

What's in a name?

An article by Annette van der Feltz – Expatriate Assistance

What's in a name? If you are moving to the US on a work visa – the answer to this question could be: a lot!

When moving to the US, getting your name registered correctly, and understanding how the various government agencies determine your first, middle, maiden and last name, is crucial to a smooth settling in process.



It is one of those trivialities expats tend not to think of when moving here. However, getting it wrong can have a significant impact and result in a lot of frustration and repeat visits to various government agencies. Annette van der Feltz is a relocation agent who helps make the foreign familiar for expats moving to the USA and guides them through the necessary bureaucracy as part of the settling in process.

Moving an employee overseas has many benefits but is also an expensive and time consuming endeavor. It is important to make sure you and your family settle in quickly and smoothly, so you can focus on the new job and your family settles into a new routine. There are many stories of families who did not get any support when moving here, became frustrated and did not thrive. This may result in an expensive and stressful early repatriation.

One frustration you may run into is getting your name consistently right with the various government agencies. This may sound weird to some, but here in the US, every government agency has its own rules, there is no central registration database, so there is plenty of room for different interpretations.

When you, the expat, receive your US visa, you will notice that the visa has your given names (first and middle names) and your last name. No problem so far. When you enter the US, you can retrieve your I94 arrival record which has your first and middle name under the header "First (Given) name". So wait, what is your first name and what is your given name? The answer is surprisingly: whatever the government agency you are dealing with decides it to be! Before you know it, your first name becomes a combination of your first and middle name with some government agencies, while other government agencies see your first name as your actual first name and all other given names as middle names.

Now you are ready to apply for your drivers license. But wait, the agent at this agency tells you that the name on your visa does not match the name on file with the Social Security Administration (SSA), which issued your SSN (Social Security Number, a tax ID). And if you are someone with several middle names, or a particularly long name, your names do not all fit on your SSN card and some names are cut off. Now the name on file with the SSA does not match the name on your visa.... And so the challenge of correcting your name and living with a variation of names begins. Have I mentioned getting on an airplane with an ID card where your name is spelled differently than on your ticket, and you try to convince the gate agent it really is you and to let you board?! This happened to a friend recently, whose airline ticket was in the name of Adrienne van den Berg*, but her ID card (drivers license) was in the name of Adrienne Vandenberg*. Fortunately, she was able to successfully plead her case with a friendly supervisor who let her board, but not before reprimanding her to spell her name correctly next time she booked a ticket!



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Having a relocation consultant can help you avoid multiple trips to the various government agencies. For over 13 years, I have been making the foreign familiar for expats moving to the USA. I make sure your family settles in well by offering settling in and education assistance, as well as spouse coaching and intercultural coaching. This way, you can focus on transitioning to the new job at the US office, and the family can settle in quickly and smoothly. Before you know it, you and your family will be on your way to making your American expat assignment a wonderful adventure!

I will make sure you have the right documents and advocate for you - among others - to make sure your name is spelled in such a way that you will not have any issues down the road. And if there are issues, I will help you resolve them in the quickest way possible. Borrowing the Dutch tax authority's slogan "I can not make it more fun, but I can make it easier"!

Please visit my website www.ExpatriateAssistance.com and contact me if you would like more information on how I can help you and your family settle in.

* name changed for privacy reasons