

Business Spotlight 6/07

Intercultural Communication

Families Abroad

Interview with Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich

Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich shares some fascinating insights from her personal and professional experience into moving between cultures with your family. She provides some advice on creating the greatest possible Return on Investment when you move abroad.

RG How did you get involved in this whole area of supporting families going abroad?

HSU Well first of all I'm a child of bicultural parents with a Dutch father and an English mother; on top of that I've moved many times and lived abroad and returned back to my passport country, the Netherlands. One of the things I've found out is that as long as I can remember there was always a sense of being detached and of disconnectedness to that culture. I've never considered this to be anything critical but have always had the feeling that I was the one from the outside looking in. It was both a comfortable and a strange position to have; there was always a bit of a question mark at the back of my mind. I was not really sure what sort of a cultural identity I had.

I then worked in an international business environment as a corporate banker with people who were living and working abroad themselves. After some time in that job there came the point when I needed a career change. I took what I considered a courageous step at the time and opened up a relocation agency. At first it was very much about logistics, helping people to find a house when living abroad. It then became more than this. Through my work I started to ask myself questions that I had lived through when I was abroad. When my clients asked me about the culture that we were in which was also my culture I realised that there was an awful lot of learning to be done not only on their side but on my side too. One of the big steps I took was to move out of the relocation business into intercultural training. I realised that people didn't just need a house but what they were really looking for was a home in that other culture.

So it's my personal biography that really got me going in the intercultural field. I'm still moving constantly between cultures as my English mother lives in the Netherlands, my Dutch father in Belgium and my German husband in China. You might ask where I live; well theoretically I live in Germany but actually I live at the airport.

The experience of working for that French bank is important for me in my work in supporting families moving between cultures. It helps me to understand the mechanisms that are at play in large organizations as well as the realities of the workplace. Working with the French you obviously have to be able to speak French,

which I did, but I still had to find out that just being able to speak their language was not enough. What I was lacking was a more profound understanding of what made them tick. The French also wanted to understand why the Dutch do things in that particular way and wondered why no one had ever told them that there is a better way of doing things, being of course, the French way. That was very rewarding and a vital foundation for my work today.

RG What are the main challenges which families face when they relocate abroad?

HSW It is getting that ROI, that Return On Investment. I am deliberately using a very business like expression. You have to invest a lot not just at the beginning but the whole time. I make a point of this when I meet families preparing to go abroad. I always give them a bit of a jolt and ask them why they decided to take on the assignment in the first place. I often see a quizzical look on their faces but they then frequently say that it's not just for the career. This is the start of the dialogue I want them to continue not just with me but with themselves.

It is no longer the case that if you go abroad you will automatically have a great career. Things have, in fact, turned around: if you want to have a career you must have been abroad first. I get them started by asking them why they are doing this and then comes the answer: 'we also want to do this for personal growth, we also want to do this for the experience of living abroad, we also want to do this to have an enrichment for the family, for the benefit of the children by giving them the world.' If I hear this sort of thing I have to tell them never to lose focus on that intent. Quite often people get so overwhelmed by the complexity of things to arrange and set up that they lose sight of the wood for the trees. The reality of the working place is that extreme working hours and high expectations of performance in projects take over; the other reasons for going abroad easily get forgotten. This is one of the major challenges people face when they live abroad. If they lose sight of their original motivation it is like a little spot on the apple which may grow and the apple will go mouldy.

RG Let's move on to the children. My impression is that children are often better at adapting to life in other cultures than sometimes their parents are.

HSU It really varies. Some children have the best times of their lives. They may be living on a compound on which there is a school, where they for the most part find a structure which offers all the comforts of the home country simply within a different and maybe exotic and exciting environment. The environment is like the icing on the cake, the cake itself has not really changed much. They love this and thrive on it. I've had feedback from German families who have been relocated from Germany to Shanghai; the children go to the German school, live on the compound and have a wonderful time. I want to get away from the idea that moving abroad with children will necessarily be a problem. It doesn't have to be the case and the experience varies as each biography is a different one.

The other side of the coin is that there are some challenges that lurk underneath the surface. A lot depends on what stage of your life you are in. Personal circumstances are important: is there, for instance, a dual career issue. If the primary care giver used to work and they no longer do the feeling that living abroad is going to be a great holiday wears off after a while. It has an effect on our own identity. Our identity

comes from what we contribute; it is not just a question of the money. We need to have the feeling that we can contribute to those around us: this doesn't have to be a job, it can be voluntary work in our neighbourhood. This will have an effect on the children because if I can't deal with my own needs then I will be less able to deal with the needs of the rest of the family.

Another thing which comes in to play and which I have heard about many times is that frequent travelling on top of the long working hours on the part of the working spouse brings the family management responsibility heavily onto the shoulders of the primary care giver. It is not that they aren't capable but they are no longer in their familiar environment and little things that they would have been able to take care of themselves with their hands tied behind their back blindfolded take them at three times longer in the unfamiliar world. They often feel left alone, they lack their partner as a dialogue partner because they are simply not there. They feel that while it's great to be a home with the children they would love someone to talk to. This will not only cause stress between the partners but the children miss the other adult. Without the input from, for instance, the father the kids can start to take over. This can especially be the case with boys if there is no other man in the house. Even if things seem perfect at the first glance some challenges lurk beneath the surface.

RG How far does the reaction of children to living abroad depend on their age?

HSU Children are, of course, all little individuals. One should be very careful to say that under the age of 8 it's not an issue and they'll be fine. Children are not a piece of luggage.

Parents often think that they are doing the best for their children. If the children are not that keen when they hear that the family is moving to the USA it's almost like a self defence when the parents say things like 'But you'll be fine', 'You'll love it'. They mean well but they are cutting off the child from expressing their concerns. You don't want to put the child in the decision making role but you can at least give them an opportunity to express themselves. There can be very concrete reactions; they may be a little unruly or tearful. After the move there may even be a kind of depression in their behaviour. I don't want to create too negative a picture but the more you are informed about potential effects the less alarmed you will be when they happen. Younger children may, for instance, start sucking their thumb again, wet the bed or want to sleep with mummy and daddy again, when before they were perfectly comfortable in their own beds.

One of the important things which we tend to forget is that children, although they are exposed to so much these days are still children, not little adults. What they lack is simply life experience – they can't think about the move in an abstract way like we can. They can't know what it means to live in another culture in another country to the same extent that we can. We have the life experience, we have moved and travelled abroad before and have gone through many personal changes. We use that as a basis from which to project our idea of what is ahead of us. A child can not do that. That's why we need to be much more down to earth with children and coach them through the process. You must bring it down to the children's personal experience. I can give you an example; I've just recently been coaching a 9 year old boy whose family were going to move to Moscow. At this sort of age the children are starting to develop their own identity through sports, hobbies and friends. In this case his

passion was hockey. I was able to tell him that ice hockey is one of the favourite sports in Moscow and of course he was then gung ho. This was the starting point for talking about other aspects of life in Russia. We could then talk about why Russians play ice hockey and the climate and the benefits of that. This process starts to open up the minds of the children to the new experience. The key is to open up a positive perspective but at the same time to leave the children enough room to express their own personal concerns. Parents are often afraid of opening up this Pandora's box.

RG What advice would you give families preparing to go abroad?

HSU One very important part of the preparation is to make best possible use of a 'look and see' trip before the assignment. The pressures of the job are often such that the working partner goes on the trip and then says 'I'll just pop into the office – I'll be gone for 5 minutes, it may be half an hour but I'll be back.' I don't have to tell you what happens. It is critical to use this trip for the family and resist the temptation of going into the office as far as you can.

When you first arrive in the country invest as much as you can of your personal and some of the office time in your family. The first 3 months are like the first 100 days in office of a new government; they are crucial but you can get away with a lot during this time. The employer will understand that you might need to take an afternoon off or come in a little later because of things that have to be done at home. If you don't take advantage of this the 100 days are soon over and your employer will no longer be so understanding. Later you will pay the price for not focussing on the family during this time.

RG I see a parallel here to change management in organisations. After a merger or takeover it is vital for people to invest in relationships with the employees in this crucial initial stage. Unfortunately this side of things is often neglected as the business pressures take over.

HSU Yes, it is important not to make the wrong priorities. That brings us back to the original question of why you wanted to go abroad. Getting Return on Investment also means knowing when and where to invest your energy. If you invest in your family in the first three months it pays off, you get a big ROI in the long run. Don't the family alone during that critical phase. The non-working spouses also need to express their needs and be able to say to the working partner 'No, I don't want you to go to that meeting at the weekend – I need you here'. Quite often in the international field people have partners who are extremely supportive but sometimes so supportive that they risk harming themselves.

There is also something I call 'the waiting room syndrome'. Some people just bide their time waiting for the assignment to be over. They say things like, 'I'm not going to get involved because I know we're going to be leaving again before too long.' 'It's not worth the effort to learn the language because ..' This is dangerous because things don't always turn out as we planned them. People say to me that they didn't bother to learn the language because they thought they were only going to be in place for a few years and then find themselves in the 6th year and now they wish that they had.

RG I've heard that very same thing from immigrant Turkish families in Germany (see BS Working with Turkey). The danger is that their focus is on what is going to happen after rather than on the moment.

HSU Exactly, the assignment is not a rehearsal – this is it, it is your performance on the stage. This is a part of your life and, of course, that of your children. It is an essential forming element of your child's biography. It will have a distinct long term effect on the children. That's what you wanted in the first place. People often forget this.

RG It's strange that business people who are so used to having goals and measuring the achievement of their goals don't apply this to their family life. They say that the target in moving abroad was for the family but when they are there they are working all the time.

Finally I'd like to ask you what families have to consider before they return home.

HSU Well the first question is what is home? I'd like to give you an example of why I say this. Recently I was running an intercultural training for a Canadian family who'd been living in the United States and had moved to Brussels. They told me what happened during the enrolment of their son in the International School. During the roll call the teacher asked for any American children to raise their hands. Their son, Scott, raised his hand. The parents were shocked as they identify themselves as Canadians, not Americans and said to Scott 'You have to wait you are Canadian, not American'. Scott replied 'No, I'm American.' What had happened was at the age of four Scott had moved from Canada to Alabama and so his formative years were abroad. For the parents home was Canada, for the son it was Alabama.

If your child doesn't have a living memory of what their 'home' culture is you have to invest there. This is extremely important. I advised this couple to get a log cabin in the woods of Canada and have a place that you can return to each year which becomes the traditional home.

On another level you must realise that the experience of living abroad has changed you. Scott is no longer a normal Canadian: he is a cocktail of Canadian, American and Belgian. He will stand out. You will have gained a broader perspective and be more flexible but you will not necessarily be able to share the experiences with the people who are now surrounding you. They will not be able to understand fully what you are talking about and what they might really want is for you to be 'normal'.

If you return home after multiple assignments then your child can react in a number of ways. You may have the tree hugger who says 'Oh I'm so glad to be back in Germany and I never, ever want to leave again.' Alternatively you may have the travelling shrub who wants to keep on going on the move because this is what they are used to. The tree hugger has deep roots, the travelling shrub roots in wherever they happen to be.

