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A trailing spouse catches up

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TWO years ago, Yvonne McNulty's husband was offered the chance of a lifetime — a posting to Chicago with software company Oracle.

Ms McNulty, despite having to leave her own job in Sydney, was thrilled. But she didn't realise her husband's new employer was focused on him, not his partner.

After three months of being unable to work due to the strict US visa rules for spouses, she was spending vast amounts of time alone due to her husband's work commitments, and "starting to wonder why I was bothering to get out of bed".

"I really missed being able to work. I was confused, lost and very lonely."

The experience triggered her interest in the plight of "trailing spouses" — those following their partner's work overseas — as part of a thesis project.

Ms McNulty interviewed the spouses of more than 160 workers, covering 27 English-speaking nationalities living in 44 countries.

She found roughly four in



Back home: Mr and Mrs Rodgers

10 postings failed — the overwhelming majority because of a lack of family or spouse adjustment, with the companies making little effort to ease their employees' move.

The problems predominantly affect women, but the study found up to 10 per cent of trailing spouses were men.

Sydney investment banker Simon Rodgers was enthusiastic about his wife Maria's opportunity to take her IT career to the US. But six months into the 18-month posting, they were back in

Australia. Mr Rodgers was promised a US working visa that turned out to be a dependant spouse visa, leaving the investment specialist unemployed.

While he was playing the "traditional wife role", he said his wife was having "an extremely bad time at the office" in a role that had been ill-described.

"The firm went out of their way to make things harder," Mr Rodgers said.

As Ms McNulty's experience showed, the glamorous image of an overseas posting may be far from reality for the husband or wife.

"It places a huge strain on your relationship — when you have no friends, you rely on each other a lot more. When you're not economically contributing, and you used to be, you wonder if your partner resents you spending, even though you both made the decision to come."

Ms McNulty and Mr Rodgers both want the study to spur a recognition of workers as part of another company — their family — and for employers to help ease them into their new country.