

# Is your global mobility program addressing what it should? Linkage with business strategy? Talent management? Assignee mentoring?

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Too often, global companies think of their international assignment or global mobility programs as a set of policies and rules governing assignment packages, relocation support and compliance with immigration and income tax laws and regulations. These are the areas for which global mobility departments are traditionally accountable.

While these areas are vital, they are only a small portion of what a sound mobility program of any size should address. Although smaller companies may have limited resources and simpler environments, they should consider the themes outlined below.

## What is expected from your mobility program?

Mobility programs help ensure that resources for the organization's global business strategy are in place where and when needed – today and tomorrow. “Today” refers to meeting basic needs where local talent is unavailable by “importing” resources from other countries. “Tomorrow” means ensuring future talent needs are met by developing existing talent, with an international assignment as a possible developmental component<sup>1</sup>. Bottom line: In order to shape an effective mobility program fully aligned with organizational goals, it is

<sup>1</sup> Assignments are almost never purely developmental in scope. While every international assignment includes a developmental component *de facto* (as one is living and working in a new environment), most assignments fill



essential to understand business strategy and how it translates into a “people” agenda.

## Does your talent mobility program reflect your company's culture?

A talent mobility program is by and large a reflection of an organization's culture. Many of a program's features are a transcription of inherent company traits. For example, how a company approaches hierarchy will drive the extent to which people can self-nominate for an

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assignment. The level of employee empowerment will shape how prescriptive (or flexible) assignment packages and the mobility process itself needs to be. The amount of assignee “hand-holding” expected in the assignment process will be derived from the level of accountability, sense of responsibility and degree of self-sufficiency generally expected of people in the organization. It is essential to

positions, transfer know-how, and/or unify company culture.

identify the key cultural traits of an organization – mission, vision, values, and behaviors – and reflect those major characteristics in the mobility program.

### Who owns talent mobility?

Talent mobility is an essential pillar of an organization’s global strategy. Yet, there is often

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a broad disconnect in concept and execution. There can be a lack of clarity regarding which party among line management, HR or Mobility should own the talent mobility piece.



Leadership should set broad objectives regarding resourcing, talent management and development needs that reflect overall business strategy. They own the talent management and development program. The HR function should provide methodology and implementation support in drawing and executing actionable people plans: talent identification and assessment, succession planning, talent development, and overall staffing. Global Mobility becomes naturally responsible for implementing moves regardless of the underlying reason(s) for assignments. Open communication and sharing of information among all parties, including assignees, is essential to success.

What are the components of a sound global mobility program? These are depicted on figure 1 as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. All pieces are interconnected and inter-dependent: intersection with talent management (the “business and people sides”) in green; global mobility process components (the “engine” side) in blue; and program management in purple.

### The talent management components of a global mobility program

As a consequence of an organization’s culture, business and people strategies, where does the broader talent management agenda intersect with mobility? The answers vary from organization to organization, but here are some general themes:

- Identification of key strategic roles: When considering the need to develop a global mindset as relevant to a company’s ambition and footprint, top leadership roles naturally come to mind. However, other roles are also critical: medical research professionals in a pharmaceutical company; portfolio managers in a fund management firm; marketing and product management executives in Fast Moving Consumer Goods, as examples. Identifying “pivot” positions, understanding where needs are geographically, and planning accordingly are essential parts of the talent process. Mobility becomes involved when international assignments or transfers have to be put in place.
- Assignments justified by opening new or expanding footprints in existing markets, by



Figure 1 – Components of a sound global mobility program

transfer of skills or by the need to “fix” situations routinely take place in the execution of business strategy. These assignments can be ear-marked for high-potential individuals at early stages in their careers. Mobility needs to understand the business context and objectives for such assignments to be able to anticipate them.

- Adoption or reinforcement of corporate culture is a frequent need. This is obviously the case following an acquisition. It is also relevant in new markets, where company culture acts as a unifying device and brand attribute.
- Assignee selection plays a very important role not only in avoiding a poor fit, but also in reaching consensus internally regarding what a position entails, what the key success areas are, and what skillset, experience and

personal attributes are required to succeed. In many instances, there is no need to engage in a lengthy, costly formal professional assessment. A series of conversations between the future assignee and business leaders, focusing on context and expectations, will frame the assignment in the right dimensions from the outset.

- Mentoring is essential. An assignment mentor should be someone much more senior to the assignee in the organization, and possibly out of the assignee’s chain of command. A mentor should help the assignee navigate an assignment during all of its stages, both professionally and personally. This includes reintegration at the end of the assignment. Another important part of a mentor’s mission is to make sure the assignee remains visible in the company.



Ideally, mentors should have been on an international assignment themselves.

- Reintegration must be envisioned before the assignment starts. Assignees are very often left to their own devices upon return home.

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Best practices call for discussing an assignee's performance systematically as part of the talent review, and getting senior leadership involved in facilitating "landing." A leading European company in the field of industrial automation reduced turnover of returning assignees threefold after applying a team approach that included line management, HR and mobility.

- It is essential to look at the economic dimensions of assignments at the very early stages. ROI<sup>2</sup> of assignments has been a topic on the docket for decades. While-experienced mobility professionals prepare cost projections routinely, scoping the return on investment – i.e. valuing tangible and intangible outcomes, with proper risk assessment – is a difficult exercise. Again,

getting clarity and agreement around the very purpose of the assignment and associated expectations goes a long way, even if valuation, in most cases, remains an educated guess. Even more powerful are regular ROI reviews performed jointly by the assignment sponsors and the assignee during the course of the assignment, and at its conclusion.

### Assignment management: a well-oiled machine

More familiar to global mobility professionals are the assignment management pieces. Getting these right requires regular fine-tuning, as there are a high levels of interdependence.

- Understand the business drivers and the target audience for international assignments. This is key to developing assignee compensation, benefits, compliance and relocation support. Tiered packages, mirroring types of assignments and assignees, (such as millennium professionals, mid-career managers, and senior executives) is usually a sound start.
- Recognize mandatory steps resulting from compliance with immigration and tax laws. International taxation is a very complex



<sup>2</sup> Return on Investment = (outcomes from assignment – assignment costs) / assignment costs

subject that requires the involvement of professionals in that field, especially if remuneration includes long-term incentives such as stock options.

- Identify appropriate levels of support for assignees and their family members. While this includes determining what services and/or cash allowances to offer, it also means evaluating options such as a “cafeteria” approach, or the ability to trade services for cash and *vice versa*. Cross-cultural awareness and training, career assistance to spouses/significant others, and access to specialized education resources are now standard offerings. Mitigating risk and attention to duty of care are not to be neglected.
- Determine the major pain points. The assignment process is conceptually straightforward, but details can generate anxiety and frustration. Many of the internal tasks are designed to attend to the needs of employees joining or leaving the organization, not employees relocating internationally. Sometimes, there is little appetite to adapt local processes to accommodate a limited population. Finding internal solutions or specialized vendors to assist with them can help.
- Communicate with assignees. An overview of the entire process – expatriation, assignment, and repatriation – will help put the assignment on the right track. Frequent, targeted communication along the way is highly effective. Monitor satisfaction levels in the mobility program. Collect assignment satisfaction data from assignees and family members during the assignment, and upon repatriation and reintegration home.
- Select vendors carefully, as they are viewed by assignees as an extension of the

company. Establish SLAs<sup>3</sup>. Monitor vendor performance and assignee satisfaction.

- Assess risk elements in a contextual manner. International assignments generate risk. Effective risk management depends on the business environment and geographical location. Immigration and income tax compliance are also an integral part of the risk management agenda.
- Invest in technology dedicated to the global mobility program. It enables communication among the parties involved in the assignment process: business leaders, future assignees, assignees and their families, et cetera. A dedicated intranet site with company policies,

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relevant contacts, hyperlinks to resources and vendors, checklists and other tools is merely a first step. Companies with large programs need comprehensive assignment management solutions. Smaller programs may turn to spreadsheets as basic assignment management tools. An alternative is to outsource to vendors who manage the process using their own technology.

- Develop a sound protocol to accumulate cost information in one place. Cost management is an integral part of the assignment process, but is usually neglected because it becomes quickly very complex. Identify accruals to determine the true cost of assignments. Keep an eye on exceptions to policy that have been granted, enforce compliance with policy, and/or amend policy.

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<sup>3</sup> Service Level Agreements



- Expand traditional assignment management policies. “Non-traditional” assignments are a rapidly accelerating trend. The most common are: commuting assignments to one or several countries, assignments within assignments, multiple and repetitive short trips, etc. Direct hiring from abroad with a package to assist with international relocation is traditionally handled by Global Mobility. Policy boundaries between assignees and IBTs<sup>4</sup> are getting increasingly blurry. Expanding policies manages risk and compliance, and provides necessary support to employees.

### Managing the mobility program

Managing the program itself is an essential task that will help ensure alignment with the broader strategic business and people agendas. Establishment and monitoring of KPIs<sup>5</sup> to measure success is particularly important. Communication, including success stories and assignee testimonies, also play a paramount role internally and externally.

### What about smaller mobility programs?

international mobility is a specialized trade that requires guidance by professionals in the field, and looking at all the facets of a sound mobility program may seem overwhelming. This does not mean companies with relatively small assignee populations should ignore any of the themes highlighted in this article. It just means they can apply a convivial, down to earth and common sense approach to devising solutions. Focused conversations can replace formal talent reviews. Direct contact can replace assignment management systems. Spreadsheets remain effective tools for package administration. Outsourcing all or part of the mobility process to a vendor may also be a viable solution. No matter the solutions, it is of paramount importance for the “people side” of mobility to remain in the organization, as it represents an important part of the company’s competitive advantage. ♦



#### About the author



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<sup>4</sup> International Business Travelers

<sup>5</sup> Key Performance Indicators