

The effects on families of job relocations

Employers are being encouraged by the Government to change their policies to promote the work-life balance of their employees. But one aspect of organisational policy that has been largely neglected is relocation of employees and their families. Little is known about the extent and nature of job-related moves and their effects on family life. Research examining the family impacts of such relocations, carried out by Anne Green and Angela Canny of the Warwick Institute for Employment Research, shows that:

-  Employers' business needs and career development considerations for employees are the main reasons why employers initiate the relocation of their employees. Those relocated are predominantly male, drawn from the younger and middle age ranges and working in higher level non-manual occupations.
-  Employers' assistance for relocating employees is focused predominantly on the financial aspects of moving house. However, there is increasing evidence of the impacts relocation has on partners'/spouses' jobs, children's education and care for older relatives. Yet many employers remain unwilling to take account of these wider issues.
-  Despite the diversity of views expressed in interviews with both employees and partners it was clear that partners were generally less sympathetic than employees to requirements to relocate: there is a greater likelihood that the partner will end up sacrificing their own career in the face of relocation.
-  There is an increasing tendency for employees to set limits on when and where they are willing to relocate in the interests of achieving a work-life balance. This means that employers may need to work harder in order to retain key employees and to understand their needs in the context of relocation.
-  The researchers conclude that trends in family structures and ways of working have created a more complex and diverse context for relocation. Employers may need to be more flexible in their relocation policies in order to meet the requirements of employees resulting from the more complex demands from their family lives.

Introduction

Geographical mobility presents a potential tension in relation to government family and work-life balance policy. Pressure from an employee for one partner in a household to relocate may adversely affect the employment opportunities and career development of the other partner, access to childcare, the desire for geographical stability for children's education, and providing support for older relatives.

Evidence from previous studies suggests that employees facing relocation are especially concerned about practical support in family-related matters. Family interests pose crucial challenges and may conflict with other social, economic and environmental policy agendas.

Against this background, this study was concerned with examining the impacts on families of geographical mobility. It involved:

- charting the changing role and nature of geographical mobility, especially employer-initiated relocations;
- investigating the working, career and family life experiences of those who relocate;
- exploring family members' experiences of geographical mobility; and
- identifying elements in relocation policies that help to reduce family frictions.

Context

Census and survey sources reveal that each year about one in ten households in England moves house. Most moves are over short distances and are undertaken for housing- and family-related reasons. However, a small proportion of all moves is job-related. These tend to be over longer distances and as such may be more disruptive for the family involved.

In this study the term 'relocation' is used to refer to those job-related moves taking place between workplace sites belonging to the same organisation but in different locations, where the distance is such that the worker cannot commute to the new location. Such moves range along a continuum from voluntary job changing by individuals to moves undertaken at the behest of employers.

Interviews with employers indicated that employee relocations are mainly undertaken to meet employers' business needs and for employees' career development purposes. Labour Force Survey and case

study information shows that those relocated are predominantly male, drawn from the younger and middle age ranges and working in higher level non-manual occupations.

Relocation agents and human resources managers reported that employers mainly provide assistance with the financial costs of moving house. Eligibility for such relocation assistance - by amount and type - often varies (even within the same organisation) in accordance with seniority and reason for relocation.

Developments in the nature of geographical mobility, in the labour market and in family and household structures point towards a more complex and diverse context for relocation. Individuals faced with relocation may have a wider range of working and living arrangement options open to them than formerly. This has implications not only for the individual employee concerned, but also for his/her family and employer, as well as for the economy and society more generally.

Impacts on career development

Traditionally, career progression within many large multi-site organisations has involved relocation. Employees tend to associate relocation with career development and are often concerned about the implications of turning down an opportunity to relocate. However, there are different traditions and expectations in different industries, in different job functions, in different companies and even in different parts of the same company, so that pressures and opportunities for relocation vary between individuals. Some employees choose to take greater charge of their own careers by moving between companies. Inter-organisational moves may, or may not, necessitate relocation.

Some employees were found to be more willing to move than others. For employers and other family members not directly involved in the relationship between the relocating employee and their employer, the implications of relocation are more uncertain. Partners' attitudes towards moving ranged from being happy to fit in, through feeling their own ambitions were being frustrated to feelings of resentment. One female partner in her late 40s noted: "Companies have no conception how difficult it is for partners with careers – they don't care"

Despite the diversity of views amongst both

employees and partners it was clear from interviews that the partners were generally less sympathetic than employees to requirements to relocate: there is a greater likelihood that the partner will end up sacrificing their own career in the face of relocation. The evidence suggests that employees and partners are becoming more likely to set constraints about when and where they are willing to relocate.

Long-term impacts on families

Relocation is not just about changing people's jobs, it also changes their lives. Despite the fact that relocation is different for different people, it is evident that individuals tend to be more willing to relocate when they are young and before the onset of family responsibilities, whereas the desire for stability tends to increase with age. One male employee in his late 40s noted: "I've been happy to move around, but as I get older and my family grow around me it's definitely harder to do ... not just job wise (as I've lived all over the world) but as a husband and father."

Relocation can lead to a reconfiguration of family living arrangements. Examples from the research included young people leaving the family home prematurely, parents moving away from children from previous relationships, an older parent moving out of the family home to form an independent household and formation of 'dual location' households – with one partner commuting long distance.

The impact of relocation is different at different stages:

- *school age children* - parents tend to be very concerned about relocation disrupting children's education;
- *young adults* - relocation poses a particular challenge for young adults in the family for whom friends and peers are particularly important, but who may not yet be ready or have the financial resources to set up an independent household;
- *older relatives* - physical proximity is important for older people or those in declining health, but if they move to be near their adult children they may lose out on their own friendship networks.

Getting the most from relocation

In general, the chances of relocation being successful increase when expectations of the new job and the

new area are realistic. Those individuals and families who have relocated more often tend to learn what to expect. A positive approach to relocation is helpful in minimising the stresses involved in leaving the old area and settling in at the new area. Individuals, families and companies differ considerably in their 'mobility mentalities'.

To date, employers have made little attempt to formally assess the impacts of relocation. Employers stated that they tended to measure 'success' subjectively in terms of employee productivity. For relocating employees and their families, job satisfaction for the employee relocating is only one measure of 'success' amongst a more complex array of effects. Impacts on families varied according to the different reasons families had for moving and what they wished to achieve from it.

Some of the employees interviewed, faced with the option of relocation, chose rather to commute long distances. They thought this placed most of the costs of relocation on themselves, rather than on other family members. However, long distance commuting also has impacts on families, especially through separation for prolonged periods. Its sustainability in the long-term is also questionable.

Employees and their families welcomed financial assistance to ease the costs of moving house. Generally, they found the services of relocation agents helpful in co-ordinating the move. Employers have only just started to develop other kinds of assistance beyond the costs and practicalities of the house move. One employer admitted: "We haven't been terribly proactive, I guess mainly because we don't want to face it or have managed to find other ways around it" However, the question of whether employers should get involved in family issues, and the extent of such involvement, remains unresolved in the minds of employers, employees and their partners. Pleas for employers to listen more to their concerns and for formal mentoring emerged from the interviews with employees.

Policy implications

The researchers conclude that employers need to take a step back to examine in more detail the rationale for employee relocation. Issues for consideration include:

- What does the business hope to gain and could

such goals be better achieved by other means? Is relocation really necessary and, if so, is there greater scope for shorter distance moves (involving less family disruption) in order to meet organisational needs? The benefits, costs and impacts of long distance commuting also have a bearing on understanding when and how it might be substitutable for relocation, and when it might not.

- As partners' employment has become more of an issue for families, employees and their families have become more assertive about relocating. This means that employers are likely to have reduced room for manoeuvre if they want to retain valuable staff. Hence there is a need for both national government and for employers themselves to heighten their awareness of the effects of relocation on families. It is likely that ways of addressing the unintended consequences of other policies (e.g. education) on employee and family attitudes to relocation will be needed. The very diversity of family circumstances and of individual preferences means that relocation policies ideally need to be both flexible to meet individuals' circumstances and at the same time equitable and transparent.
- There is a relative lack of data on the volume, nature, extent and characteristics of job-related relocation. Statistical agencies and policy analysts need to clarify the concept of relocation in order to engage in new data collection and measurement mechanisms. This is necessary if we are to monitor relocation trends in economy and society, and to help provide insights into their likely impacts on families.

About the project

This study is based mainly on case study and qualitative interviews conducted in late 2001 and 2002. The research involved:

- analysis of secondary data sources to chart changes in employment and household structures, developments in relocation policies and practices and trends in migration and commuting;
- interviews with key informants from relocation companies/agencies, trades unions, central government and regional economic development

agencies in order to obtain expert overviews of the changing role of, emerging trends in, and prospects for, relocation;

- case studies with twelve employers, designed to obtain an employer perspective on the rationale for, and experiences of implementing and devising, geographical mobility policies;
- interviews with sixty-four employees selected from the twelve case study organisations who had been faced with a relocation opportunity;
- interviews with twenty-one partners, covering topics similar to those included in the employee interviews.

How to get further information

The full report, **Geographical mobility: family impacts** by Anne E. Green and Angela Canny, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press as part of the Family and Work series (ISBN 1 86134 501 1, price £13.95).