

# Prime Relocation

## International Assignments: Implications and Practices



Switzerland is a far more complex country than first meets the eye. It's image abroad of purity, punctuality, precision, cows and chocolate run true, but if you delve deeper, Switzerland is a far more complex country. It's a country that takes a long time to get to know. It isn't a place to expect instant bonding and bear hugs – the assimilation can take longer.

Whatever its complexities and contradictions, Switzerland offers a lifestyle and quality of life that most of us dream of. It is a safe environment to raise children and offers a range of excellent leisure activities. Nevertheless, moving to Switzerland as an expat can be a daunting and challenging task and one that requires meticulous planning and organisation. This article will review the implications of having the necessary support for your relocation to be a success.

### Not a Third World Country

Some employers downplay the challenges encountered by expats in adjusting to life and work in a foreign country. They think Switzerland is not a third world country and as such finding an apartment and hooking up the utilities are easy. The reality is often very different. Many newcomers don't even know where to

begin in their quest for an apartment; most importantly they don't know the area and can't distinguish a good/advantageous area from a less

advantageous one. They also don't know how to interact with Swiss landlords – having no experience of anything Swiss previously. This immediately puts them at a disadvantage. The result is that newcomers either chase from place to place viewing apartment after unsuitable apartment, unsure about what choice they should make. Very soon, they become frustrated and disheartened and are unsure about making a decision for an apartment without having any local knowledge.

### Tenancy Agreement – Piece of Cake ?

When it comes to the tenancy agreement, the danger is that unwitting new transferees without any support, will sign a lease without understanding fully what they are signing or how the system works. Although the Swiss are mostly fair, even they will try to talk expats into conditions and lease lengths which simply are unsatisfactory and not conforming to local norms.

A relocation professional, however, understands the local market, can immediately identify the best areas and save the newcomer time in only viewing the best available properties on the market within their budget. A good relocation consultant will explain the lease conditions to the employee and take them through the contract.

It is certainly beneficial that any transferee has the possibility to discuss their individual concerns and anxieties about the move process and assimilation into

a new culture, outside of the work environment with a relocation consultant. Working as a relocation professional isn't just about organising housing and advising on schools, it is about being a good listener and adviser.

#### Personal Matters

Relocating from one country to another can be a very stressful experience. It involves a great deal of soul-searching, strong emotions and often high expectations. It is, therefore, very helpful to have the moral support and guidance provided by a relocation consultant. The relationship needs to be a trusting one and the family or individual need to feel that they are being well-cared for. Relocation consultants provide useful tips into the local way of life, culture and traditions throughout the relocation process, which can only be provided by a local.

#### What about the Trailing Spouses?

Often trailing spouses are left to fend for themselves without any support from the employer company. To encompass the whole relocation of the family seriously, employers should consider the impact of everyday life on the spouse left at home – they are the ones who have to navigate their way around the local shops, hairdressers and shoe-menders. Intensive language lessons are in many cases a necessity, as are cultural awareness courses which should include the whole family, not just the relocated employee.

#### Who's Responsible?

Too often, companies assume that once they have transported families and their goods to a foreign country, their responsibility has ended. This assumption is especially common amongst smaller to medium-sized companies with newly created foreign offices. Employees are chosen for their international assignment because of their expertise, high level of foreign travel experience and occasionally some language skills. Because of their many abilities, employers have unstated expectations that these individuals can handle any situation that arises with minimal effort.

Experience of travelling abroad is certainly useful, but it does not equip individuals for the challenge of conducting every personal and business interaction under a new set of rules.

A lack of understanding about local culture and lack of language skills can damage a partner's self-esteem. Spouses have to remind themselves that they are not stupid and may hold a degree in micro-biology, for example, but this does not help when faced with buying produce at a local market and a lack of language skills can reduce them to a 3 year old in communicating! Here the advice of a relocation specialist and some suggestions for language schools can make the transition smoother and the assignment time abroad much more enjoyable. If a spouse feels isolated and lonely, they will undoubtedly focus on the negatives

instead of the positives to their new life abroad. A relocation service will put the spouse in touch with suitable networking resource.

#### Effect on the Children

The way the mother feels about the relocation will have the largest impact on the attitude of the kids and their relocation experience. Kids shouldn't feel that they have to do without or are being short-changed and it is important that their hobbies and clubs are continued in their new location. The bonus of being able to snowboard or ski every weekend and swim in all the lakes in summer should help the children in adjusting. Often it isn't the children who have difficulties adjusting, however, but the mothers.

#### Adjustment takes time

Even trailing spouses who have left behind established careers will adjust, with time. Many welcome the opportunity of having some "me" time and focusing on getting the children and husband settled. However, should a spouse wish to continue working, it is imperative that employers provide her with the right career support such as provided by the Spouse Career Centre.

In the end, it all boils down to attitude – if the family or individual have the right mindset and attitude and embrace their assignment in Switzerland with enthusiasm and vigour, they will have a good time. Of course the social network needs to be there for them and they need to feel secure and settled in their house or apartment. If the relocation advisor, employer and transferee all work together, the relocation will succeed and the family or individual will enjoy their Swiss assignment to the full.

By ensuring that transferees have a support network available, employers are doing their best to help the transferee in making what is not always such an easy move into Swiss culture and society.