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**WHAT INTERNATIONAL RELOCATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES  
WORK BEST FOR WOMEN MANAGERS?**

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## **WHAT INTERNATIONAL RELOCATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES WORK BEST FOR WOMEN MANAGERS?**

With globalization, more and more human resource professionals are trying to meet the challenges of moving business leaders from one site to another. Increasingly, organizations are paying attention to international mobility issues because they need the best available talent for various overseas assignments. According to Brett & Stroh (1995), the willingness of managers to relocate internationally is a critical concern for two reasons. First, intentions predict subsequent relocation decisions. Second, reluctant (less willing) expatriates have been shown to have greater difficulties adjusting than those who were eager for the new experience.

However, competent managers are not willing to accept an international assignment at any cost. Nearly a third of employers participating in a study by The Conference Board's Work-Family Roundtable (U.S.A.) said employees at their companies have refused an overseas assignment because they feared an adverse effect on their career development (Anonymous, 1997). Difficulty in finding candidates for international assignments has been cited as a key challenge by 74 % of respondents to a survey, up from 67 % the previous year (Frazee, 1996). As a result, "instead of a big group of people fighting over a limited number of openings, there's a big group of openings and a limited number of people interested in them" (Flynn, 1996).

To move the best people available to critical international assignments, employers are increasingly providing policies and practices to relocate and pursue global careers. The objective of this paper is to assess the relative effectiveness of these policies and practices in increasing the willingness of managers to relocate internationally. We will also attempt to determine which of these international mobility practices are more effective for increasing the willingness of women managers to accept an international assignment and relocation.

In recent years, the professional and academic literature has suggested many expatriate support practices available for organizations that are dealing with international mobility issues. When it comes to empirical research, however, few studies have considered the reactions of managers to these initiatives. Also, to our knowledge, the preferences of women relative to those of men have not been systematically analyzed. Following a review of the literature, this paper presents the results of a recent study that includes 332 respondents and 35 international mobility policies and practices.

### **International Mobility Policies and Practices**

International mobility policies and practices address three important issues. First, there is the concern of career advancement. In one study, many graduates in international business were discovering that international assignments could take them off the fast track to the top (Feldman & Tompson, 1992). Thus, international mobility policies and practices must alleviate the "out of sight, out

of mind" syndrome and help make international assignments good career moves. Second, there is the money issue. Managers may fear a decrease in their standard of living with an overseas assignment. This is especially true in dual-career marriages when the spouse is not guaranteed a job within the international relocation arrangement. Therefore, international mobility policies and practices must also address financial issues. Third, family ties is often listed as the top reason employees declined a transfer (Flynn, 1996). Clearly, part of the challenge of managing a multinational workforce is dealing with the issue of dependents. Since employees may have several personal issues making them reluctant to accept relocation, firms must be imaginative and flexible.

Assuming that international mobility policies and practices influence relocation decisions, employers may want to know which of these policies and practices work best in various contexts and for different manager characteristics. It is assumed that the greater diversity of today's workforces should encourage employer's to customize expatriation practices. With more and more women, and women with families in the workforce, it seems reasonable to expect employers to tailor their international mobility policies and practices to the specific needs of women leaders. Furthermore, to meet employment equity and affirmative action objectives, human resource practices must support the advancement of women to top management positions. Through international assignments, female managers may acquire valuable experience that is required for continued vertical mobility. Thus, for equity motives as well as to have the best available talent willing to accept important international assignments, organizations should provide international mobility policies and practices that are responsive to the particular needs of women managers.

### **International Mobility Policies and Practices for Women Leaders**

Even though one study revealed that male and female MBAs are equally interested in international careers, women remain underutilized for global assignments (Adler, 1989). In the same study, male respondents saw greater organizational rewards for pursuing an international career than their female counterparts. Another interesting result from this study is that women reported that they are more likely than their male counterparts to turn down a foreign assignment if suitable employment cannot be found for their spouse. If women and men have different views of international assignments, they may also respond differently to various international mobility policies and practices.

Women leaders are also dealing with new family arrangements. In one study, the family situation was identified as the most important factor perceived to contribute to the success of international assignees (Arthur & Bennett, 1995). A previously mentioned study also unveiled the difficulties of managing dual-career marriages in an international arena (Feldman & Thompson, 1992). To meet the challenge, Adler (1997) recommends flexible benefits packages : "Given that most expatriate benefits packages have been designed to meet the needs of traditional families (employed husband, unemployed wife, and children), companies must modify their benefits packages to meet the needs of managers who are single (women and men) and in dual-career marriages". Thus new family situations require different approaches than those that companies have used in the past. In addition,

since the work-family literature has shown that women and men respond to family demands in different ways, we may assume that they need different international relocation support practices.

## **Methodology**

All study participants had received master's degrees in business administration from the University of Sherbrooke (Canada) between the years 1969 and 1996. Addresses were obtained from alumni records offices, and questionnaires were sent through the mail during November 1997 with stamped, self-addressed envelopes for return. Of the 1056 questionnaires mailed, 332 with usable data were returned. Since 22 questionnaires remained undelivered because of address changes, the effective response rate for this study is 32 %.

The sample contained more men than women respondents. In fact, 282 men (84.9 %) and only 48 women (14.5 %) completed and returned usable questionnaires. This, however, reflects the composition of the student body at the MBA level. According to University records, the situation a few years ago was 152 women out of 945 graduates from this academic program. The average age of the respondents is 43 years, with the average for men (44 years) being higher than the one for women (39 years). Nearly all respondents are presently employed (97 %) and most are in the private sector (69 %). About a third of respondents (32 %) have gained work experience outside of Canada (32 %). Most respondents have a spouse or partner (90 %) and in most cases this person is employed (70 %). Most responded that they would accept an international assignment under certain conditions (81 %), while only 2 % of respondents answered that they would not accept such an assignment.

The list of international mobility policies and practices used in this study was developed based on a review of the literature. Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent each of the 35 policies and practices mentioned in the questionnaire would increase their willingness to accept an international assignment of about a two-year duration. Other questions provided information on the respondent and his or her professional and family situation.

## **Results**

In this section, we will first consider the relative effectiveness of the 35 international mobility policies and practices. Next, using bivariate analysis, we explore the significant differences between male and female respondents. Finally, in this section, we present a multivariate look at the data controlling for possible intervening variables.

## International mobility policies and practices

Table 1 contains a ranking from the policies and practices perceived to have the strongest impact on the respondent's willingness to relocate internationally to those perceived to have the weakest impact.

**Table 1**  
**Ranking of International Mobility Policies and Practices**

International Mobility Policies and Practices	Mean	SD	Rank
Maintain standard of living in host country	3.99	1.04	1
Cover travel expenses	3.95	1.24	2
Give access to quality schools	3.92	1.36	3
Cover housing and travel costs within host country	3.80	1.04	4
Provide preliminary visit to host country	3.75	1.03	5
Make international assignment part of a career development plan	3.74	1.11	6
Increase standard living in host country	3.71	1.06	7
Plan for return and reintegration	3.68	1.15	8
Cover expenses for a return visit	3.66	1.15	9
Involve spouse in international mobility planning	3.59	1.15	10
Help spouse find employment in host country	3.58	1.10	11
Ensure new competencies will be used upon return	3.51	1.05	12
Offer pre-departure training	3.49	1.11	13
Offer pre-departure training for family members	3.49	1.05	13
Ensure international assignment is a promotion to higher level responsibilities	3.43	1.05	14
Ensure availability of resource-person to guide and counsel in host country	3.34	0.98	15
Cover education costs of children	3.31	1.30	16
Provide cultural training	3.29	1.07	17
Provide bonus for annual vacations	3.27	1.13	18
Ensure that international assignment will lead to a promotion upon return	3.19	1.27	19
Inform expatriates of developments at head office	3.11	1.22	20
Plan an international assignment that will not exceed two years	3.09	1.26	21
Provide additional international assignments in different countries following this one	2.99	1.21	22
Give access to quality child care in host country	2.87	1.41	23
Provide additional international assignments in same country following this one	2.83	1.11	24
Offer performance bonus in host country	2.82	1.14	25
Create opportunity to meet colleagues who have had international experience	2.82	1.06	25
Provide access to a mentor in home office	2.76	1.06	26
Compensate one month for spouse's job search in host country	2.68	1.19	27
Provide salary increase (10-15 %)	2.61	1.12	28
Cover the costs of three paid visits	2.53	1.40	29
Create support groups in host country	2.38	1.01	30
Share international experience with colleagues upon return	2.23	1.05	31
Provide international assignments as training experience	2.12	1.08	32
Share international experience with other former expatriates upon return	1.93	0.91	33

This ranking indicates that maintaining a good standard of living is the incentive that has the strongest impact on respondents' willingness to accept an international relocation. It is also interesting to note that some money issues are at the top of the list and others are at the bottom. Thus, not all financial policies and practices have the same impact on the willingness to relocate. In this study, it was found that a salary increase and compensation for the costs of three visits might not provide the needed thrust. Policies and practices related to career issues seem evenly dispersed in the ranking with « making the international assignment part of a comprehensive career development plan » the highest ranking career oriented incentive. Looking only at family oriented policies and practices shows that access to quality schools has the strongest impact on the willingness to accept an international assignment. Involving the spouse in international mobility planning and helping the spouse find employment in the host country are two other family related policies and practices that appear in the top half of the ranking.

## Preferences of women

Table 2 contains only the statistically significant differences between the average ratings of women and of men respondents.

**Table 2**  
**Significant Differences between Women and Men**

International Mobility Policies and Practices	Mean		Diff.	T Stat.
	Women	Men		
1. Plan for return and reintegration	4.00	3.68	0.32	2.03*
2. Ensure new competencies will be used upon return	3.96	3.51	0.44	3.51***
3. Offer pre-departure training	2.46	2.12	0.34	1.97*
4. Provide cultural training	3.65	3.29	0.36	2.17*
5. Inform expatriates of developments at head office	3.79	3.11	0.68	4.60***
6. Plan international assignment that will not exceed two years	3.67	3.09	0.58	2.95**
7. Provide performance bonus in host country	2.46	2.82	-0.36	-2.07*
8. Give access to a mentor in home office	3.27	2.76	0.51	3.07**

\* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

A first and more general observation is that significant differences exist for only 8 of the 35 international mobility policies and practices. This means that 27 of the policies and practices listed in this study have similar impacts on the willingness of women and men to accept an international assignment.

Looking at the significant differences between women and men, it appears that for seven of the eight policies and practices listed in table 2, the impact of each practice on the willingness to accept an international assignment is greater for women than for men. The only exception is men's preference for a performance bonus in the host country. Conversely, women seem to prefer practices such as training, information and the support of a mentor. The results also suggest that women are more sensitive to career issues when considering an international assignment.

### Multivariate analysis

To determine whether our main independent variable (gender) does provide unique information, table 3 contains the multiple regression results for the eight international mobility policies and practices where significant differences were found between women and men (see table 2). Using a backward regression procedure, we were able to determine whether sex remains a significant predictor when other variables are analyzed simultaneously, thus controlling for interrelations.

**Table 3**  
**Regression Results – International Mobility Policies and Practices (Betas)**

	<b>International Mobility Policies and Practices</b>							
<b>Variables Entered</b>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
Sex	-.11 <sup>†</sup>	-.15*	-.11 <sup>†</sup>	-.12*	-.20***	-.16**	.11 <sup>†</sup>	-.17**
Age	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Salary	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Spouse	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Employed Spouse	---	---	---	---	---	.17*	-.10 <sup>†</sup>	---
Family Income	---	---	-.12*	---	---	---	.12*	---
Children	.06 <sup>†</sup>	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
F	2.81 <sup>†</sup>	6.45*	3.82*	3.96*	11.37***	6.74**	3.19*	7.90**
R <sup>2</sup>	.02	.02	.03	.01	.04	.05	.04	.03
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.01	.02	.02	.01	.04	.04	.02	.02

<sup>†</sup>p<.10; \* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

The results in table 3 indicate clearly that the gender variable does provide unique information about the perceived influence of international mobility policies and practices on the willingness to

accept an international assignment. We can observe that for each incentive in the multiple regression, sex appears in the final equation. Very few of the other variables in the regression show up in the final equation. Having an employed spouse as well as the level of family income represent two other variables that deserve some attention. Having an employed spouse appears to increase the impact of an international assignment that will not exceed a two-year period and to reduce the impact of providing a performance bonus in host country. As family income increases, the importance of pre-departure training decreases and the influence of providing a performance bonus increases. It is interesting to note that the number of children is not an important predictor of the perceived influence of the selected international mobility policies and practices on the willingness to accept an international assignment.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The results of this study provide support for the proposition that international mobility policies and practices have different perceived impacts on the willingness of women and men to accept an international assignment. Career oriented international mobility policies and practices appear to have the strongest positive impacts on the willingness of women managers to accept an international assignment. Maybe men perceive these career oriented policies and practices as less important because they may feel more confident in their skills and career progression following an international assignment. Conversely, women may prefer these international mobility policies and practices because they focus more on connection, responsibilities, care and protection. Women and men may also have different perceptions of the meaning of an international assignment. The data from this study indicate that women may accept an international assignment more for developmental purposes. The significantly higher responses given by women on such practices as training, mentoring and the use of new competencies upon return support this notion. These varying interpretations should be explored more extensively in future research.

For organizations wishing to get the best available talent for international assignments, the results of this study provide some indications on which international mobility policies and practices may work best. The results also provide some policies and practices that could have a stronger positive impact on the willingness of women managers to accept an international assignment. Employers should however conduct a needs analysis within their organization while paying attention to the possible differences between men and women.

To meet the challenges of moving business leaders internationally, organizations are investing in international mobility policies and practices. This study provides some evidence of the relative effectiveness of 35 such policies and practices. Some international mobility policies and practices have a strong influence on the willingness of respondents to accept an international assignment while others have only a modest or weak influence. It is important to recognize that women and men may not share the same needs when it comes to international mobility policies and practices. Therefore, to get the best available talent as well as for equity motives, these policies and practices should be tailored to the needs of women leaders.



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