

## The World Awaits – How to prepare for global relocation

Line Mørkbak works as an Intercultural Trainer and is the co-author of a new relocation guide for Danish families. In this article she characterizes today's Danish global assignee as well as describes what employee, family and employer should be aware of when planning a global assignment.

When previously one would talk about international migration patterns either *immigration* or *expatriation* would be the label used, but in today's world we talk about international travel patterns as free, global movement of humans. In this perspective the present migration is more precisely characterized as *global mobility*.

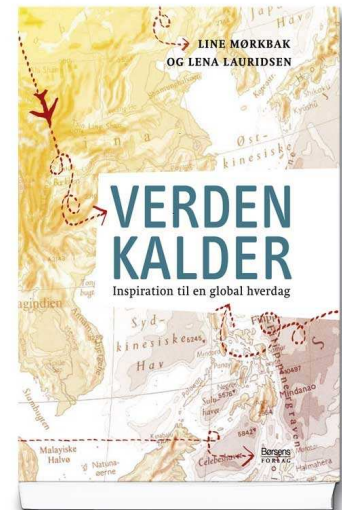
International businesses and organizations include national staff, their relocated employees as well as their employees on outsourced location around the world when they refer to their global workforce. These companies have become truly global. Not just in the sense that their products have expanded from international commerce into globalized trade but in the fact that production, developing teams, sales departments, HR resources etc. are spread out on different global locations.

With assets spread in such a global web the importance of internationally savvy employees are essential to keep an expanding global company successful and competitive. These employees are global and mobile both in mind set and in openness towards job challenges in new locations. They are characterized by their eagerness to fulfill the company's international growth by relocating their work performance along with their families to the location needed. An international move which all acknowledge will benefit both the progress of the company as well as personal careers.

### Characteristics of today's global assignee

Let us take a quick look at the characteristics of Danes on international assignments. In 2006 27.000 Danes made an international move; an increase in more than 33% since 1980<sup>i</sup>. With a high level of language abilities, a sound sense for international business and innovations Danes has long been attractive international employees. With growth in the global market this is still the case; though there has been a change in the level of educational background for Danish assignees. The picture of today's Danish global assignee is male<sup>ii</sup>, in mid or late thirties with families and young children. Assignees were previously characterized by their high level of education which isn't necessarily the case any

### Danish relocation guide for assignees and their families



The authors Line Mørkbak and Lena Lauridsen have written an inspirational guide for Danish families longing for a life abroad. 'The World is calling' (Danish title: 'Verden Kalder – Inspiration til en global hverdag') was published in May 2008 at Forlaget Børsen. The book is based on the combination of the authors own experiences living in the US, Mexico and Slovakia and interviews of 103 Danish families living all over the globe.

'Verden Kalder' describes all aspects of family life in a new culture: how to prepare for an international move, dealing with culture shock, and issues for accompanying spouses, learning new languages, getting children established in new routines, cultures of international schools and what to be aware of when returning back to Denmark after a period abroad.

The book also includes country portraits of the most popular relocation locations for Danish companies and families, including an elaborate chapter on the culture of the US.

For a full list of content, reviews and purchase information - please look at: [www.verdenkalder.dk](http://www.verdenkalder.dk)

longer. As an example large numbers of Danish technicians and instructors are hired on global contracts and operate on local facilities all over the world.

In the process of writing the relocation guide "The World is calling" my colleague and I interviewed 103 Danish families living all over the world. From this body of data several findings emerged, of which two will be presented here: 1) Key reasons for Danish families to move abroad and 2) Requirements that today's Danish families have prior to accepting a global relocation.

### **Key reasons to relocate**

- The possibility of appealing and challenging career opportunities is the dominating reason for families to make an international transfer, coupled with a general longing for the adventure of international life experiences. Another key reason mentioned by the interviewed families is the prospects for their children to live in and experience different cultures. Along these lines families' also point out the urge to explore family patterns, as an alternative to the stressful work-family life of two working career parents which is the dominating in present Danish society.

### **Requirements prior to accepting a global relocation**

- The mentality and worldview of today's relocating family is characterized by a great level of engagement and involvement in ones life situation and life choices. These are families who have a high demand for information and who will research opportunities thoroughly. With this comes a sense of control and need of being in charge of the family's international move. They know they need to be proactive and therefore have a natural interest in using relocation professionals and coaches to help them in the relocating process. As a generation they have an overall view on change as the norm and as necessary to stimulate growth. The growth potential and happiness for the whole family is therefore a central focus prior to accepting an international assignment.

### **Thorough relocation preparation**

*"It can be a positive and enriching experience for both employee, family and your career to spend years internationally but relocation is always a radical change not just for the employee but for the accompanying family as well. The company therefore has to ensure a broad and thorough preparation of its employees and their families [...]."* Translated extract from foreword by Jørgen M. Clausen, CEO of Danfoss A/S in relocation guide 'The World is calling'.

As mentioned, international assignments are an undeniable element of our expanding globalized market. Jørgen M. Clausen points to the important factor, that thorough relocation preparation is the key of a thriving and successful global and mobile workforce. This was also our findings in doing research and interviews for 'The World is calling'. The preparation and need for relocation support is largely the same regardless of the job function of the Danish assignee.

So what can global companies do to support relocating families? What is essential to be aware of for employee, family and employer when planning a global assignment?

### **Start an active dialog**

- Companies must acknowledge the families need for influence and be open to a new way of negotiation, not only considering the actual work assignment. It is recommended to start the relocation discussion as an active dialogue where the specific needs of all family members are taken into consideration. It can

be beneficial to draft a relocation plan which will function as a psychological contract between the company and the assigned family.

### **Support for traveling partner**

- When an international assignment is offered, a family often has to decide to focus on one partner's career and let the other partner's career take second place for a while. The challenges of dual careers are a constant dilemma for most Danish families considering an assignment abroad. Companies can overcome some of the present challenges of dual careers by strong and realistic support to the traveling partner. This could involve career or life coaching, contacts to local business network for job opportunities and in some cases even a job offer. Regardless of career choices it is important that not only the employee, but also the traveling partner is directly informed on the company's expectations for the assignment.

### **Preparation before departure**

- It is not realistic to totally avoid the experience of culture shock when moving a family from a familiar Danish culture to a new and alien cultural setting. Cultural changes like these are dramatic and affect both peoples mental and physical balance. This is a natural reaction. Never the less, language classes prior to departure, as well as cultural courses designed to prepare the family for life in their host country can be extremely valuable. Preparation for the new culture and society will ensure the family's ability for a fast and successful adjustment to the new country as well as guarantee an effective employee early on in the assignment.

### **Support from HR**

- After departure the family's main contact to the company will happen through the company's HR department. Issues and questions regarding health, schools, safety, insurances, housing etc. will all have to be answered by HR staff. HR is the family's lifeline back to Danish expertise and help. It is therefore important that the company has a knowledgeable and trained support staff either on location and/or at the head quarter in Denmark.

### **Assistance when returning back to Denmark**

- At the end of the assignment job arrangements should be made so the valuable international expertise the employee has gathered can be used optimal back at the Danish office. Relocation back to ones home country is to be considered as yet another relocation and the company should therefore give realistic support to assignee and family when returning back to Denmark.

*Line Mørkbak has the past 10 years lived and worked between the US and Denmark – since 2005 managing her own company [www.cultureCrossing.dk](http://www.cultureCrossing.dk) based in the US. As an Intercultural Trainer & Facilitator she delivers customized workshops to improve efficiency in multicultural work teams, provide intercultural competency trainings as well as cultural introduction courses for relocating families. Line Mørkbak offers her services in both the US and Denmark. She is also the co-author of the successful Danish relocation guide 'Verden Kalder – Inspiration til en global hverdag' [www.verdenkalder.dk](http://www.verdenkalder.dk)*

---

<sup>i</sup> Data from Danmarks Statistik.

<sup>ii</sup> 90% of Danish assignees are male and 10% female.