **spouses as being more positive about the Assignment**. Once more, the direction of cause and effect is especially difficult to discern in these findings.

# Summary of Findings about How Assignment Outcome and Personal/Family Adjustment are Related

In this chart, an asterisk denotes a statistically significant relationship between the variables.

	Job Attitudes	Assignment Assessment	Cultural Difficulties	Willingness	Best Solution or Mistake?
Mental Health	*	*	*	*	*
Alcohol/Drug Abuse	*	*	*	*	*
Work-Family	*	*	*	*	*
Spouse's Assessment	*	*	*	*	*
Spouse: Best Solution?	*	*	*	*	*
Marital Concerns	*	*	*	*	*

- ♦ Every family/personal adjustment measure was significantly related to every Assignment outcome measure, highlighting the interwoven nature of people's lives and underscoring the importance of sponsoring organizations being concerned with the entirety of their employees' lives under conditions of potentially difficult assignments.

# What Advice Do Participants Offer?

We asked participants what advice they would offer employers, other employees considering a similar assignment, and families? Here is a sample of their responses.

## Advice to Employers

### Be clear about terms of assignment.

There should be transparency on the type of work we would be doing and rules and regulations. We should be fully informed about the allowances we would get before we take a decision.

Give them as much information about the role as possible including an accurate estimate on the length of the project.

Make sure that employees to be assigned on International assignments are informed of everything that needs to be known.

### Offer appealing financial rewards.

Make it more appealing by offering some additional incentives, since the sacrifice for people who are part of a family is very high.

Don't penny pinch - your employees are putting themselves out tremendously for the sake of this assignment and its importance to your business.

Do not employ degressive policies that make it less beneficial the longer the assignment lasts.

Make sure all their needs are taken care of. Be more sensitive and not be so calculative in terms of cost. When employees are happy, they will work happily.

Flybacks are extremely important to the assignee.

Provide as much convenience (accommodation, allowances, etc.) as possible to make the assignment a lot easier for the assignee.

The economic benefits should be proportional to the personal sacrifice done by leaving family and friends.

### Do not force an employee into taking such an assignment.

If someone states he likes traveling, he doesn't mean the time spent on the road and being into the night at work.

Ask their opinion and don't hold it against them if they do not accept it.

At least, give us the choice.

Consider extensions a serious decision, Give them time to think about it.

Ask people what they want to do and respect their choice - so you create real commitment.

To listen and provide the employee needs rather than over powering them to travel unaccompanied.

### Offer flexibility in policies.

Flexibility is a beautiful thing.

Give the employee the possibility to have a degree of control of the time spent away from the family.

Be flexible and make sure the policies cover this.

Give them more help and control over their assignment.

Allow flexible working arrangements (i.e., telecommuting, working from home) for part of the assignment. Security advice should be accurate. I am not allowed to travel out of the capital due to the 'security situation' here. However, the situation is currently very very safe and so I feel that intelligence is not as good as it could be. I should be allowed to travel during this safe political period. Flexibility in working hours/days/flybacks, more per diem/allowance/fly back.

**Offer practical assistance and support for the employee.**

Don't just dump the people on the assignment - actively help the individuals.  
Be more supportive and consistent in what is expected and what the company can and cannot provide. If you make a promise keep it!  
Show more that you care (concretely!).  
Provide more administrative assistance to individuals.

**Make the employees' family and personal welfare part of your concern.**

Involve the partner, discuss with both persons and try to find the right balance, by fulfilling even little requests for them. The worst is probably to not care. Simply listening and showing interests and will to find solutions, even if you cannot do everything that you wished to help, can be enough.  
Figure out a way to help the family left behind cope with the inconvenience of having you gone most of the time. It is not their choice and not their fault.  
Make it obligatory for the family to take a pre-decision assignment evaluation so that all members align their expectations and concerns, and at the same time improve family communications and expectations. Companies and assignees will benefit having a more stable family relationship and enhanced communication.  
Care more about family, not only the employee.  
Take care more on their private life.  
Encourage flybacks as much as possible Allow family to flyover & remain in assignment country for 2-4 weeks.

**Offer the option for the family to accompany the employee.**

If the spouse can accompany the employee for a moderate increase in total expenses, strong consideration should be made to encourage the spouse to go along. It makes the employee much more effective and durable for the assignment.  
Allow family members to fly-in or have fly-out benefits to catch up with family matters and life. And for long-term assignment, provide accompanied travel privileges.  
Allow families. It will improve productivity.  
Long term employees should be given option to take spouse and children on travel.  
Always need to sponsor spouse on an assignment > 2 months for employee benefits and better output.

**Maintain close communication throughout the assignment.**

Communication up front is oh so important so an informed decision can be made by the employee.

Involve the partner/spouse in decision making.

Make sure regular contact is maintained with the person on assignment. Make sure you monitor their feelings about the assignment. I feel like I was pushed too hard and consequently drew back from subsequent travel. If I had not been pushed so hard, I might have been happier to keep that lifestyle going for longer.

Speak to the people on assignment. Provide regular contact.

Always speak with them explaining the time it will take.

Agree on regular updates and progress meetings.

Contact the employee regularly by phone to ask for concerns, issues, feelings.

Perform health-of-assignment assessment every 2-3 months. Speak to the people on assignment Provide regularly contact.

Contact the employee regularly by phone to ask for concerns, issues, feelings.

Make sure they don't disappear off the local organisaton chart and keep in touch regularly. Invite them in to the home office for a chat every quarter.

**Arrange for better work/life/family balance.**

Increase frequency of flights home.

Allow family members to fly-in or have fly-out benefits to catch up with family matters and life.

Pay close attention to their work life balance - ( i.e. if they are out of town four days per week allow them the fifth day with their families).

Ensure that your employee, when they come home, has plenty of 'catch up' time with their family with the pressure of work - say 3-4 days.

Do not allow people to be on the assignment a very long time and allow for extended vacations.

1. Provide a better work life balance. 2. Provide a better work life balance. 3. Provide a better work life balance.

**Help the employee integrate into the host country.**

Provide cultural orientation after the employee reaches the country because we are not really focused before we depart.

Give the employee some background on the differences in culture between the assignee's home country and the host's. This would prevent some culture shock or misconceptions while on assignment.

Provide as much information about the city up front especially, medical, reimbursement and cultural differences.

Employers should have a close relationship with the assignee especially at the beginning of the assignment, so that accommodation, work and relationships happen to be successful.

Help understand the host country, provide some social connection in host country.

Offer invitations to events to mingle more with the host country people.

A course in local host language should be provided.



## **Advice to Others Considering an Assignment**

### **Clarify company policy before the assignment begins.**

Review your policy carefully and know what your company will cover and what your company will not cover.

Make sure you know the extra commitments required before you take the assignment.

Lock down a specific milestone for your roll off date and make sure everyone is aware and you will get support to roll off when that milestone is achieved. Living with uncertainty in a country that is not your own is very hard.

Clarify with the employer every condition before making any decision.

### **Consider assignment carefully before accepting - it's not for everyone.**

The opportunity is given to you. It is but an opportunity, you are the one who decides if it's the best thing that ever happened to you, or the worst thing that ever happened.

If single - enjoy it. If married and spouse is coming together - enjoy it. If married and leaving family behind - DON'T DO IT.

Think twice before accepting it.

Need to really evaluate what's important from a family perspective and if this assignment fits.

Be flexible, enjoy traveling and learning about others. Be open minded!

## **Advice to Families Considering an Assignment (from Married Participants)**

### **Stay in close touch with family while away.**

Keep in deep contact with your spouse. Use all possibilities of communication: Written letters, email, telephone, skype, web-cam ...

Communicate with your family on a regular basis.

Keep constant communication.

Travel home regularly, make good use of the time you have with your family.

Think carefully about time zones and how you will arrange to communicate on a regular basis and definitely block time in your working day to connect on the family's local time.

### **Keep spouse involved in all aspects of assignment, starting with the decision to accept it.**

Make sure it is a joint decision and that your spouse give you the full support during the assignment.

Make sure both partners are being totally honest about any concerns about the assignment.

Spouse should plan a trip to the assignment country for at least 2-3 weeks to better understand the environment in which the spouse is living and working. Also, meeting and getting to know their mate's new friends will put the spouse's mind at ease once they go back home.

**Find benefits for you and your family.**

Make the most of the perks of being out of town such as the flexible flybacks, hotel points, frequent flyer points, etc. so that you can have weekends trips away to an exciting destination. This gives you the feeling that you and your partner are getting something out of your time away and doing interesting things together which strengthens your relationship.

Make sure that you have some personal agenda - like acquiring a new skill to ensure that you do not get lonely/depressed.

Make sure there are longer term benefits if you are successful.

**Make arrangements at home to ease the strain of absence.**

Figure out a way to not have the 'stuff you need to do' get in your way of spending quality time with your spouse and children when you do get to go home.

Be prepared for the difficulty of planning activities together.

Line up backup daycare / sick care for your child.

Think about the financial impact it has on additional cost for child care.

Make your family independent before leaving for assignment.

It does stress the relationship, make sure you plan to address this - plan dedicated time together with your family/spouse to remedy absence.

Check finances. Make sure everything is in place before you travel.

Make sure that you make good arrangements back home so that they can sustain themselves independently.

Have additional support in the family for the person that has to stay at home.

**Do not accept assignment if it will not work for you and your family.**

It's a 1000 times better when your spouse is with you on assignment. Otherwise, it gets lonely and monotonous quick. The food won't taste as good, the colors aren't as vibrant, and you just don't feel the pull to go out and have an adventure if you don't have someone with you.

Think twice before you accept.

Think of the impact on you of being away and the possible 'guilt' you feel of not being there to support your spouse.

**Try to bring family for assignments longer than several months.**

Consider going together instead of just one person leaving.

If you can take your family with you, it would be a good choice.

Always consider taking your family on all assignments.

Ask employer/make employer allow you to take your family with you.



## **Advice by Single Employers to Others Considering an Assignment**

### **Embrace the new cultural experience and work opportunity.**

Do not look for what is in your home country. Be more open and adventurous about the experiences you will encounter.

Make connections, support systems at work, also try to engage in out of work activities while on assignment, just as if you were at home.

Do it while you can. You need to enjoy life and see the world as well as gain the international experience.

Be prepared to face a different culture, but do not try to impose your own. Try to live as a native, taking advantages of all good things you can find. Although it is hard to avoid, try not to compare your home country with your current country.

It is tough but good exposure and experience.

### **Recognize and figure out how to deal with social implications.**

It is a great experience but also a big sacrifice in terms of personal life.

Consider the effect it will have on your personal life and relationships. Only you can tell whether the results are worth it.

Realise that you are putting your life on hold, that work expects you to work more/harder since you don't have 'home stuff' to take care of, and that while you think everything's 'on-hold', life will continue to move on with family and friends. This last point is the biggest one, as you cannot expect to return home and find everything 'just like it was' when you left.

Think through all potential issues you may have when working out of the country. Understand the financial, personal, and professional impacts to you and your family.

If you easily feel homesick, you should pre-occupy yourself with either work or activities with friends. Try to spend a lot of the free time to do some things you like to do for yourself. Make sure to spend some time enjoying the sights of the host country.

## Summary and Recommendations

- ♦ Perceptions of financial fairness have a profound impact on work as well as family and personal outcomes. Stay in close touch with employees about compensation issues.
- ♦ HR support concerning visas, permits, and policies is similarly important. Communicate policy as clearly as possible and learn as much as possible about the nature of employees' work and travel.
- ♦ Employees reporting more control over various aspects of the assignment (e.g., timing, length, trips home) had significantly better work, personal and family outcomes. Be as flexible as possible.
- ♦ Employees who received cross-cultural training had significantly fewer intercultural challenges at work, and had better personal and family outcomes as well. Consider cross-cultural training an excellent investment in human resources.
- ♦ Employees having an easier time getting meals, exercise and medical care were more positive about their assignments. Simple investments in lifestyle can have big payoffs.
- ♦ Employees who were less worried about their families were more positive about their assignments. Invest in family communication, family travel, and family-related support services.
- ♦ Employees' personal and work lives are highly inter-related. When one is positive, so is the other, and vice versa. Provision of support to families can have a positive impact on work outcome.

**The Interchange Institute** is a not-for-profit research organization whose mission is to promote dialogue and facilitate understanding between people who move to a new country and their new communities. We conduct research on the process of intercultural transition, produce publications to assist international transferees and their families, design and deliver specialized cross-cultural training workshops, and train and consult to professionals in the field.

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