

## «Spouses are Often the Key to Expat Success or Failure»

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Niels Burkhard of Mohler Burkhard Partner

**Swiss expats are generally paid well, but assignments often fail because families don't feel at home in Switzerland. This has wide-ranging consequences, headhunter Niels Burkhard tells *finews.com*.**

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***Niels Burkhard, Switzerland didn't do well on welcoming outsiders in a recent expat ranking. Are skilled foreign workers really suffering that badly here?***

Most expats like living in Switzerland, but their partners and spouses or families often run into problems. They often don't speak one of Switzerland's official languages: German is not a lingua franca like English is, and it is hard to understand. Swiss dialects complicate things further.

Trailing spouses are often lonely, and they don't have the support network of family and friends that they would have at home. The Swiss system of childcare and schooling is also off-putting to foreigners.

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**«Unhappiness of trailing spouses can become a costly risk»**

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Often, trailing spouses don't have a job of their own when they move, and they are often unsatisfied with their role. This of course affects the expat partner and leads to survey results like the one you mention. It becomes an issue for companies because unhappiness with trailing spouses can lead to abandoning an expat assignment for home.

***Swiss banking is especially reliant on expats. Given the difficulties of having a social life, is a hefty Swiss paycheck the only incentive to come here?***

No. Besides the paycheck, Switzerland has a relatively unpolluted environment, political stability, a healthy economy, good healthcare and a high degree of security for foreign workers.

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**«Singles find it easier to up sticks for a job»**

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The recent «Expat-Insider» study published by Internations illustrates this. The HSBC study shows how highly Swiss bankers rate their work-life balance in Switzerland.

***Is it tougher for singles or expats with partners and families?***

Our experience shows that single expats find it easier to move abroad than skilled workers and executives with spouses and families.

***Disappointed spouses are often a factor in expats' performance at work and attitude to the job and can even lead to an expat assignment failing. This is expensive for companies. What can they do about it?***

Many international firms already establish contact with the expat's partner or spouse even before the employment contract has been signed. It's about exchanging views and giving information on language schools, the Swiss housing and labor market, work permits, potentially setting up their own business, the children's schooling or day care, or legal questions.

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**«Big firms do more for expats than small ones»**

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Human resources firms which specialize in spousal programs provide valuable support, and our firm is a pioneer in this market. We began working with Impact



Group, which is active internationally, at the beginning of this year in order to provide extensive services with global reach.

Ideally, both partners could begin working soon after they arrive in Switzerland – this makes it easier to integrate into a new environment.

***Are Swiss financial firms especially good or bad at efforts to integrate expats?***

Large firms make a bigger effort than small- and mid-sized firms when it comes to integration. Every sector has firms which are beacons and others which have potential to improve.

***Finance is a notoriously performance-driven industry. Does that make it harder for expats and their spouses to integrate?***

No, the performance culture is not the decisive factor. What is often more important for highly-skilled and specialized workers are the soft factors, like how welcome they feel at work and in their communities, their purchasing power and the happiness of their family.

***How much of a difference do spousal programs make with expat assignments?***

A program for spouses ensures that partners of skilled workers and executives become active and positive decision-makers and not negative influencers. Spousal programs can make the difference between succeeding or failing in your expat assignment.

***Have you been able to recruit expat executives in Switzerland just because of the spousal program?***

Yes. It is customary in many countries for both partners to work. An international assignment would only be thinkable for these skilled workers and executives if their partner can also find work. In this situation, the spousal program can be the deciding factor in being able to recruit a candidate.

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