

WORKING IN SWITZERLAND...

Flexibility is Key

WORDS

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Switzerland is not an easy place to integrate into. Though small, it possesses four different national languages, a complex, federal and cantonal governmental system and many regional differences anchored in centuries of history. Even cities separated by a typical American commute, such as Basel and Zurich, boast different tax and school systems as well as different dialects.

Being situated at the intersection of Switzerland, Germany and France, Basel is even one step more challenging. The newcomer is exposed to three different languages and cultures. Which one should you choose to learn? As many Swiss are also quite proficient in English, one might be tempted not to learn any new language at all. Having said that, full integration and the wealth of experience and satisfaction that come with it is predicated upon some knowledge of a local language. For those seeking employment, knowledge of at least one of the locally spoken languages (predominantly German) is very advantageous. And, as in any part of the world, the Swiss are enamored by those foreigners who even try a hand at their local dialect.

Over the last eight years, the Spouse Career Centre (SCC) has accompanied thousands of spouses of partners whose careers have taken them to Switzerland. Whether the accompanying spouse is looking to continue his or her career or “merely” to become better integrated into the local culture, we believe that the biggest challenges are rooted in the differing personal and cultural expectations and backgrounds.

Those coming from the US, for example, where the labor market is very dynamic and fluid, often find the hiring process long, complicated and intrusive. For instance, the typical Swiss employer will want to see letters of reference from previous employers, and personal information, such as marital status, age and children, is expected on a résumé. In addition, the new employer will generally take more time in the selection process. As termination notices are often up to three months for new hires in Switzerland, the outcome of the selection process should be as sustainable as possible. In the beginning, one might even have to accept taking a few small steps back before being able to get on track and go forward in their career.

Beyond varying labor market regulations and practices, integrating into a new culture simply brings with it many choices on a more fundamental level – housing, taxes, day care, schools, insurance, transportation, bank accounts, connection to TV, telephone and internet – not to mention building a new social network. These all take time, and some may be even frustrating, depending upon the level of service one is used to.

Being transferred to any new country requires a lot of flexibility and adaptability. In theory, it looks so easy and quite glamorous. In reality, it is fraught with many difficult decisions, and ultimately, it is the openness and curiosity of the spouses – whether employed or not – that will decide on how successful and positive the experience will be for all involved.

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