

## Trailing Spouses

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**W**hatever happened to real men? More pointedly perhaps, what ever happened to real American men? Did they all die with John Wayne? And, no, don't get me started on a certain Texan either!

What has all this to do with business, with human resources? Well I'll tell you. We have, today in Europe, one of the nastiest exports that America has been able to foist upon us: it's called STUDS.

STUDS is for lonely trailing spouses of the male persuasion. Those who agree to follow in the upwardly mobile corporate footsteps of their be-suited beloved (the kind of American woman who usually wears a giant bow at her neck about the size of a vampire bat).

STUDS stand – or sits whimpering in a corner by itself, depending on how you look at it – for Spouses Trailing Under Duress Successfully! (their exclamation mark, not mine). Forget glass ceilings and sticky floors, women are making it up the ladder of success and they are dragging male spouses along with them.

In the Brussels STUDS outfit (where there are reported to be more than 50, it is even bigger in London) they do useful things like baseball coaching. The local American Women's Club has them helping out with car parking supervision at their events. GO STUDS, GO!!!

OK, I do agree that there are more men following their women around than ever before, but guys think a little, PLEASE! Imagine that you are sent overseas and that your wife is doing the work. What do you have? Potential heaven. She's got an expat contract, a cost-of-living allowance, a free house, school fees – the lot.

OK, I'll admit it, a little light housework doesn't cramp the macho style all that much. Even a trip down the supermarket is OK. But the real issue is this. Don't you want to get your golf handicap into single figures; write that novel; paint that picture; learn to sculpt?

What an opportunity to do some of the things you will never get the opportunity to get good at ever again.

Of course, my good, good friends the human resource professionals have got their before me – AGAIN – and have climbed on this bandwagon big time. They've even (surprise, surprise!) given it a name: "awkward sex-role reversal." But the fact is, does this really do any good; do you want to trail under duress successfully; wouldn't you rather have your own life instead?

I think that too much of this sticking-labels-on-people interference

(a speciality of the HR department) tends to take us away from getting on with things ourselves. Simply put, it crushes our independence.

So before you really cry, here's an encouraging story.

John X arrived in Brussels from the good old US of A a few months ago. His wife had landed a terrific job that meant a huge boost for her career, but three years in Europe's capital city and a heavy travel schedule. After much soul searching, they decided to give it a go. One snag. John X was in the advertising industry. Brussels is the Siberia of the advertising industry. If you are ever offered a job in Brussels in advertising, take the ice-pick you should always carry with you in job interviews (you mean you didn't know this?) and use it creatively!

Despite this mega-drawback, John X showed up in Brussels. However, he had one thing going for him, he was a networker supreme! By week two, a lot of people knew this man had landed and was looking for work. He ignored ill-serving advice like, "put up your feet for three years," or the most condescending, "if you want children, now's the time to have them," and kept on looking.

And his search didn't stop at the confines of Brussels of the borders of Belgium (remember the Americans have ALWAYS known that Europe is one big country). So, one day a well meaning friend explained that if he could commute to Washington, he could easily do the same to Paris, Amsterdam and best of all (courtesy of that tube under the Channel), London: otherwise known as ad-man's heaven.

It got better. John's Madison Avenue firm said they could get him a job if he could get to London. So a few weeks after landing in Europe, John is a cross-border commuter. He heads out early Monday and gets back late Friday. By the way he tells me he sees his wife more than he did when they were travelling around the U.S. all week.

John has proved my theory. If you want it enough you can find it and make it work. It can also add new dimensions and depth to your life. So now HR professionals, here's the challenge. What loony phrase are you going to pin on spouses that don't trail, but add value to themselves, to others and to their relationship? Or have you already done it?

Probably the less said about over-educated parking jockeys the better. it's not a case of GO STUDS GO, but of NO STUDS, NO!