

# Net Expat Newsletter

Expats Coaching • Dual Career Solutions • Expats Assessment

Offices throughout Europe, America, Asia

ISO 9002



Dual Career

Mobility

Integration

Talents

## Corporate perspective

**Isabelle Elie**

Vice President  
Compensation & Benefits,  
ALSTOM Transport



ALSTOM Transport designs, develops, produces, delivers and commissions transportation equipment and infrastructures. With 80% of our sales outside France, we need to assign all categories of employees abroad. We have a permanent base of 300 expatriates plus a 100 per year for shorter periods. Some of our biggest projects can last more than 10 years, from the first installation to handover to the client. This is especially the case in Asia and South America. Every year, a small ALSTOM "village" is built from scratch, often in a big city for a metro project, but sometimes moving along a railway line.

When such big projects come to an end and when we enter the 'demobilization' phase, it is time to organize the next assignment for our employees. But, on such big projects, there is a mixture of feelings that can make the return

## Daring to improve!

more difficult for the expatriates. A project is an exciting adventure, and handover to the client can be followed by a feeling of emptiness. The small ALSTOM "village" is also a unique experience, where all the spouses and children get to know one another. The managers of such projects are also used to working in a relatively

manage the transition smoothly from this exceptional experience to a more ordinary one.

Last year, we had some big projects entering the 'demobilization' phase. Some of the assignees had been working far from their base for more than five years and had consequently almost lost their references, their network. ■ ■ ■

*ALSTOM has put some tools in place in order to facilitate repatriation and to help the employee and his/her family...*

autonomous environment, far from Headquarters and far from their base. These observations have led ALSTOM Transport to put some tools in place in order to facilitate repatriation and to help the employee and his/her family

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## Editorial

**Alain Verstandig**

Managing Director,  
NET EXPAT



International mobility is taking more and more people across frontiers that are fading away, leaving the impression of an increasingly open and transparent world. Yet I am aware of the unsaid thoughts and hidden agendas that underlie this apparent reality. For a start, I mean the competing agendas inside multinational corporations, with HR Departments that develop the tools for international mobility and Business Units that partially

## Hidden agendas

use them when it suits them. Then you have the hidden agendas between home- and host-country organizations, which don't necessarily share the same short-term interests. There are also the hidden agendas of recruiters, on the one hand, who have to fight to sell international assignments that are

no longer as attractive as they were because the incentives are lower, and the candidates on the other who sign undertakings in the full knowledge that they can't really meet them... And finally there are the competing agendas within expat families whose members don't say everything before leaving on assignment and then say too much when they return. We at NET EXPAT often leave the impression that we are magicians in reconciling these hidden agendas. I'm now convinced our services are the 'X' factor that keeps many expatriate assignments from breaking down. ■



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■ ■ ■ Stability & commitment are our main drivers, so we have decided to assign a Human Resource professional to be their reference, acting as a mentor. She has met all the expatriates due to return in the coming six months. The purpose of these appointments is to know the assignee better and especially understand his work experience abroad. It is also to know his or her expectations in terms of the next job, and to identify the potential constraints and issues. So her task was to identify job opportunities and coordinate relations with the assignees and all the HR teams and professionals in France. We undertook to propose at least two job opportunities to each of them.

At the same time, we decided that it would be useful for the assignee and his/her family to be accompanied during this phase. Support was to be provided by external professionals in individual coaching who had been through similar experiences: the return from expatriation. The quality of the dialog with NET EXPAT, plus the excellent understanding of our issues, led to the decision to integrate NET EXPAT programs in our 'Return from Expatriation' programs. When we communicated this internally, the reaction of the assignees was a mixture of enthusiasm, scepticism and anxiety. The system started off slowly with the first employees, who have since told others of the benefits for them in their professional ... and private lives. The confidence in this project has since grown significantly. We have now decided to continue with the project and to turn it into a standard feature of the repatriation process. ■

## Coaching for Expatriates

**Vincent Fertin**

Former Senior Expat at ALSTOM



**NET EXPAT: You came back from your expat assignment six months ago. How do you see this repatriation process now?**

**Vincent Fertin** The first thing I noticed is that coming back is much more difficult than going abroad in the first place. The issue of expatriation gets so much attention that it completely overshadows the problems of repatriation. And this is wrong!

When you're facing the prospect of expatriation, you're full of excitement and adrenaline. Everyone knows about the problems of professional adjustment and culture shock (and all the other shocks) and, provided he or she is properly prepared, every expat is at least mentally ready for the change. Coming back is quite another matter: when NET EXPAT phoned me, I was still in Korea at the end of my assignment and I remember asking myself what purpose could be served with the "Coaching for Expat upon Repatriation" module ALSTOM

*The issue of expatriation gets so much attention that it completely overshadows the problems of repatriation*

was offering me. I had personally failed to grasp even a fraction of what I was headed for. Like any other repat, I had a host of false ideas about my return. In fact, when you go back, you discover that the country you left some years ago has completely changed, that your colleagues, your friends, your family and even you yourself have changed a lot. We went off the two of us, my wife

## Coming back is much more difficult!

*When NET EXPAT phoned me, I remember asking myself what purpose could be served with the "Coaching for Expat upon Repatriation" module ALSTOM was offering me*

and was receptive to my decisions, while continuing to match them with realistic objectives. She challenged me and made me come out of my comfort zone in order to progress. She also prepared me for some important internal interviews. I remember my first interview a few days after I got back – a disaster! With my arrogant manner of a recently returned repat and all the clichés



and I, and came back as a foursome with two children. We left at a time of life as a young couple and came back in another phase of life.

**NE: How does external coaching help?**

**VF:** For a start Jeanine, my NET EXPAT coach, listened to me professionally: with all the things that happen at the beginning of the repatriation phase, you need to have someone to talk to confidentially about sensitive and personal things, without getting the impression that you are being judged. Regardless of the respect and friendship I feel towards members of the ALSTOM HR department, I would never have been able to open up to them in the way I was able to with NET EXPAT. Jeanine helped me step-by-step

of the expat who has just got back from the 'front line', my interviewer quickly tripped me up – but he was understanding about it as, like me, he had made the same mistakes as a repat...

I greatly appreciated the ExpAdviser test which helped me see myself more clearly and confirmed, after the event, my 'expatriability'. Having said that, I think that ideally the test should be taken before expatriation and not on return. That's when it would be of most help to both the expat and the employer.

**NE: In your opinion, how much do you think multinational companies should get involved in this kind of thing?**

**VF:** I am happy that ALSTOM offered me NET EXPAT return coaching. ■ ■ ■



# Newsletter

■ ■ ■ I think it's great that people at ALSTOM like Isabelle Elie, who has herself been on expatriation, should take the initiative in helping change attitudes and offering tools that are better adapted to today's realities of international mobility.

Expatriation is essential for corporations to grow in today's business environment. While it represents an important opportunity for personal development for the expat, it also poses a serious element of risk. Companies should be more aware of this

fact. Whether expert, manager or chief executive, an expat is in the first place a man or a woman. Whatever the job, expatriation is primarily a human challenge. The expat will feel the knocks as a man or woman, and should be helped as such. ■

## Interview

# International Mobility within the United Nations

### Mary Jane Peters

Secretary High-Level Committee on Management, Chief Executives Board, UN System



**NET EXPAT:** Mary Jane, where does your job fit into the huge United Nations system?

**Mary Jane Peters** The United Nations family brings together a lot of people. It comprises no less than 27 independent or quasi-independent organizations; the UN, UNESCO, the World Health Organization, the World Trade Organization, etc. (see <http://www.un.org/aboutun/chartlg.html> for more information).

The role of the Chief Executives Board (CEB) for which I work is to build bridges between these organizations and to look for operational synergies. Anything to do with Human Resources is naturally home ground for the CEB.

The UN has been aligning its HR management systems with international best practice since the 1990s: almost 180 nationalities are now represented on the UN system's payroll, and we stopped talking about "home and host countries" a long time ago

**NE: Does the Dual Career problem also affect the UN**

**system?**

**MJP:** Certainly! We became aware of the extent of this problem back in the early '90s,

*The need for spouses of UN staff members to maintain their professional careers is becoming a major impediment to recruitment, reassignment and retention*

as it was one of the big issues resulting from our international presence. In 1995, the executive heads of all the organizations of the UN system agreed to introduce a work/family agenda in order to promote productivity. This agenda already included elements like UN staff spouse employment support.

As Catherine Bertini, Under-Secretary-General for Management of the UN and Chairperson of the CEB's High Level Committee on Management, says today: "the need for spouses of staff members of the UN to maintain their professional careers is becoming a major impediment to recruitment, reassignment and retention in all

organizations of the UN family.

This concern is not unique to the UN system but is equally a problem for diplomatic services and cross-national enterprises."

Our situation is not an easy one. Our staff is located not only in our organizations' HQs (Geneva, Vienna, New York, Rome, London, Paris, Montreal and Madrid) but also throughout the world. So we have a variety of situations to deal with.

One of the first steps we took in coping with the Dual Career issue was to initiate efforts so that spouses of UN staff members could obtain work permits in host countries. The case of one headquarters, Geneva,

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■ ■ ■ is an eloquent one: In the mid-90s, Geneva and Bonn were competing as the HQ location for the WTO. Geneva proved to be much more favorable for the spouses of UN staff members, who systematically obtain a Ci permit and consequently have access to the labor market. This factor was decisive in the choice of Geneva. Unfortunately, we have not yet been so successful elsewhere.

Our aim to bring more women into the upper echelons of the hierarchy also put the spotlight on the Dual Career issue: a woman needs to travel, gain exposure to other cultures, and mature in an expatriate environment, in order to develop her expertise. In most cases these women will spend their whole career outside their own

country; yet, are married to men who also want to develop professionally. If we don't help the latter, there will be no chance of hiring, retaining and facilitating the mobility for these high-potential women. So that's why, in 2004, the CEB started to encourage the further development of staff spouse employment initiatives in order to facilitate the recruitment and retention of women.

**NE: How do you see things developing in future?**

**MJP:** The future is not likely to change this situation at all. The Dual Career problem is going to affect more and more couples, and host-country job markets will be more and more competitive: it's not going to be easy for expat partners.

The creativity and flexibility of our HR units will partly resolve the problem, but we can't expect too much. We will need genuine international mobility with expat staff members moving from one place to another because local contact and on-the-ground management will always be essential.

Enormous changes are going on within the UN, in terms of both organization and mentalities. It's no longer politically correct to joke about the Dual Career problem in the way we used to hear it referred to in the corridors some years ago: today the spouses of UN staff members, men and women, are fully entitled to continue their professional development. ■

## Testimonial

### When the expat spouse is ... a male

**Vincent Delforce**

*Expat Spouse from TOTAL*



*The expat can easily feel guilty and think the family is being sacrificed to his or her career...*

About a year ago, my wife got an offer of an expatriate assignment. It was really a hard decision to take: I would have to resign from my job, and we would be changing our settled family life dramatically. It was like buying a ticket for a roller coaster ride!

*The coaching also helped relieve a lot of the stress*

One year later, I must admit the ride fulfilled its promises, with the highs and the lows. Our first challenge was to settle into our completely new life: my wife taking on her new job, us finding a new house and a new school for the children, and then my finding a job. A lot of changes to cope with – and all at the same time!

Because I was able to use my native language in my host country, I thought it would be quite easy to find a new job equal to my old position, but my immediate surprise was that I knew nothing about the job market.

My coaching sessions with NET EXPAT

really helped me to understand the situation and to overcome any inhibitions. The coaching also helped relieve a lot of the stress I felt in those moments of doubt, by confirming my decisions or helping me to discover new opportunities. I eventually got a job quite quickly. I then realized what my wife had gone through when taking on her new job. You have to integrate into a new team, adapt to the cultural aspects of your host country (which turned out to be even more different than I had expected!), and prove your professional

skills. The most important thing to remember was that the decision to expatriate by my wife and myself had been a joint one. It was our mutual adventure. Otherwise, it can be easy for an expat to feel guilty about the problems and feel the family is being sacrificed to his or her career. So make sure you take the time to discuss any expatriation decision thoroughly with your family.

Finally, this was a very enriching experience. It improved our international mobility and brought our family and our couple closer together. We were aware of the role of our own culture in our mindset, and this helped us open our minds to these new cultures and ways of thinking. We very quickly made a lot of new friends, and are now very happy with our new lives. So the challenge is well worth taking up! ■

### "Last minute news"

The Dutch government has introduced a new regulation allowing the partners of non-EU foreign workers to work. This change recognizes the importance of dual careers for highly qualified people (min salary 45.000€/year) to international companies and makes the Netherlands a more attractive business location. Under this new regulation, partners no longer need to apply for a separate work permit, and will be allowed to work freely during the course of the assignment.

More information at  
[http://home.szw.nl/actueel/dsp\\_persbericht.cfm?jaar=2005&link\\_id=62870](http://home.szw.nl/actueel/dsp_persbericht.cfm?jaar=2005&link_id=62870)  
Information received from the Permits Foundation  
[www.PermitsFoundation.com](http://www.PermitsFoundation.com) promoting open work permits for partners of expatriates.

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