

The preparation, training and support requirements of expatriate trailing spouses



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Background: Decades have passed since trailing spouses were first identified as the primary causes of expatriate failure. This has led to numerous studies to determine how best to avoid such failures. In particular, it was determined that through the preparation, training and support of trailing spouses multinational enterprises (MNEs) can not only assist with their adjustment to the host country, but also reduce the likelihood of expatriate failure.

Aim: With the impact of the trailing spouse still being a major concern for the success of an international assignment decades after it was first identified as such, this research aimed to determine the preparation, training and support requirements of trailing spouses prior to, and during an international assignment.

Setting: The article includes the responses from trailing spouses who at the time of the study were on assignment in 52 countries on six continents.

Methods: Both non-probability judgement sampling and snowball sampling were used to identify the 218 respondents who completed a self-administered questionnaire which respondents were able to access online. The data was then analysed using exploratory factor analysis, Cronbach's alpha, a *t*-test and paired *t*-test.

Results: Statistically significant differences were found between the preparation, training and support required by trailing spouses and what was offered to them by MNEs for all the specific forms of preparation, training and support measured in this study.

Conclusion: MNEs are still falling short of the preparation, training and support needs of trailing spouses. In particular, MNEs seem to focus on some operational aspects of spousal adjustment while the social aspects are still not sufficiently addressed.

Keywords: Expatriates; International assignments; Trailing spouses; International human resource management; Adjustment; Preparation; Training; Support.

Introduction

The inability of an expatriate's spouse to adapt to the host country has consistently been found to be the most common cause of expatriate failure (Anderson 2005:568; Briscoe, Schuler & Claus 2009:165; Haile, Jones & Emmanuel 2007:101; Tung 1981:76). Expatriate failure can be defined as the underperformance by the expatriate during the international assignment, the premature return of the expatriate, or repatriate failure on returning to the home country (Briscoe et al. 2009:180; Harzing & Van Ruyseveldt 2004:274; Shen 2005:657; Swarts & Du Plessis 2007:48; Templer 2010:1754). This can be attributed to the fact that spouses are confronted with obstacles in the host country, such as culture shock, isolation, differences in work-related norms, health care systems, housing and schooling (Andreason 2008:386; Briscoe et al. 2009:185; Mendenhall, Dunbar & Oddou 1987:331).

Although expatriate spouses are likely to be less sheltered from the foreign environment and more exposed to the culture than the expatriates and in some cases even the accompanying children, they tend to be excluded from selection and training processes and receive less in-country support, making it harder for them to adjust (Andreason 2008:382–387; McNulty 2012:418; Tung 1982:65; Wilson 2011:9). Deen (2011:10), Harvey and Moeller (2009:280) and Haslberger and Brewster (2008:2008) acknowledge that these obstacles tend to create high levels of stress and tension for spouses, leading to conflict within the family and affecting the expatriate's morale and ability to perform their job effectively. Many multinational enterprises (MNEs), however, fail to recognise the relationship between expatriate success and the trailing spouse's adjustment, and as a result they neglect to include the spouse in the expatriation process. In fact, according to Cartus

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and Primacy (in McNulty 2012:421), MNEs' interest in providing assistance to expatriates' trailing spouses and families is on the decrease with only 13% of enterprises being interested in improving these assistance programmes. Consequently, it is not surprising to note that overall organisational support continues to disappoint trailing spouses (McNulty 2012:430; Selmer & Leung 2003:17), with trailing spouses believing that MNEs are not genuinely interested in their wellbeing (McNulty 2012:430).

In fact, between 80% and 90% of expatriates are accompanied by their spouses (Ali, Van der Zee & Sanders 2003:564; Van Erp et al. 2011:58; Wu & Ang 2011:2690) but only 50% of MNEs offer some form of support for trailing spouses, 87% of which provide assistance only when necessary. This while as little as 13% have formal policies in place regarding trailing spouses (Briscoe et al. 2009:183).

Thus with the impact of the trailing spouse still being a major concern for the success of an international assignment decades after it was first identified as such (Tung 1982), this research aimed to determine the preparation, training and support requirements of trailing spouses prior to and during an international assignment.

This article contributes to the existing literature as it contributes to McNulty's (2012:432) call for more quantitative studies on the topic, and in doing so it develops our knowledge of this field.

Literature review

Spousal support of the expatriate, the assignment, and their adjustment and satisfaction during an international assignment is considered crucial for assignment success (Cole 2012:309; Long 2010:75; Wang, Bullock & Oswald 2011:74). Consequently, Gupta, Banerjee and Gaur (2012b:26) and Vögel and Van Vuuren (2008:80) emphasise the importance of spousal preparation, training and support prior to and during the international assignment.

Preparation requirements

A survey by CIGNA International (Brown 2008:1030) found that 53% of enterprises felt they provided sufficient preparation for expatriate families, while only 32% of expatriates felt that their families received adequate preparation and support prior to and during the international assignment. Cherry (2010:133) and Dewald and Self (2008:357) state that the involvement of the spouse in pre-departure preparation regarding the assignment, including supplying them with information on the foreign country's culture and living standards, aids in their general adjustment. While the opposite is also true, spouses with unrealistic expectations soon become dissatisfied with the country, culture and living conditions, which inhibits their cross-cultural adjustment and often results in the family's premature return (Kim & Tung 2013:1042). Consequently, enterprises should provide families with a realistic preview

of everyday life in the host country, as well as accurate and up-to-date information about the country, its people and culture (Cherry 2010:139; Kim & Tung 2013:1045; Purgal-Popiela 2011:39; Vögel & Van Vuuren 2008:85).

In particular, Cascio (2006:645), Sharma (2012:15) and Vögel and Van Vuuren (2008:85) recommend that enterprises organise orientation visits to the host country for potential expatriates and their spouses before their final departure. These orientation visits provide expatriates and their spouses with invaluable first-hand information regarding the host country and culture, which may reduce spousal uncertainty and aid in the spouses' adjustment during the assignment (Ghafoor et al. 2011:338; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012:63; Sharma 2012:15; Sims & Schraeder 2004:76).

The opposite can, however, also be true, with Harvey and Wiese (1997:368) and Sims and Schraeder (2004:76) warning that the pre-departure orientation visit can become a 'tourist' visit or holiday, leaving the expatriate couple with an unrealistic perception of the host country's culture and customs. As a result, the couple can experience severe culture shock on their arrival in the host country, as they realise that the culture and lifestyle they experienced on their orientation visit differs significantly from the reality.

Additionally, it has been suggested that enterprises should offer relocation, housing and placement assistance, and provide expatriates and their spouses with lists of property agents, appropriate schools, shopping centres and medical clinics prior to the assignment (Cherry 2010:139; Kim & Tung 2013:1045; Purgal-Popiela 2011:39).

Kupka, Everett and Cathro (2008:1774), however, found that the majority of trailing spouses were rarely prepared for the foreign environment they were to encounter. As a result, the following hypothesis was stated:

H₁: There is no difference between the preparation required by trailing spouses and the preparation provided to them by the multinational enterprise prior to the assignment.

Training requirements

The trailing spouses' need for training prior to their departure is emphasised throughout the expatriate literature (Fischlmayr & Kollinger 2010:471; Mohr & Klein 2004:1197; Smart 2011:64; Vögel & Van Vuuren 2008:85). Expatriates and spouses who are prepared for and aware of the host country's religious, cultural, language, and lifestyle differences, will have a mental idea of potential situations that may arise during the assignment. This mindset of being prepared should increase their confidence in the assignment, eliminate uncertainty, and ease their adjustment in the local environment, reducing the chance of premature return (Cho, Hutchings & Marchant 2013:1053; Gupta et al. 2012b:18). In particular, this training should include a focus on both objective and subjective characteristics of the foreign culture, with the objective characteristics focusing on tangible and observable characteristics such as architecture, language and

currency, while the subjective characteristics will focus on intangible characteristics such as values, norms and beliefs (Shay & Tracey 1997:34–35).

According to Shaffer and Harrison (2001:243), differences in the host country's language and cultural novelty will, however, have a greater impact on the accompanying spouse than on the expatriate, with cultural novelty defined as 'commonplace features or everyday customs' of a country's culture. Spouses often struggle to adjust as they become confused, stressed and overwhelmed by their lack of knowledge and understanding of the new, foreign culture and its customs (Caligiuri, Tarique & Jacobs 2009:257; Ghafoor et al. 2011:337; Gupta, Banerjee & Gaur 2012a:3560; Van Erp et al. 2011:75). While expatriates have the stability of a familiar work environment, the spouse tends to be more immersed in the local culture on a daily basis, interacting with locals who may not speak their language and who are not accustomed to dealing with foreigners (Andreason 2008:386; Cole 2012:313; Purgal-Popiela 2011:33; Wilson 2011:9).

Kupka et al. (2008:1783) and Mohr and Klein (2004:1194) found that spouses who acquired a basic repertoire in the foreign language had a more positive international experience, and adjusted more easily than those who made no attempt to learn the language. Language and communication problems create social barriers, making it difficult to cope with everyday tasks, form friendships, find employment, and adjust and integrate with the locals (Cherry 2010:137; Kim & Tung 2013:1033; Purgal-Popiela 2011:38; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012:73; Sharma 2012:16). Enterprises should therefore provide relevant pre-departure and post-arrival training, to assist spouses with adjusting to the host culture and language, and with developing social competences and networking skills (Cherry 2010:140; Lund & Degen 2010:70; Okpara & Kabongo 2011:29).

Spouses in general, however, do not receive relevant pre-departure training from MNEs, and are sent to the host country unprepared, without any briefing about the new culture they will experience (Gupta et al. 2012b:17–21; Lund & Degen 2010:70; Mansour & Wood 2010:387; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012:63). Sims and Schraeder (2004:76) found that many managers believe that pre-departure training for expatriates and their spouses is expensive, time consuming, and often ineffective in reducing culture shock. As a result, due to previously high expatriate failure rates multinationals are unwilling to invest in such training programmes. Consequently, programmes that do exist tend to be ineffective and run by unqualified individuals (Lund & Degen 2010:70).

As a result, the following hypothesis was stated:

H₂: There is no difference between the training required by trailing spouses and the training provided to them by the multinational enterprise prior to the assignment.

Support requirements

International assignments usually require trailing spouses to give up the current and familiar structure and stability in their lives, increasing their uncertainty and stress levels and inhibiting their ability to adjust (Cherry 2010:133; Cho et al.

2013:1052; Wilson 2011:38). One of the primary stressors for trailing spouses is the anticipated loss of social support provided by family and friends in the home country. This lack of support increases the spouse's feelings of isolation, which has been known to cause conflict within the family, resulting in decreased spousal adjustment and expatriate productivity (Cherry 2010:133; Crowne & Goeke 2012:10; Mäkelä, Känvälä & Suutari 2011:190; Mohr & Klein 2004:2004; Smart 2011:31; Wilson 2011:38).

Trailing spouses therefore require strong social support from host nationals as well as the enterprise, in order to successfully adjust in the host country and to reduce failure that often occurs within the first year of an assignment. According to Cole (2012:313), Fischlmayr and Kollinger (2010:472), Long (2010:178), Wilkinson and Singh (2010:178), and Wilson (2011:17–18), social support has a significant effect on psychological well-being and personal growth, reducing uncertainty and allowing spouses to get advice from host nationals, form friendships, and share experiences with like-minded people.

Additionally, recent trends have indicated that the number of dual-career couples sent on international assignments is growing significantly. A dual-career couple is a couple where both the husband and wife are employed, psychologically committed to their work, and earn an income for the family (Konopaske, Robie & Ivancevich 2005:408; Mäkelä et al. 2011:186).

Dual-career couples are often faced with many issues and problems when an expatriate manager accepts an international assignment. These problems often arise when trailing spouses seek employment in the host country, as spouses are often unable to find suitable or satisfying work, or are ineligible to work in host countries with conservative cultures. When giving up their careers, trailing spouses experience role changes and feel a loss of identity and self-esteem. The anticipated loss of additional income and career development may also reduce the expatriate family's living standards, and lead to disagreements within the family (Cho et al. 2013:1053; Luring & Selmer 2010:61; Shaffer et al. 2012:1295). The resultant stress experienced by spouses in this situation often has a crossover effect on the expatriate's work performance and adjustment, increasing the likelihood of failure (Gupta et al. 2012a:3560; McNulty 2012:421–422; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012:63).

Alternatively, Andreason (2008:388) and Rosenbusch and Cseh (2012:63) have found that spouses who do not experience a change in their employment status adjust more easily on an international assignment.

Consequently, enterprises can provide trailing spouses with employment assistance, as spouses who are employed in the host country receive social support, and learn culture-specific behaviours from their host-national colleagues in the workplace. Enterprise assistance may include the creation of

a position within the foreign subsidiary, assistance with obtaining the necessary work permits, recommending the spouse to other enterprises operating in the host country, or the payment of a spouse's further education expenses (Cole 2012:313; Mäkelä et al. 2011:188; Vögel & Van Vuuren 2008:85; Wilson 2011:67).

Kupka and Cathro (2007:960) have, however, found that only 10% of trailing spouses who were employed in the host country were assisted by the enterprise in their job search, while 85.7% of spouses struggled to obtain work by themselves. In a study by McNulty (2012:428) it was found that due to visa or work permit restrictions only 36% of trailing spouses were able to continue with their careers in the host country.

In light of these facts, expatriates often refuse an international assignment or their spouse may refuse to accompany them as they are committed to their own careers (Cho et al. 2013:1053; Els 2007:23; Fischlmayr & Kollinger 2010:458; Mäkelä et al. 2011:188). A statement supported by Cartus (in Wilson 2011:22) reported a 6% decrease in enterprise spousal support programmes between 2007 and 2010, which was accompanied by a 15% decrease in the number of trailing spouses who accompanied expatriates on international assignments.

As a result, Forster (1997:427) states that MNEs should therefore provide support for the spouse during the assignment, in the form of employment assistance, mentoring programmes, expatriate communities, enterprise social gatherings, health clubs, or regular visits back home, to reduce stress associated with adjusting to an unfamiliar environment. Enterprise assistance may also include housing, shopping, schooling advice, counselling, stress monitoring, and supporting work-life balance by introducing the family to leisure, social, and cultural activities (Cole 2012:313; Crowne & Goeke 2012:10; Gupta et al. 2012b:1; Lauring & Selmer 2010:61; Rosenbusch & Cseh 2012:63; Wilkinson & Singh 2010:173–174). As a result, the following hypothesis was stated:

H₃: There is no difference between the support required by trailing spouses and the support provided to them by the multinational enterprise during the assignment.

Methodology

Measuring instrument

The research was preceded by a comprehensive study of the expatriate literature in order to determine the preparation, training and support requirements of expatriate trailing spouses, before and during an international assignment. Qualtrics – a system used to create online surveys (Qualtrics 2019) – was then used to construct a self-administered questionnaire which respondents were able to access online through a link contained in an email.

The questionnaire contained 34 demographic questions and 22 statements linked to a four-point Likert scale. The 22 statements were divided as follows: five statements related to

preparation, four statements related to training and 13 statements related to support. These 22 statements were displayed across two columns, one column to measure what trailing spouses felt was required by them in order to adjust and the other to measure whether they received this from the MNE.

Sample

Non-probability judgement sampling was used with sample members selected based on whether they were trailing spouses *currently* accompanying an expatriate on an international assignment. These spouses were considered to be in the best position to respond to their needs as well as to what they received from the MNE.

Initially 196 MNEs were contacted to determine whether or not they made use of expatriate employees. For those enterprises that employed expatriates, the relevant human resource or expatriate manager was contacted telephonically or via email to request their assistance with distributing details of the study to expatriate spouses. Only 17 of these enterprises provided formal consent for their expatriates' spouses to participate in the study.

Snowball sampling, although not initially intended as a sampling method, was also used, as trailing spouses who completed the questionnaire encouraged others within their networks to participate in the research. International relocation enterprises, foreign expatriate organisations, expatriate online forums, and expatriate LinkedIn and Facebook groups were also contacted to assist in connecting with potential respondents.

Finally, 443 responses were received, of which 218 were valid for data analysis. Due to the nature of the sampling, the response rate could not be determined as it could not be confirmed how many trailing spouses received the link to the online questionnaire.

Data analysis

Firstly, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to determine whether each of the constructs represented a single or multiple factors. Next the internal consistency of the measurement tool was tested using Cronbach's alpha. This was followed by an individual *t*-test to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the preparation, training and support requirements of expatriate trailing spouses and the preparation, training and support that they were provided with. Lastly, a paired *t*-test was conducted to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the preparation and training requirements and that which was provided to the trailing spouses.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for carrying out research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Results

Demographic profile of the sample

Table 1 summarises the most important demographic characteristics of the sample. From this it can be seen that the trailing spouse in this study were predominantly female (91.7%), were between the ages of 41 and 50 (35.3%) and 42.7% felt adjusted to the host country. Additionally, 72.9% of the respondents were employed before the assignment, while only 20.6% were employed during the assignment. Lastly, the respondents were assigned to six different continents and 52 different countries, Asia being the most represented continent, represented by 40.6% of the respondents, followed by Africa with 35.0%.

Exploratory factor analysis

The number of factors was determined by how many factors had eigenvalues greater than 1 (Pallant 2010:192). Consequently, one factor emerged each for *preparation required* and *preparation provided* prior to departure and one factor each for *training required* and *training provided* prior to the assignment. *Support required* and the *support provided* during the assignment consists of two factors each. Each variable under support required and support provided was classified under the factor where it loaded the highest, with Table 2 providing a summary of the exploratory factor analysis results.

Reliability

In total there were 22 variables measuring the preparation, training and support required by trailing spouses and that which was provided to them by the MNE. Table 3 provides a summary of the Cronbach's alpha values of the variables measuring required factors and those provided for each of them. According to Milfont and Gouveia (2006:76) and Tappen (2010:131), a Cronbach's alpha value that is above 0.70 is regarded as an indication of reliability. As can be seen from Table 3, a Cronbach's alpha value greater than 0.70 was achieved for all of the factors.

Preparation required versus provided

All five of the preparation variables showed statistically significant differences ($p < 0.0001$) between the preparation required by trailing spouses and the preparation provided to them, with the mean scores for what was required all being greater than the mean scores for what was provided (see Table 4).

Training required versus provided

All four of the training variables showed statistically significant differences ($p < 0.0001$) between the training required by trailing spouses and the training provided to them, with all the mean scores for training required being higher than the mean scores for training provided (see Table 5).

Support required versus provided

The study found statistically significant differences ($p < 0.0001$) between the support required by trailing spouses

TABLE 1: Sample characteristics.

Variable	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	18	8.3
Female	200	91.7
Age		
20–30 years	23	10.6
31–40 years	50	22.9
41–50 years	77	35.3
51–60 years	32	14.7
61–70 years	7	3.2
Missing	29	13.3
Were you involved during the selection process?		
No, not at all	112	51.4
To some extent	81	37.2
Yes, completely	24	11.0
Missing	1	0.5
Do you have children at school?		
Yes	106	48.6
No	112	51.4
If yes are they accompanying you on the assignment?		
Yes	103	47.2
No	2	1.9
Missing	1	0.9
Length of time between selection and departure		
Less than 1 month	12	5.5
1–6 months	148	67.9
7–12 months	24	11.0
13 months or more	28	12.8
Missing	6	2.8
Trailing spouse employed before the assignment		
Yes	159	72.9
No	59	27.1
Are you currently employed while on assignment?		
Yes	45	20.6
No	173	79.4
What is your level of adjustment to the host country?		
Highly unadjusted	9	4.1
Unadjusted	4	1.8
Coping	52	23.9
Adjusted	93	42.7
Highly adjusted	60	27.5
Proficiency in the host language prior to the assignment		
Could not speak the language at all	111	50.9
Could speak and understand the language in a limited way	24	11.0
Could understand the language used in everyday situations	8	3.7
Could communicate in a range of everyday social and travel contexts	7	3.2
Could speak the language with confidence	12	5.5
Could use the language in a range of culturally appropriate ways	5	2.3
Could speak, read and write the language with fluently and ease	49	22.5
Missing	2	0.9
What is the location of the MNE's head office?		
Africa	47	21.6
Asia	30	13.8
Europe	73	33.5
North America	49	22.5
Oceania	8	3.7
South America	1	0.5
Missing	10	4.6

MNE, multinational enterprise.

and the support provided to them, with all the mean scores for support required being higher than the mean scores for support provided (see Table 6).

TABLE 2: Combined results of the exploratory factor analysis.

Construct	Factor description	Eigenvalue	Variance explained by individual factors (%)	Cumulative variance (%)
Preparation required	Preparation required	2.85	57.03	57.03
Preparation provided	Preparation provided	2.56	51.22	51.22
Training required	Training required	2.93	73.25	73.25
Training provided	Training provided	3.05	76.24	76.24
Support required	Vocational support required	7.245	55.73	55.73
Support required	Social support required	1.278	9.83	65.56
Support provided	Practical support provided	6.43	49.44	49.44
Support provided	Employment support provided	1.13	8.71	58.15

TABLE 3: Factor reliability as described by the Cronbach's alpha values.

Factor description	Cronbach's alpha value	Number of items
Preparation required	0.808	5
Preparation provided	0.753	5
Training required	0.877	4
Training provided	0.895	4
Vocational support required	0.908	6
Social support required	0.889	7
Practical support provided	0.866	9
Employment support provided	0.852	4

Paired *t*-test

A paired *t*-test was conducted for the preparation required versus preparation provided factors as well as for the training required versus training provided factors. The test could, however, not be conducted for the support construct, as the two factors making up the support required construct and the two factors making up the support provided construct consisted of different variables.

When looking at the results, a statistically significant difference was found between the preparation required by trailing spouses and the preparation provided to them by the MNE (*t*-value = 15.705) ($p < 0.0001$). A statistically significant difference was also found between the training required by trailing spouses and that which was provided to them by the MNE (*t*-value = 13.945) ($p < 0.0001$). These paired *t*-test results support the results of the individual *t*-test by showing that MNEs are not providing trailing spouses with the preparation or training that they require prior to an assignment.

Consequently, the following hypotheses could not be accepted:

H₁: There is no difference between the preparation required by trailing spouses and the preparation provided to them by the multinational enterprise prior to the assignment.

H₂: There is no difference between the training required by trailing spouses and the training provided to them by the multinational enterprise prior to the assignment.

Although a paired *t*-test could not be conducted to test the support hypotheses, it is clear from the individual *t*-test results that the trailing spouses in this study do not perceive the MNEs to be meeting their support requirements.

Descriptive statistics

All the variables focusing on preparation required had a mean score of above 2.5 on a four-point scale, with 'advance

notice of relocation' being the most required preparation requirement (see Table 7).

Meanwhile 'training regarding similarities and differences between the home and host countries' objective characteristics' was the training variable most required by trailing spouses (see Table 8). Objective training refers to observable and tangible characteristics of a culture such as currency, architecture, and so forth, as opposed to subjective characteristics such as punctuality, attitude to work and the like (Shay & Tracey 1997:34–35).

Financial support to further the trailing spouse's education was the most required vocational support requirement (see Table 9), while enterprise-provided visas, work permits and so on was the social support most required by trailing spouses (see Table 10).

Discussion

The expatriate literature suggests that the preparation, training and support of trailing spouses will improve their adjustment to the host country and consequently the success of the international assignment. Having said this, decades after first identifying trailing spouses as the primary cause of expatriate failure, this study has found that MNEs are still falling short of the preparation, training and support needs of trailing spouses.

In particular, this study has found that the largest discrepancy between the preparation required and provided to trailing spouses was for information sessions covering cultural differences between the home and the host country, followed by the need for reading material on the host country, both emphasising their need for information on the host location. These findings support the literature which emphasises the importance of information sessions to enable spouses to understand what it means to live in the host country and to foresee potential issues that might arise, thus enhancing their cross-cultural adjustment (Miser 2010:4; Simeon & Fujii 2000:597; Yu et al. 2005:191).

Advance notice, despite being the preparation requirement with the highest mean score, was found to be the preparation requirement with the smallest difference between what was required and what was provided to trailing spouses, which highlights a focus on the operational aspects of an assignment. With an increase in dual-career couples, sufficient notice to explore career options in the host country before deciding whether or not to accept an international assignment is vital

TABLE 4: Individual *t*-test results for preparation required versus preparation provided.

Variables	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean difference
Information sessions covering cultural differences between the home and host countries (for example, eating habits, festivities, housing, schooling and safety concerns)	13.312	< 0.0001	1.09174
Detailed reading material on the host country (for example, its history, economy and customs)	12.581	< 0.0001	1.01835
Orientation visit to the host country prior to departure	11.324	< 0.0001	0.94037
Contact with spouses already on assignment in the host country	11.150	< 0.0001	0.88991
Advance notice of relocation to allow for sufficient preparation	8.494	< 0.0001	0.54128

TABLE 5: Individual *t*-test results for training required versus training provided.

Variables	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean difference
Training regarding similarities and differences between the home and host countries' objective characteristics (for example, currency, political system, architecture)	14.134	< 0.0001	1.07339
Training regarding similarities and differences between the home and host cultures' subjective characteristics (for example, social behaviour, lifestyles, customs, values and belief systems)	13.265	< 0.0001	1.02752
Basic courses in the host language prior to departure	11.539	< 0.0001	0.93578
Language manuals, tapes, CDs, dictionaries, etc.	11.304	< 0.0001	0.83486

TABLE 6: Individual *t*-test results for support required versus support provided.

Variables	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean difference
Employment counselling in the host country	14.364	< 0.0001	1.22936
Introductions into expatriate spousal social networks in the host country	13.946	< 0.0001	1.17890
Employment assistance through formal recommendations	14.185	< 0.0001	1.11468
Club memberships (sport, cooking, hobby or social clubs)	13.798	< 0.0001	1.09174
Tour of the host country on arrival	13.674	< 0.0001	1.08257
Financial support for further education	12.760	< 0.0001	1.08257
Compensation for lost wages	12.496	< 0.0001	1.06422
Coach or mentor during the assignment	13.085	< 0.0001	1.05963
Employment assistance within the enterprise	12.763	< 0.0001	1.05046
Repatriation debriefing and counselling in preparation for the return home	13.181	< 0.0001	1.05046
Introductions to host nationals (locals) on arrival	12.591	< 0.0001	0.97706
Enterprise-provided visas, work permits, etc. for the host country	6.949	< 0.0001	0.55505
Accommodation within an expatriate community/compound in the host country	5.973	< 0.0001	0.44954

TABLE 7: Mean scores for preparation required.

Variable	Mean score	Standard deviation
Advance notice of relocation to allow for sufficient preparation	3.450	0.6580
Orientation visit to the host country prior to departure	3.280	0.9454
Contact with spouses already on assignment in the host country	3.106	0.7991
Detailed reading material on the host country (for example, its history, economy and customs)	3.055	0.8515
Information sessions covering cultural differences between the home and host countries (for example, eating habits, festivities, housing, schooling and safety concerns)	3.018	0.8797

TABLE 8: Mean scores for training required.

Variable	Mean score	Standard deviation
Training regarding similarities and differences between the home and host countries' objective characteristics (for example, currency, political system, architecture)	2.908	0.9010
Training regarding similarities and differences between the home and host cultures' subjective characteristics (for example, social behaviour, lifestyles, customs, values and belief systems)	2.862	0.9255
Basic courses in the host language prior to departure	2.711	0.9949
Language manuals, tapes, CDs, dictionaries etc.	2.537	0.9653

(Moore 2002:64). The longer in advance the notice, the better prepared the spouses will be to cope with their relocation (Forster 2000:69; Spera 2009:289).

With Sims and Schraeder (2004:76) stating that managers believe pre-departure training for spouses is often ineffective in reducing culture shock, it is interesting to note that the

TABLE 9: Mean scores for vocational support required.

Variable	Mean score	Standard deviation
Financial support for further education	2.931	0.9600
Employment assistance through formal recommendations	2.917	0.9221
Employment counselling in the host country	2.894	0.9757
Repatriation debriefing and counselling in preparation for the return home	2.885	0.9458
Employment assistance within the enterprise	2.876	1.0015
Compensation for lost wages	2.858	0.9991

TABLE 10: Mean scores for social support required.

Variable	Mean score	Standard deviation
Enterprise-provided visas, work permits etc. for the host country	3.404	0.8600
Introductions into expatriate spousal social networks in the host country	3.151	0.9006
Tour of the host country on arrival	3.110	0.8184
Club memberships (sport, cooking, hobby or social clubs)	2.991	0.9107
Accommodation within an expatriate community/compound in the host country	2.922	0.9830
Introductions to host nationals (locals) on arrival	2.890	0.8461
Coach or mentor during the assignment	2.839	0.8939

largest differences between training required by spouses and what was provided to them were for objective and subjective cross-cultural training. Enterprises are therefore falling short not only in terms of the need for information on the host country, but also in terms of providing the cultural training that expatriate spouses require. Thus, a number of studies have emphasised the importance of training programmes to

improve spousal adjustment (Gupta et al. 2012b:1053; Konopaske & Werner 2005:1161; Miser 2010:2; Mohr & Klein 2004:1197), as these training programmes would reduce uncertainty and ease adjustment into the local environment (Cho et al. 2013:1053; Gupta et al. 2012b:18; Jenkins & Mockaitis 2010:2696; Smart 2011:90). In particular, training on the host country's objective characteristics was found to be not only the variable with the biggest difference between what was required and ultimately provided, but also the training variable most required by trailing spouses.

Although language training allows spouses to effectively communicate with host country nationals and consequently helps them form friendships and cope with everyday tasks (Mohr & Klein 2004:1194; Sharma 2012:16), of the four types of training tested in this study, language training was found to be the least sought-after requirement. This could, however, be attributed to the fact that 51.4% of the trailing spouses were able to speak the host country language prior to the assignment.

In an earlier study by Moore (2002:63), it was found that 73% of dual-career couples considered spousal employment opportunities a major factor when deciding to accept an international assignment. However, only a quarter of spouses reported having received career assistance from the MNE. Based on the finding of this study, this seems to still be a problem, with the largest gap between support required and support provided being for 'employment counselling'; spouses feel they need counselling in order to establish or advance their career during the assignment. Financial support for education enhancement and enterprise-provided visas or work permits were two other important requirements. In both cases, these would enable trailing spouses to upgrade their skills, gain international experience and further their careers prior to repatriation. Spouses who are unable to work in the host country may become bored and frustrated and often experience a loss of professional status and self-esteem, which affects their ability to adjust (Mohr & Klein 2004:1193; Shaffer & Harrison 2001:241; Wilson 2011:38).

The findings also indicate a large gap in terms of introducing spouses into expatriate spousal networks, with these networks allowing spouses to get feedback and advice, form friendships and share experiences with others (Fischlmayr & Kollinger 2010:472; Long 2010:178; Wilson 2011:18).

Multinational enterprises focusing on the operational adjustment of spouses over social adjustment was again highlighted, with the smallest discrepancy in respect of support required and provided being for 'accommodation within an expatriate community/compound in the host country'.

A surprising finding was, however, that the least required social support requirement was for a coach or mentor during the assignment as mentoring programmes have been found to relieve stress and anxiety and assist with problem solving

(Kupka et al. 2008:1771; Miser 2010:5). An introduction into expatriate spousal social networks was, however, the second most required social support requirement; possibly indicating that spouses prefer informal mentoring over formal mentoring.

In conclusion, the findings of this study show that even though we have been aware of the fact that trailing spouses are the most common reason for the failure of expatriate assignments and we are well aware of the needs of trailing spouses, MNEs are still not providing sufficient preparation, training and support to them. Seemingly, MNEs rather focus on the operational aspects of the assignment and fall short in trailing spouses' social adjustment needs, supporting an earlier finding by McNulty (2012:430).

Limitations of the study

Although the respondents in this study were assigned to six continents and 52 countries, a possible limitation of the study is that North America, Oceania and South America were under-represented as host locations compared to Africa, Asia and Europe.

Finally, the study only focused on trailing spouses who at the time of the study were on an international assignment. These spouses were considered to be in the best position to identify their preparation, training and support needs as well as what they were offered by the MNE. However, a more comprehensive view of the current situation might be gained by extending this study to the expatriate managers of MNEs as well as repatriated trailing spouses.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

The problem was conceptualised by both E-L.W. and A.J.V., while E-L.W. was primarily responsible for the data collection and analysis with the assistance of A.J.V. The first rough draft of the article was produced by E-L.W. after which A.J.V. was responsible for writing the final article.

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Data availability statement

The data will be stored in accordance with the institutional policy for the preservation and retention of research data.

Disclaimer

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