How to reduce family relocation stress.

Current statistics show that the average American relocates four times during his or her career. (a) A person can expect to have to move at some time to take advantage of a career opportunity.

The human dynamics of relocation, meanwhile, are more complex than in the past. With the prevalence of two-career families, relocation often affects not one but two careers. Recognizing the difficulty of relocating two-career couples, employers may consider single job candidates better suited for relocation. This myth, however, is rapidly exploding. Many single people now are reluctant to leave their carefully built support networks. A growing number of formerly married singles and single parents also makes relocation more complex.

Making the decision. Managing the stress of relocation should begin even before a job offer is received. Just as business managers have found that employee involvement increases acceptance of change in the workplace, involving a family in discussions of how relocation will affect them can increase their understanding and acceptance.

A job seeker need not wait until receiving a job offer to probe a family's opinions about relocation. A person who is thinking about changing positions should discuss the pros and cons of relocation with his or her spouse. Children also may need to be involved in a discussion.

Discussions on relocation should go beyond determining what each spouse's lifestyle and geographical preferences are to probing the emotional effects of a move: problems and anxieties that each family member might have about making a move. Two-career families should discuss the effects on both careers.

A job change can require temporary dislocation of a family. In families where both spouses are heavily involved in family life, even a brief period of dislocation can place great stress on both partners. If all family members understand the reasons for a move and stress is recognized and openly discussed, a family will suffer less. A move should not be interpreted as something one spouse is "doing" to the family but something the family is doing together.
Managing the move. Before entering final discussions with a prospective employer, a job candidate should do homework to evaluate or negotiate the moving package his or her family will require.

To assess the amount of responsibility a prospective employer will shoulder, a job candidate should determine:

* Whether the employer will cover house hunting costs;
* How many trips to the new area will be required for house hunting;
* Whether the employer will help with selling a current home;
* Whether the employer will cover closing costs on the new home;
* For how long an employer will cover temporary living expenses; and
* The employer's policy on visits back to a previous home to close it up.

A house hunting process can begin before an employee leaves to start a new job. A list of a family's housing requirements that goes beyond determining neighborhood, price range, and type of home (single family or condominium) can make house hunting easier. A complete list should consider details such as a formal dining room, a fenced-in yard, a full basement, or schools within walking distance.

Settling in. Although many relocated families expect their stress to end when the moving van pulls away empty from a new home, relocation stress often continues. Recognizing and accepting the stress of a settling-in process will help. A relocated employee can expect slightly lower performance on the job. Forging new business connections and working relationships at a new institution takes time, and slippage in efficiency often occurs.

Fatigue is to be expected. Sensory overload from processing new data on and off the job can be wearying.

Some executives, temporarily separated from their families and support systems, throw themselves into new jobs. They work long hours seeking to make up for their loss of efficiency. This can lead to exhaustion and depression. A relocated employee should be patient, expect to be stressed and fatigued, and resist the temptation to overwork. Discussing expectations with a new employer to determine realistic goals can be helpful.
A spouse who arrives in the new area sooner than the rest of the family can ease the family’s move by taking time to explore the new community and locate nearby services such as banking, shopping, and dry cleaning. The more a relocated employee knows about an area before the family arrives, the faster the family can become acclimated to its new home. The sooner a family can return to normalcy, the less stress it will experience.

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