

Relocation

Career
Transition
Series



Australian Government
National Mental Health Commission

Paper 7

About the career transition series

About these guides

These guides are a nine-part series developed to share research-led practices on career transitions to help support mentally healthy workplaces. In this series, you will find best practice strategies along with the stories of organisations supporting their people through eight key transitions. We share first-hand accounts of the career transitions many of us will experience in our lifetimes, whether it is having a baby or a career change, a personal crisis, or retiring from the workforce altogether.

Why these guides exist

Developed by the National Mental Health Commission in partnership with Transitioning Well, these guides emerged as part of the National Workplace Initiative (NWI) after early research and consultation highlighted the toll of a number of career transition points on the mental health of employees. These guides are based on the findings of this [Green Paper](#). They blend published research, insights from experts, and first-hand stories of individuals who have experienced or supported their people through transitions. We thank everyone who contributed to these guides and the organisations who permitted us to share their unique stories.

What these guides aim to do

- Recognise the impact of career transitions on workplaces and workers
- Inform workplace leaders and individuals about the importance of supporting transitions throughout the career journey
- Showcase how organisations can support workers across the life cycle in helping to promote and sustain mental health at work
- Share inspiring examples of forward-thinking organisations implementing research-led practices to proactively support career transitions.



Organisational-led approaches to support mentally healthy workplaces



Relocating is a significant event in one's life and is associated with a high risk of uncertainty and stress for employees and their families.¹

Source Career Transition Points Green Paper, 2022

About this transition

Australians are highly mobile, with 40% of the population changing their residence every five years according to the Australian Government Centre for Population.

2021 was a big year for resettling across the country. Research from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows Australians relocated more than ever in this period. The majority of these moves were between states and from cities to regional areas. These moves have been partly attributed to impacts of the Covid pandemic, but they also highlight longer-term migration patterns between capital cities and regional areas.

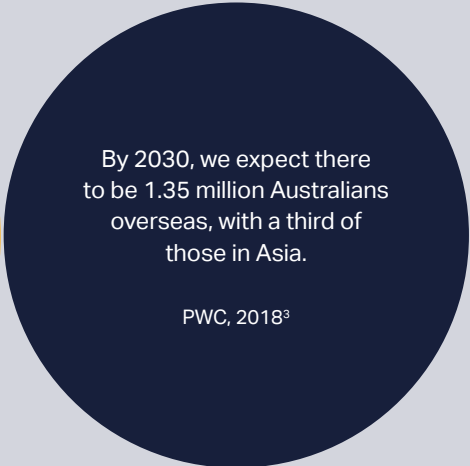
The decisions to relocate are often associated with age and key life events (e.g. educational or career opportunities or entering the labour market), and seeking to improve personal and financial opportunities, whether in Australia or overseas.

Key Messages

1. An organisational-led relocation should support the employee and any partners or family members—it is critical for a positive, successful transition.
2. There are two types of relocation stress. **Occupational stress** is the natural stress involved with relocating and starting a new job, and will reduce over time with good support in place. **Emotional stress** is less predictable and more likely to place longer term strain on the relocated person.
3. Attention to attrition and retention post-relocation is critical, particularly when an employee has more marketable skillsets after the relocation experience, or is unhappy on return, especially if a suitable role is not available

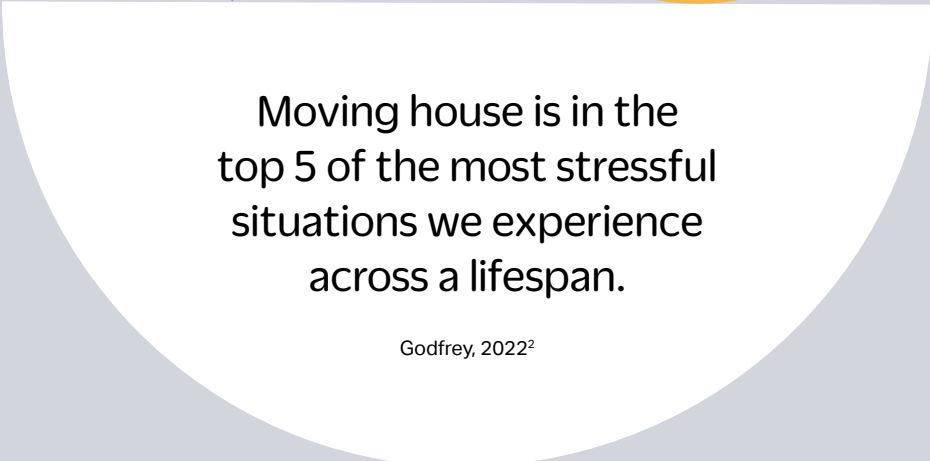


Key considerations




By 2030, we expect there to be 1.35 million Australians overseas, with a third of those in Asia.

PWC, 2018³



Moving house is in the top 5 of the most stressful situations we experience across a lifespan.

Godfrey, 2022²



40% of the population change their residence every five years.

Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022⁴

Why it is important for an organisation to support this transition

Relocating is a significant upheaval and is associated with a high risk of uncertainty and stress for employees and any family members.

One of the key indicators of successful relocation is organisational support. So, it is important for organisations to have support and tools in place to assist employees. This will help to minimise disruptions and ensure good outcomes for both the employee and employer

By 2030 we expect there to be 1.35 million Australians overseas, with a third of those in Asia.

Source Price Waterhouse Coopers, Australia's diaspora as a pathway to innovation, 2018.

Risks and their impacts on the team/organisation

Relocation is a significant life event, so there is the potential for both short- and long-term impacts on people's mental health and wellbeing. An employee's perceived level of control over the relocation itself (i.e. voluntary or involuntary) can have varying impacts on their personal mental health and wellbeing.

Multiple life changes are associated with relocation, including a new role, a new residence, finances, a partner's employment, children's education, immigration, living conditions, work hours, social activities and pets. Two types of stress are associated with relocation:

- **Occupational stress** – This includes the natural stress involved with starting a new job and moving: new expectations, management and practices. Some unease is unavoidable and this type of stress reduces over time, especially with good support in place.
- **Emotional stress** – This is much less predictable than occupational stress, and more likely to be prolonged and place continual strain on the relocated person. It is this emotional stress that presents a risk to mental health and wellbeing.

What workers say about their experience of relocation

Why I relocated?

The opportunity to develop my career further with a new position that encompassed more growth potential and new challenges. I felt as though I was not being challenged any longer in my old position and had reached the full potential that I could within that workspace. I wanted to set new goals to enable career growth.

What impact did it have?

Some aspects are stressful in the short term. Overall, I knew what I signed up for and was more excited than stressed. It's all part of moving locations.

Depression, isolation as you rebuild networks, anxiety about new work expectations.

How can organisations support their people?

Help with setting up a support network and also allowing for flexibility with work. For example, allow people to travel back home on occasion and make an effort to organise social events for teams to build connection outside of the day to day.



4 ways people relocating can internalise the transition

According to Nancy K Schlossberg, a leading expert in transitions and career development, a transition is defined as any event or non-event that changes our roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions.⁵

It can look like this in the relocation transition:

Roles

"I'm starting all over again in a new location."



Relationships

"I am feeling lonely without being close to extended family or close friends."



Routines

"Finding the new routines and rhythms need to be considered for me, and my family." (if applicable)



Assumptions

"People might not be very welcoming, and it may take a long time to make new connections."



Why relocating can feel so disorientating

Moving has been ranked in the top five most stressful experiences of our lives. It is right up there with divorce. People often talk about the logistics of moving, such as packing or unpacking, but the emotional aspects cannot be discounted.

Moving can symbolise a new beginning, and emotions like hope, disappointment, loss, anxiety and fear can come with this transition. Relocating can be particularly disorienting because the individual is likely to be dealing with external challenges to their routines and relationships, while physically distanced from their usual support networks.



Common challenges

Workplace etiquette

Within the workplace, even within the same organisation, differences in communication can be significant, particularly relating to manager/team relationships, the degree of formality, modes of giving and receiving feedback, accountability and humour.

Family and relationship pressure

How a partner or family member adjusts to the relocation can significantly affect success and cannot be underestimated. If a partner or child is struggling to settle into their new environment, it is highly likely to affect the employee's work performance and job satisfaction.

According to research by the American International University, adolescent children of relocated employees can also experience increased distress and potential suicide risk, partly due to problems establishing new social relationships.

Home sickness

One of the challenges with relocating can be learning how to cope with being distanced from normal support networks, which can result in feeling lonely. While the experience can positively push people out of their comfort zones, it can also feel isolating at times.

Many relocating employees struggle with loneliness and the feeling of missing home and their network of family, friends and wider community (e.g. religious, sporting, hobby, volunteer and other social groups). If the relocation is overseas, they can also find it difficult to make new connections, especially if there is a language barrier.

Culture shock

Culture shock is the feeling of disorientation experienced when subjected to an unfamiliar culture, environment, or way of life. This can include moving within Australia. Canadian anthropologist Kalervo Oberg first coined the term 'culture shock' and believed all individuals went through a process of identity loss, strain, and confusion when interacting with a new culture.

Culture shock can lead to a mix of emotions including anxiety, excitement, loss of confidence, loneliness and uncertainty. Differences in living standards and norms may cause discomfort during transitions. The environment also plays a significant role in how individuals manage the transition; remote locations such as mine sites and deserts can compound isolation pressures and weather disparities can impact lifestyle choices. Relocates may experience increased anxiety moving to high-risk destinations that require additional safety measures.

Discrimination

Sexual orientation, religion or gender can prompt discrimination within Australia and particularly overseas. Relocating someone with a disability or a family member with a medical consideration to a less-resourced location may also result in them experiencing discrimination.

Relocations aimed to improve diversity inclusiveness can bring their own challenges for both the individual and the organisation; for example, increasing women in mining locations needs to be managed to avoid risks of gender-based harassment.

Tips for supporting successful relocation transitions



For Organisations

- **Assess the individual's readiness** for relocation and where they may require additional support.
- **Ensure the employee has well-documented copies of their relocation terms** and conditions and has been guided through them, providing the opportunity for any questions.
- **Offer an initial paid 'familiarisation visit'** to enable the employee and any partner (plus accompanying children if beneficial) to build awareness and insights into the proposed relocation and any challenges.
- **Offer practical guidance and resources**, including helping individuals find and access their support needs, especially those with accompanying partners or families (e.g. local childcare, schools, community and sporting groups, healthcare services, veterinary services). A relocation handbook (online or printed) for relevant destinations could assist, including contact information for local networking and community groups they could join.
- **Encourage managers to meet more regularly with the new employee**, particularly in the first few months to provide support and guidance and organise a 'welcome' to introduce the employee to their team members. Resourcing inclusive team building activities and events can also be helpful, as well as providing any additional training.
- **Provide financial support for the physical relocation**, such as transport and housing costs, shipping personal belongings, assistance in helping a partner/child settle into their new home, and visas and taxation assistance for international relocates.
- **Provide financial support for the partner or family.** This extended support is critical for a successful transition, and is particularly important for vulnerable groups (e.g. migrant or refugee workers). Examples include paying for new school/childcare fees, employer-provided partner support.
- **Provide financial support to recognise any hardship.** Workers in 'hardship locations' such as remote areas or relocations with a high degree of adjustment between prior and new destination can be provided with ongoing allowances to compensate.
- **Consider temporary placements in relocation policies.** Workers who do 'Fly In Fly Out' (FIFO) shifts in remote or dangerous locations are still vulnerable to relocation impacts and mental health issues, especially when they are away for long periods from any family members, social networks or pets.
- **Provide financial support to travel home during relocation.** Enabling the employee and any accompanying family members to visit their prior home location, usually on an annual basis, can help maintain both workplace and social connections.
- **Consider 'peer-to-peer' support.** Relocating employees are introduced to work colleagues who can provide further guidance in the initial weeks/months. Encourage accompanying partners to develop a social network for support purposes for both themselves and any children.
- **Provide cross cultural training** for international moves including explicit information regarding local cultural, professional and working practices.
- **Consider providing mental health resources.** This could be sessions with a trained counsellor or internal human resources, or documented ideas on how to build social networks (e.g. business networks, volunteering, hobby groups, sporting or music clubs, school or community groups) and where to reach out for further support.
- **Consider an end of relocation interview** to gain further insights and to manage any issues

Tips for supporting successful relocation transitions

For Individuals

- **Seek out information** about the relocation, and talk with others, especially those with experience of a similar relocation to set realistic expectations.
- **If possible, spend time in the new location before making a permanent commitment** to increase confidence in the decision to move.
- **Arrange to speak regularly with the new manager and any human resource specialists** who can provide ongoing support and guidance, and clarity of terms and conditions to reduce misunderstandings of what costs and challenges may be involved.
- **Find out about local services and resources, cultural norms and nuances** (even if moving from metropolitan to rural areas) and if relevant, **learn local languages and customs**.
- **Engage with the local community** to help build a new sense of belonging. Consider joining business networks, hobby groups, sporting or music clubs, school or community groups to expand your social networks and support. Develop friendships with like-minded work colleagues and neighbours. If a dog owner, visit local known pet parks to meet other pet owners. Actively engage with local activities and events to meet others living nearby.
- **Enable children to maintain existing support groups** whether online or in person, especially if there is an expectation of returning to the home location or prior school.
- **Recognise** that a relocation can have a high degree of uncertainty or stress and seek support for mental health as needed. Organisations often provide these resources or speak with your local GP doctor in the first instance.



Feeling overwhelmed and not sure where to start?

In our research, we found that if an individual and their family feel supported, they are less stressed, and more able to focus on work.

Take time to understand the individual and any family members (if applicable), including why they are considering the move and what they are hoping to gain from the experience. To enable more targeted support, start discussions early, and have checklists for any family members (including children) about hobbies and preferences—support for partners, children and pets is critical!

Relocation Case study

At a glance



- Staff relocations previously had a high failure rate within the first 12 months.
- To address this need, Porsche took proactive steps to look at how they could improve the support they provided to employees' relocation (both interstate and overseas).

Globally, Porsche is a highly regarded employer. Voted the most attractive employer in the automotive industry by the Institute of the Automotive Industry, they earned the Automotive Top Career Award for 2021. Porsche Cars Australia employs over 70 people, operates in Australia and is headquartered in Collingwood, Victoria.

Activities and outcomes

- **Prepare:** Review factors before the decision, (e.g. impacts for partner and children, family plans, lifestyle choices, assignment length in a personal 'stock take'). An introduction booklet for the individual and their families to explain the 'basics'.
- **Look and see:** Travel to the destination for approximately three weeks. See the city, meet the teams and understand the local support available.
- **Move:** Partner with an external relocation company to manage logistics (e.g. home search, bank accounts, Tax File Number, health care, schools) and help ease the process while maintaining line of sight and support from Human Resources. It is important to give time for 'life admin' tasks. Encourage the individual to come first and get settled, then bring the family a few weeks later to minimise disruption when more family time and connection is recommended.
- **Post move:** Regular family events (i.e. family days, bring your kids to work days) allow new families to connect with others. Invite colleagues that live in similar areas to facilitate connections.
- **Partner support program:** Help support partners/spouses (if applicable) with what they want to do, (e.g. education, seeking work, updating CV's and networking).
- **End of placement:** Plan 6–12 months ahead, allowing alignment with family timing. Relocation support is helpful again to assist with ceasing leases, utilities and relocation of furniture, personal effects, etc.

Key findings

- If an individual and their family feel supported, they are less tense and distressed, and more able to focus on work.
- Support for family and spouse is critical - including pets!

Key Takeaway

Start early—plan and prepare, and if relevant, focus on the whole family.



Advice for others

- **Pre-planning is vital;** it takes time to understand the individual and their family; what do they want to gain from this experience, why they are considering a move and what's really important for their family to enable more targeted support. Start discussions early, have checklists for all family members (including children) about hobbies and preferences, to see what they want from the move.
- **For moves within Australia** less external support is needed but some assistance is still recommended (e.g. temporary accommodation and support to find schools).
- **A good starting point** is to develop and share a handbook. This includes relevant websites and resources, so the employee and family can start their research early. Circulate this with staff who have moved before to help collect feedback on what they would have liked to know when they relocated.



Worth a read

The Emotional Impact of Moving,

Sarah Godfrey, 2022.

Read here: <https://www.movingmindsets.com.au/emotional-impact-moving-sarah-godfrey/>

The Psychology of Moving,

Sarah Kershaw, 2010.

Read here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/28/realestate/28cov.html>

Six tips for ensuring a smooth international employee relocation,

Susan Muldowney, 2019.

Read here: <https://www.seek.com.au/employer/hiring-advice/6-tips-ensuring-smooth-international-employee-relocation>

Read more in this series:

Paper 1

Career Transitions Series: General Principles

Paper 2

Career Transition Series: Entering the Workforce and Young Worker Transitions

Paper 3

Career Transition Series: Learning to Lead (*this guide*)

Paper 4

Career Transition Series: Parenting and Caring

Paper 5

Career Transition Series: Redundancy and Career Change

Paper 6

Career Transitions Series: Health-Related Changes

Paper 7

Career Transition Series: Relocation

Paper 8

Career Transitions Series: Crisis and Career Shocks

Paper 9

Career Transitions Series: Late Career and Retirement

[Click here to read the other papers in this series](#)



References

- 1 National Mental Health Commission. Career Transition Point: Exploring the challenges and opportunities of career transitions and mental health and wellbeing. National Mental Health Commission. 2023. Available from: www.haveyoursay.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/career-transition-series
- 2 CSIRO. Six “megatrends” to re-shape workplace health and safety [Internet]. www.csiro.au. 2018. Available from: <https://www.csiro.au/en/news/news-releases/2018/six-megatrends-workplace-health-safety>
- 3 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Older Australians, Employment and work [Internet]. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2021. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australians/contents/employment-and-work>
- 4 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Older Australians, Employment and work [Internet]. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2021. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australians/contents/employment-and-work>
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