Split Family Status: Policy & Programme Best Practices

This issue discusses the factors that may cause split family status, the challenges that face the relocating family, and the support available to make the assignment successful.

Factors that Cause Split Family Status

Dual Careers
In dual career families, relocation can be particularly challenging as the spouse’s employment may be just as important to the family income as the assignee’s. Spouse employment issues could prevent a whole family moving or, if the spouse does decide to relocate, their employment notice period may prevent the family moving together. For female spouses, cultural differences could make relocation particularly difficult. Some countries do not practice equal opportunities between men and women and this may make it challenging for a female spouse to find a suitable job, potentially resulting in a reduced family income.

Support. As a historically critical reason for affecting employee decisions to go on assignment, spouse assistance services are key to ensure a successful move, recognising and supporting the accompanying family as they undergo significant disruption to their personal lives and careers. Many Cartus clients with assignees relocating to the UK utilise Focus (www.focus-info.org), a support group operating in the UK which provides career and cultural environment support to expatriate spouses through counselling, seminars, and networking. Spouse assistance can be offered through a local service provider, which helps with securing a work permit, job hunting, and to establish a ‘community network’ for the spouse. Financial assistance may be offered too, which could include reimbursement for continuing education or volunteer programmes. Cross-cultural and language training programmes can also be extended to the spouse.

Schools
After dual careers, schooling can be the biggest cause for split family status. Depending on the destination location, the choice of schools may be limited, or the expatriate population is high and therefore school places are not available; either way, finding good quality school places remains a challenge for the relocating family and often a key factor to whether an assignment is accepted. In some parts of the world including areas in Africa and the Middle East, there may not be good quality local schools and security may be an issue as well. For most expatriate children, international schools are the preferred option, although the most popular ones can be fully booked a year or more in advance, so planning is critical to ensure that the family has the best chance of getting places at the desired schools and to prevent split family status.

Support. When it comes to timing, ensure that you avoid non-summer moves for families and if schooling is an issue, consider including school search assistance in the relocation policy or offer to cover boarding school costs in the home country. However, if you do opt to cover school costs, consider using actual cost reimbursements as opposed to lump sum allowances, as the former is an improved cost control.
It is important to offer the family as much lead time as possible when there are children involved as applications to international schools can be a lengthy process. The age of the assignee’s children can also be an influencing factor. For example, it is difficult to move children aged between 13 and 18 because of exams they may be undertaking. This results in far more transfers taking place in June and July; another reason for advance planning. Many clients have begun to contract local education service providers such as our global supplier, School Choice International (SCI), which helps assignees and their families find the right school for them.

**Hardship Locations**
For security reasons, there are certain countries and regions that many organisations discourage assignees taking their families to, e.g. Angola, Nigeria, and Iraq. Some regions may not be recommended for families because they lack quality housing or suitable schooling, which can be the case in certain African and Middle Eastern countries.

**Support.** For permanent split family moves, where the assignee’s host location is not deemed appropriate to house the family, some clients allow the family to live in a neighbouring city or country. For example, if an assignee lives in a secure compound in rural Russia, the family stays in Moscow, or if the assignee works in Riyadh, the family may opt to live in Abu Dhabi. For short-term assignments in hardship locations, consider adapting the policy to a commuter assignment i.e. the assignee spends Monday to Friday in the host location and weekends in the home location or alternatively, intermittent periods with the assignee spending two weeks in the host location and two weeks in the home location, where the assignee would work virtually.

**Other Contributing Factors**
Healthcare may be another factor in preventing an assignee and their family moving together. If medication and treatment is not available in the host country for a family member, then it may be difficult for the entire family to relocate. Similarly, if there are strict rules on bringing prescription drugs into the host country, this too can influence a family’s decision.

If elderly relatives live with an assignee, the lack of available medication in the host location may lead to a split family status. Indeed, even if medication is freely available, the elderly relative could be too frail to relocate. It is also important to remember that in many countries elderly relatives are not recognised as dependents when relocating.

Same sex partners can also be a barrier to relocation. For example, some countries do not recognise same sex partners and homosexuality remains illegal in some parts of the world, including countries like United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Tunisia, and Morocco.

**Support.** Practical support such as language tutoring, pre-assignment trips, orientations, cross-cultural training, and multiple trips home can address many of the challenges faced in a split family relocation. Financial support is equally important and you should consider including additional shipping allowance and corporate accommodation for the duration of the family split in your relocation programme.

**Typical Policies**
A typical preferred policy option supports permanently split families for up to six months and offers two months of support for assignees in a temporary split family situation. In instances where assignee and family moves are unable to be coordinated, consider providing local one bedroom accommodation for the assignee until the family arrives in the host location.
Typically, families are not financially supported if the move is temporary, although they are provided with a monthly home visit depending on where the host location is. They do not normally include home finding trips either, as serviced apartments and rental cars are provided instead.

When looking at long-term policies to address potential split family situations, consider using commuter or short-term assignments to ‘plug’ the skill gap in the host location. Commuter or short-term assignments would mean the assignee retains their home-based salary and, typically, travel and accommodation would be provided by the company. Opting for either of these policy types would provide flexibility, career development, and would meet the skill requirements in the host location. It would also ease repatriation issues and ensure the family remains in the home country, minimising disruption. However, there is the risk of potential productivity issues in the long term and increased administration as well as negative tax implications, which should all be considered before implementing any assignment of this nature.

If a split family move is unavoidable then you should consider using an interim trip fund; a travel fund between the host and home destination. The fund recognises that when an assignee transfers to an international assignment without the spouse, there may be a need for them to travel regularly to their home country to maintain contact without being financially disadvantaged.

**Recommendations**

**Prevention.** In many cases, split family status can be prevented by the level of support you offer your assignee and their family e.g. spouse assistance, education support, cross-cultural and language training, and immigration support. Also consider using a thorough candidate assessment process before offering relocation. Cartus’ assessment service will identify any potential family issues involved at an early stage.

Like most aspects of relocation, advance planning remains key. It is important to give the assignee as much time as possible to firstly decide whether to move and then to plan. By giving the assignee and their family this opportunity, it reduces the risk of assignment failure as they have enough time for the spouse to decide alternative options of employment and, if children are involved, to decide what would be the preferred schooling choice.

**Support.** Split family status is not ideal in any relocation move, but on occasion it is unavoidable, so the support you offer is key to a successful assignment move. Goodwill gestures go a long way to demonstrate your support. For example, if the assignee has to use their own annual leave to visit their family, consider not including their travelling time as part of the holiday allowance. To prepare for future split family moves, consider creating a distinct split family policy, perhaps divided between temporary and permanent moves. Providing a blanket policy ensures cost optimisation by not having to address split family situations on a case by case basis and helps to speed up processes by having a clear policy guideline to follow.

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