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Chapter 18
**HOUSEHOLD
EMPLOYEES**

The idea of having domestic staff can be disconcerting for Foreign Service employees and family members. In our theoretically egalitarian society, words such as “servant” or worse, “houseboy,” raise specters of bygone eras.

There are a few different factors in play overseas:

- Daily tasks may require great effort—even without any potential language barriers. Instead of sticking a frozen dinner in the microwave, you may need to ask for instructions on what to buy and how to cook it, travel to the local market, bargain for unfamiliar produce, carefully wash and disinfect it, wait for a power outage to end, and only then begin cooking supper. Having someone reliable to assist you can make life in a hard place easier.
- Hiring someone can help the local economy by providing another job; it can be an effective way to share your income without promoting dependence. In a country where jobs are scarce, holding a position as driver or cook may hold more status than you realize.
- Household employees may provide a window into the local culture or a part of society that you may not see as a Foreign Service employee or family member, enriching your experience and broadening your understanding of the country.
- Help at home can free up time for other activities, such as representational events in your residence, opportunities to get to know the country, or meaningful volunteer work.

PLAN THE POSITION

Do not feel that you have to hire your predecessor’s employees or the first person recommended to you by the CLO Coordinator. Take time to determine your requirements first. Do you need someone full-time or part-time? Do you want someone to cook—local or American foods? Will you need help on evenings or weekends? Do you need child care? How many hours per week? Will the employee need to take care of

your pets, receive telephone messages, shop for food, or manage other employees? Does the employee need to speak English? How well? Do you want a live-in maid? Would you mind employing additional family members? Think about these and other factors before asking for recommendations.

Although you may have diplomatic immunity, your employees will expect you to abide by local labor practices. Find out in advance what is normal in terms of working hours, holidays, benefits, bonuses, and so on. Getting a sample contract may help you avoid unpleasant or expensive surprises down the road.

Check with others at post to determine an appropriate salary. Pay will depend on the local pay scale, the size of your house and family, the employee's experience, and the scope of duties. Choosing the cheapest employee may mean sacrificing experience and maturity; it may be worth paying more.

Be clear before you interview anyone what you intend to provide in the way of fringe benefits. What is expected? (In some countries, employers provide personal hygiene products such as soap and shampoo for live-in employees, along with room and board). Which items will the employee be allowed to use? Will you pay for sick days or emergency absences? Will you help the family by providing school uniforms or other extras? What will the limits be? These points can be included in a written contract if agreed.

At some point your employees most likely will face personal circumstances that affect you (for example, your live-in housekeeper has a baby, or a close relative of hers falls seriously ill). Will you loan money or provide salary advances? It helps to consider various possible situations in advance and think about how you might deal with them.

HIRE CAREFULLY

The best way to find an honest, reliable employee is to get recommendations from previous employers, the CLO Coordinator or Management Officer, or other acquaintances at your new post. Even if the employee has excellent recommendations, take the time to follow the careful hiring practices that follow.

Prior to interviewing candidates, prepare a list of questions relating to your needs. Use it at each interview to help you select the best candidate. Be consistent in seeking information from prospective candidates. Contact the Community Liaison Office in advance for information on the employees you will be interviewing and attach any resulting papers to each questionnaire.

Factors to determine (either at the interview or in advance) include:

- Past employment: what, where, how long, duties, reasons for leaving.
- Education: languages spoken, ability to read and write (which may not be as important as you initially think), skills for any other job requirements.
- Specific position-related skills and training.
- Cultural factors as relevant to employment. For instance, you might ask whether there are foods the candidates will not cook or whether they would find it difficult to work with someone from a different local ethnic background.
- Health and hygiene habits. See "Protect Your Family" and "Train Employees" below.
- Willingness to meet your requirements.

Clearly explain the duties that you expect and the salary and benefits you are prepared to offer. Establish a professional tone at the interview. Use the formal verb form if there is one.

Pay attention to how comfortable you feel with the person—this is someone you may see every day. If you are favorably impressed with the prospective employee, suggest a paid trial period of one to three months rather than immediate employment.

When interviewing potential child care providers, consider discussing the following topics:

- education and training
- experience
- references
- care giving philosophies and goals

- ideas on meals, snacks and drinks for infants and children
- preferred treatment for common childhood ailments (to find out if there are local practices with which you are not comfortable)
- usual activities planned or typical daily schedule
- use of television or other media
- philosophies on naps or quiet time
- discipline methods, behavior expectations, and rules
- willingness and experience caring for children with special needs, if relevant

It may be helpful to interview the potential employee without children present, then schedule a time for the employee to meet the child. A few hours of babysitting while parents are still in the house (for example, unpacking or working on other projects) may give a good idea of how the potential caregiver interacts with your child.

Be sure to check references, stop by unexpectedly at times when your children are under the caregivers' supervision, and listen carefully to what your children say.

Remember that the housekeeper or cook is not necessarily the best person to watch your children. Cooking, cleaning, and caring for children at the same time may not be optimal for safety reasons, and the employee could resent the change in responsibilities, if unexpected.

PROTECT YOUR FAMILY

Obtain the potential employee's full name, address, and any identification number (such as the local version of a Social Security number). Ask the Regional Security Officer to conduct a background investigation if one has not been done recently.

Ask the post medical unit which medical tests are recommended. Arrange for a complete medical examination, chest x-ray, or other recommended procedures for the potential employee; you are responsible for the cost. You may want to personally take the employee to this examination, both to make it more convenient for your employee and to make sure that he or she does not send someone else instead.

Do not just ask for references: check them. Take the time to call previous employers and ask detailed questions. Read letters of reference carefully and attempt to verify what they say with the writers—even if they have since moved to a new post.

CREATE DOCUMENTATION

You might want to put specifics in writing to avoid misunderstandings and legal problems. Write down what you expect from the employee and what the employee may expect from you. Be as specific as possible regarding duties to be accomplished on a daily and monthly basis. Go over this list, reading it aloud to the employee, and—once all parties agree—have the employee sign it as a contract addendum.

Create monthly receipts of payments and save them. Obtain the employee's signature upon each salary payment.

Establish a form to track leave or vacation taken or paid. Some countries' laws require a 13th (at times even a 14th) monthly salary, and this form serves as proof that the employer covered all local legal requirements. Have the employee sign this form as proof that her or she received due payment and benefits.

Set up a folder and keep (at a minimum) copies of the employee's identification documents, documentation of health checkups, residence address and telephone numbers, two additional points of contact in case the employee cannot be reached, salary log, and so forth.

Give the post Regional Security Officer (RSO) a list of your domestic staff so that the alarm company or roving security patrol will know who is authorized to be at your residence when you are not home.

TRAIN EMPLOYEES

The importance of this step cannot be overemphasized. If you need to, spend an entire day or two completing all of the required tasks with the new employee. Do not make assumptions about what employees know, even if they have worked for other American families. Go over the use of each appli-

ance. Point out which ones require a transformer or other special treatment. You may want to put labels in the local language on the machines, clearly and simply noting controls and requirements. Indicate how laundry should be separated, which items should be washed by hand or line-dried, and how often to use products such as bleach or fabric softener. Show them how to wash special dishes, such as non-stick pans. Point out which cleaners should be used for each task. Make sure that cloths or brushes used for bathrooms and floors never come near dishes or food preparation surfaces. Go over procedures for safe food and water handling with all employees, at least in brief—the last thing you want is for the gardener to helpfully take the initiative and refill your bottle of purified water from the tap.

Make sure that the new nanny knows your rules regarding television time, snacks, naps, and so on. Indicate if there are foods or drinks that you do not want your child to have (in some cultures it is considered fine to give children coffee or tea, for instance). Arrange for first aid training if possible. At the very least, provide emergency contact information and go over what to do in case of choking, poisoning, and so on.

A real and unexpected problem for some families is the fact that household help may wait on children hand and foot, allowing them to do whatever they want. Avoid this by reminding both the employee and child that the employee is in charge and should be respected. Continue to assign children household chores and responsibilities, so that they will not be too shocked by a later return to “real life,” and may maintain a healthy respect for your household help.

Instruct your employees on security procedures. Make sure they know where emergency numbers are located and which device to use in case of emergency (telephone or radio). Instruct employees not to give out information about the family to incoming callers unless they are SURE that the caller is a friend or relative. Employees should know the full names of everyone in the family in case of emergency. Do not allow employees to permit entry onto your compound or in your house of anyone you have not specifically approved.

Insist that employees accompany workmen, exterminators, or others who want to enter the house, after verifying that they have legitimate work orders. Remind them that exterminators should not spray food preparation surfaces or cupboards containing pots and pans, dishes, or food.

Ask your household staff to report any suspicious or unusual activity that takes place near your residence. Make sure they know how to contact the roving security patrol to investigate any suspicious activity.

Be clear about your expectations regarding the use of your possessions and your home. Which food is all right to eat? Can the employee use the telephone, television, or radio? When can family or friends stop by, if ever?

If you do not speak the language well, or if the employee does not speak English well, you may want to enlist a friend to interpret or write out instructions in the employee’s language. You may be able to physically demonstrate many tasks, but be sure that important points have been understood.

LEARN TO LIVE TOGETHER

Respect the culture of your employees. For example, do not ask Muslims to cook or serve pork. Do not expect your female housekeeper to give the male gardener orders if this is not the norm. Do not expect people to clean up after pets if this is offensive to them.

Do not leave expensive items or cash lying around; why provide temptation? On the other hand, don’t blame the employee for everything that you can’t find. (Did you ever lose anything before you had someone working for you?)

Remember that an employee living in your house is neither a friend nor a guest. Americans may try to ease ambivalent feelings about “servants” by trying to treat employees as part of the family. This may be confusing and ultimately unfair to everyone involved. Many Foreign Service families recommend maintaining distance by using the formal verb tense, having different meal times, keeping living areas separate, and so on. This is a work relationship, after all.

Be realistic in your expectations: no one is going to raise your children the same way that you do or iron your shirts exactly the way the dry cleaner did in Bethesda. Express appreciation, compliment work well done, and be generous when it is appropriate. This is much more effective—and easier on your and your help's nerves—than constant complaints or criticisms.

AVOID PROBLEMS

If you need to dismiss employees, do not give them advance warning. Simply ask for the keys, give them the required severance pay, and ask them to leave. Try to avoid firing someone in a moment of anger. Take the time to find out in advance what local regulations are and the best way to handle the situation in the context of the local culture. "Saving face" may be important in some cultures; in other countries you may need a signed statement from the employee saying that he or she has been paid in full. Regardless of the reason, try to avoid firing someone before a major holiday.

If an employee is terminated for cause (stealing or inappropriate behavior), help prevent problems for future employers by documenting the behavior and sending a brief report to the Regional Security Officer and CLO Coordinator.

ENJOY!

It may sound overwhelming to make all these arrangements to have people working in your home. However, the first time you serve Thanksgiving dinner to fifteen people, leave on vacation the next morning, and come back refreshed to a spotless house, the complications will not seem so great after all!

RESOURCES

The Community Liaison Office Coordinator at post should have information about local domestic help.

The Family Liaison Office offers information on "Bringing a Nanny to the United States While on Temporary Assignment" (<http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/rsrscs/pubs/17026.htm>)

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