



## ***Adaptation and Career Re-Entry of Expat Partners as a Key Factor in the Success of Global Relocations: Challenges, Strategies, and Business Implications***

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### ***Abstract***

*International relocation is usually framed through the lens of the primary employee's assignment, while the experiences of accompanying expat partners often remain invisible. Drawing on qualitative interviews with expats living in Luxembourg, this paper examines the career disruption, identity loss, and integration challenges they face, as well as the strategies employed to restart professional lives abroad. Findings highlight four major themes: loss of professional identity, social isolation, children's integration as a pathway to family adaptation, and career re-entry through reskilling or entrepreneurship. The study argues that expat partners are critical actors in the success or failure of international assignments. Implications are offered for multinational companies, policymakers, and future research.*

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### **Introduction**

When families relocate internationally, attention typically centers on the employee whose assignment prompted the move. Yet, from my coaching and mentoring practice with expats in Luxembourg, it is often the partners who carry the heaviest burden. They leave behind established careers, professional identities, and social networks, and suddenly find themselves starting from scratch in a new country.

Many expat partners describe the relocation experience as a form of 'resetting to zero.' Successful lawyers, managers, or entrepreneurs in their home countries suddenly face barriers such as lack of local recognition, limited professional networks, and language challenges. This disruption affects not only individuals but the

entire family unit: a partner's difficulties with adaptation can destabilize the household and even jeopardize the success of the relocation itself.

Previous studies have acknowledged the difficulties faced by expat partners, yet the 'invisible migrant' perspective shows that their voices are still under-represented in academic literature [2,4,6].

Research aim: To explore the adaptation and career re-entry strategies of expat partners and analyze how their experiences shape the long-term success of international relocations.

### Literature Review

Career disruption and identity. Research consistently highlights that expat partners experience significant career interruption and identity loss. Their previous professional accomplishments often lose recognition in the host country, creating frustration and self-doubt [2].

Adjustment and family integration. Found that partner adjustment strongly predicts the success of international assignments. Emphasized that expat partners often act as 'social bridges,' facilitating integration of the whole family through community building and children's education [5,6].

Organizational and policy neglect. demonstrated that companies frequently underestimate the role of partners, which can result in costly assignment failures. Frames expat partners as 'invisible migrants,' whose contributions to integration are overlooked in both corporate and governmental policies [3,4].

This study builds on this foundation by situating expat partners at the center of relocation success and examining their lived experiences in Luxembourg, a uniquely multicultural hub.

### Methodology

Research design. A qualitative, exploratory approach was adopted.

Sample. 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with expat partners residing in Luxembourg for at least six months. Respondents came from diverse backgrounds (finance, education, IT, healthcare) and represented both EU and non-EU countries.

Data collection. Interviews were held both face-to-face and online, each lasting 45–60 minutes. Open-ended questions focused on career history, adaptation experiences, challenges, and coping strategies.

Data analysis. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns across narratives. Coding was conducted iteratively to ensure reliability [1].

### Findings

Four dominant themes emerged:

- Loss of professional identity. Many expat partners described relocation as career invalidation: 'I used to be a senior manager. Here, I felt like I was nobody.'
- Social isolation. Partners emphasized the challenge of building networks: 'The hardest part was not work, but the silence. I didn't know anyone outside my family.'
- Children as integration channels. School and extracurricular activities often served as gateway to social inclusion: 'Through my daughter's school, I met other parents. That's how our family started to feel part of the community.'
- Career re-entry strategies. Participants pursued reskilling, volunteering, or entrepreneurship: 'I couldn't continue in my profession, so I re-trained in digital marketing. It gave me back my sense of purpose.'

### Discussion

The findings confirm prior research on the centrality of partner adjustment, while adding new insights into the transformative role of career re-entry [5,6].

For families: Career recovery restores self-worth and reduces stress, strengthening family stability.

For organizations: Supporting expat partners minimizes the risk of assignment failure and enhances employee retention.

For policymakers: Inclusive integration programs that extend beyond the employee to the entire family increase societal cohesion.

This underscores the need for a paradigm shift: expat partners are not secondary figures but critical stakeholders in global mobility.

### Conclusion & Implications

This study demonstrates that expat partners' adaptation and career re-entry are decisive factors in the success of international relocations.

Practical recommendations:

- Companies should develop partner support programs (career counseling, networking, language courses).
- Governments should design integration policies that recognize the family unit as a whole.
- Researchers should continue exploring the 'invisible migrant' perspective to enrich global mobility studies.

By acknowledging and empowering expat partners, both businesses and societies can transform relocation from a temporary disruption into a sustainable, mutually beneficial process.

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