

Report
Research
2021/2022

2

RES FORUM


Report written by Professor Michael
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Technology in Cross-Border Working

disruptive force or
old wine in new bottles?

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About BGRS

BGRS develops and implements comprehensive talent mobility solutions for corporate and government clients worldwide. By combining deep industry experience and unparalleled insights on the future of talent mobility, we enable our clients to design mobility programs that empower them to attract, retain, and develop top performers. With more than 1,400 people across six continents, we blend global perspective with local market strength and international business.



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About Harmony Relocation Network

Harmony is a global cooperative network of moving companies and destination services providers, upholding strong family values through generations of heritage, brought together in one truly global and solid infrastructure, providing the same level of high quality services, local expertise and personal commitment, the world over.



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About Noah Mobility

Noah Mobility is a Germany-based relocation technology company that caters to both business and direct-to-consumer markets. Its platform connects the customer to relocation consultants, supporting companies who send their staff on assignment. They also service private clients, from international students and digital nomads looking to develop their career in Europe, without compromising their lifestyle, to retirees dreaming of living under palm trees. The integration of a digital platform allows cost-cutting synergies to provide a more affordable service, bookable by anyone.



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About SilverDoor Apartments

SilverDoor Apartments is the world's leading corporate accommodation agent and the leading booker of serviced apartments globally, with 20 years' experience providing a premium booking service to clients across the globe. Strategically placed worldwide offices and expert staff provide personalised support and award-winning account management, resulting in a seamless booking experience.



Intro...

When Lyndon B. Johnson, 36th President of the USA, said those words in the second half of the 20th century, he had no idea what gigantic technological leaps would follow. He passed away in 1973, the year that both the first cell phone call was made, and fiber optics were created. Fast-forward less than 50 years and autonomous cars are no longer considered science-fiction. What's more, pretty much any cell phone (or, better, smart phone) can connect you with the world at lightning speed, while companies increasingly exploit virtual and augmented reality. The impact of technology – the “miracles” made possible by technology – have transformed the Global Mobility (GM) industry as well. In fact, the impact of technology on cross-border mobility is so massive that its full history goes beyond the scope of this report. Instead, we start with a major issue we encountered in our research: that the term “technology” is extremely broad and used in multiple ways.

First, we explore the different ways this term is defined, and what these definitions mean for organizations. We then deep dive into the use of technology. We explore differences between technology intended to support the individual assignee, technology aimed at supporting the assignment process, and technology that allows the GM voice to be heard, enabling a more strategic, inter-departmental coordination of global work. Although they're closely linked, it is important to understand that they are distinct and, from an organizational perspective, to understand the intention behind each technology. We conclude with an outlook and the presentation of a digital maturity self-assessment tool.

To collect data for our research, we applied a simplified version of the so-called “Delphi technique”: a structured communication technique that relies on a panel of experts. This panel of experts was interviewed with a semi-structured set of questions. We approached them with a rough idea of the topic but let the flow of the conversation determine its own trajectory. Moreover, we took the opportunity to follow up and refine our preliminary findings in further conversations and discussions. This included conversations with the RES Forum strategic advisory board. To provide a broad angle on this topic, we included experts from across the industry and from various roles – i.e., current (and former) expatriates, GM professionals, technology managers, plus leaders from tech start-ups and providers of innovative technological solutions around the GM process. Therefore, we provide a holistic picture of both the status quo and the outlook around technology in GM.

“ If future generations are to remember us more with gratitude than sorrow, we must achieve more than just the miracles of technology. We must also leave them a glimpse of the world as it was created, not just as it looked when we got through with it ”

Lyndon B. Johnson

Foreword

Global Mobility Leader
Technology Sector, London

“As we design the employee experience, it’s so important to decide when an activity should be done by a lovely warm human being, or when is better to automate it.”

This quote from Andrew Spence, HR Transformation Director at Glass Bead Consulting, is more than four years old. Taken from a piece in The People Space from May 2017, it pertains to technology and automation in HR.

It’s a question that has been floating around the Global Mobility (GM) space for a long time, with no one able to find the right balance.

Automate too much and you alienate both the employees and the GM professionals trying to service them. Automate too little and you have a function stuck in the dark ages, unable to deal with the operational challenges that moving employees around the globe will throw at you.

I wholeheartedly believe in the power of technology in HR and GM. I also believe it can have transformational power if the function and the company are ready for change. However, the reality often fails to live up to the promise when it comes to the system many companies were sold. This is particularly the case for medium and smaller programs.

I’ve come across many providers who developed technology that’s not specifically designed for GM, but still sell it as a tool to fix all problems – sometimes at a lower cost than other providers. What they fail to mention, however, is the hidden implementation costs and the additional developments companies are expected to wait (and pay) for. Often, they’re sold a dream which may only be available a few years down the line and at considerable extra expense.

A good analogy is a game that’s free from the app store but has in app purchases that are essential to play it properly. Without the additional outlay, you’re left with an inferior, sometimes unplayable version of the game.

For smaller GM functions some technology may be the answer. However, in many cases they may be better off without a full-blown system, which is both expensive to buy and run. Importantly, many companies that want a GM system underestimate the complexity of implementation

and the need to dedicate a full-time employee to the process. This is in addition to getting all policies and processes up to scratch, which can take several months, especially if undertaken alongside the day job. Many GM functions get stuck in the middle and while the aim was to “solve Global Mobility through technology” they end up adding complexity to their processes.

If your function or company isn’t quite ready for a full-blown system, there are other ways to revolutionise global mobility through technology.

This option is equally available to companies who are ready for a full-blown system. Any company can harness the power of technology and truly change their function by choosing providers who offer something new. Something with the capacity to change the industry. These companies have typically found the right balance between using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and an actual human being.

Modern technology providers are changing the relocation industry, and, by extension, how companies manage cross-border working. Their apps are powered by AI and augmented by real people, available where and when you need them throughout your move. Using AI and smart technology enables them to offer the same services as traditional relo companies, but at a fraction of the cost. Most importantly, they’re the vanguard when it comes to employee experience. This is particularly true for Gen Z and Millennials – technology natives who expect a seamless experience through smartphone or tablet.

Already moving employees around the world, companies using this blend of technology and the human touch are truly the future of Global Mobility, regardless of what kind of system you have.

Technology in search of a definition

One issue that struck us was the fact that, for GM, the term technology seemed to say “nothing and everything at the same time.” The Cambridge dictionary defines technology in the business world as the “use of scientific knowledge or processes in business, industry, manufacturing, etc.” This, in part, explains the problem: what scientific knowledge or which processes people have in mind is an essential question. Are we considering the email programme (or more technically, the source code and technological infrastructure enabling the transmission of emails to the receiver) already as technology? Following the Cambridge dictionary definition, the answer is clear: this is an example of technology in GM. On the other hand, email is so commonplace that when we think about “technology”, email does not come to mind. The more technologically savvy the expert, the less they attributed “technology status” to relatively simple things.

Another interesting observation is that technologies such as Zoom, (a software brand), has become synonymous with computer-based communication supported by sound and video. In fact, in our research conversations, Zoom was regularly referred to as a new “technology”, although the actual base technology (i.e., transmitting voice and picture via the internet) is shared by many other programs, Skype or MS Teams, for example. An interesting fact is that the first video conferencing service, developed by AT&T, was piloted as early as 1970. Within Lyndon B. Johnson’s lifetime.

A lot of overlap and confusion exists in the use of terms amongst the GM community. Therefore, our first insight is that when talking about technology in GM, it is essential to be specific and precise, to ensure a common language. While this sounds trivial, it is vital in situations where GM professionals develop a cost-based business case for the use of technology in their departments. Several of our experts stated explicitly and implicitly that, within their environment, technology is linked to an improvement in GM work patterns and connected to specific costs. Although, there is always an initial investment in technology acquisition and deployment, the untold part of the story is that, under certain circumstances, it may ultimately save money. In other words, a solid cost-benefit analysis is warranted. Ultimately, it is for the organization to decide whether investment in new technology is worth the time, as well as the financial and human resources¹.

In our interviews, it emerged that our experts GM technology vision centered on three areas. First, technology that supported assignees and their families. Second, the assignment life cycle, with technology that supported the assignee process, as well as broader issues, such as GM procurement. Third, technology that strengthened the strategic positioning and operational effectiveness of GM professionals within the broader business.



1. Support for assignees and families



2. Assignment lifecycle support



3. Strategic positioning & operational effectiveness

II



When talking about technology in GM, it's essential to be specific and precise.

Technology supporting the individual

There was a strong understanding, endorsed by all experts, that technology in this area should be: easy to access; self-serving; and controllable by assignees and their families. Thus, many experts believe such GM apps should present relevant and important destination data. Examples included country fact files and city information; housing; schooling; and useful health information that is tailored to the assignee's specific circumstances. A minority of experts also suggested push information regarding emerging threats (climate and health, but in particular terrorism and crime) or the use of geolocation technology to increase assignee security and/or targeted crisis reactions. Most of our respondents also expressed the importance of technology related to compliance. This mainly involved technology supporting individuals in terms of personal tax help. Overall, our experts developed a picture of future technology that would support the GM role of the People Effectiveness Expert in the [SAFE model](#).

We also encouraged our experts to be daring in their vision of the future. One expert developed a vision in which GM technology would use Google- or Facebook-like data mining to understand the preferences and needs of the assignees. This would employ predictive technology to deliver relevant information, or to suggest actions to increase assignee security and satisfaction. A key issue here is the differentiation between internal vs. external use of technology. While these technological skills already exist to help companies understand their customers, it seems that organizations lack implementation of this technology to support HR in general and GM in particular.

It is worth noting that other experts thought a truly useful data-driven approach would need millions of data points that would not be available. They worried that the large contextual and individual variations would make such an undertaking too difficult to realize, or too likely to produce inclusive or incorrect predictions. However, we must differentiate between the perspective of single organizations and the perspective of tech companies who offer services to a larger number of companies and, therefore, specialize in the "techy part." Such companies have access to much larger data sets than single organizations ever would. In any event, it clearly does not matter how fancy a technology is, what matters is how easy it is to use and how helpful it is for the individual assignee and their family.

III

Technology supporting the process

Most experts concentrated on how technology can support the business process. In this regard, several striking conclusions emerged from our interviews. First, much of the envisaged technological uses are already available, or companies are already in the advanced stage of development. This technology is often designed to capture the assignment life cycle to support companies. Examples include, supporting the business case for the assignment; the identification and selection of assignees; the operational implications of sending people abroad (household shipping, accommodation, schools, health, etc.); the compliance aspects (work visa, social security, corporate and individual tax); the reward and performance management implications; security issues; and repatriation considerations.

Here, calls were made to simplify existing programmes into a single solution, rather than being distributed across multiple platforms. That way, it's possible to gather current and historical data and seamlessly integrate it with other HR information systems². Some experts wish to move away from emails and excel sheets and integrate everything into a single platform akin to Slack. They also hoped that technology would be more predictive and supportive in the sense of automatically populating documents that are compiled for external institutions (visa and tax authorities etc.). Ideally, the technology would allow push warnings when assignees might be in danger of breaking compliance rules. Of course, all technology must be compliant with relevant regulations, including GDPR specifications, which can sometimes limit its use. Overall, this would allow the GM specialists to fulfill

the roles of [Smart Talent Manager](#) and [Flawless GM Programme Designer](#).

What is also important to note is that technology should be enabling greater flexibility in terms of benefit choice and consumption. In the same vein, technology can create flexibility for the business in general, which also impacts Global Mobility and the related processes.

The Delphi experts often expressed that most of these services are available, albeit in a non-integrated and piecemeal fashion. The question is, what needs to happen so that organizations can take full advantage of them? One condition would be that GM departments are allocated the necessary financial resources to invest in GM technology. Some respondents gave fascinating insight into their organizations, who were willing to spend far more on understanding their customers than they were to invest in optimizing internal processes or HR systems. Another practical issue is the intellectual property rights and long-term business effects of service vendors bundling GM technology from different owners. There are multiple opportunities and threats that originate from this approach. One key opportunity is that the first mover – provided the company has a compelling and broad GM technology offering – gains disproportionate profits and market share. Its these competitive threats that must be assessed and managed. Ideally coupled with an appealing and fair vision for all collaborators. At present, it does not seem that one organization has all the answers.



IV

Technology supporting the GM voice

Lastly, some experts sought technology that would allow GM departments to strengthen their strategic position, inter-departmental operational effectiveness, and senior management esteem. Respondents hoped that strategy documents and policy reviews would be easily based on the information available. Thus, all technology had to fit the various purposes of GM programmes and their different target groups, as well as allowing easy monitoring and proactive management. In addition, GM experts considered the broader picture in the hope of a strong and seamless link to talent and performance management, as well as line managers. Thereby, technology would help them fulfill the role of Agile Strategic Advisor in the SAFE model.

For some experts, an advantage of this technology would be that GM could make a better business case. The lack of evidence-based GM is often a limiting factor in organizations when it comes to demonstrating the value of international assignments. While direct costs (e.g., selection, training, relocation, and reward packages of an assignee) are relatively easy to measure, it often seems impossible to demonstrate the direct and indirect value added by the assignee. In worse case circumstances, it is impossible to cost the many dysfunctional outcomes of a failed assignment. Although technology is not a silver bullet to this, it can help build, monitor, and assess a more sophisticated business case. Essentially, what matters in most organizations is whether the assignment programme adds value. While some organizational functions can easily “claim their share” in overall success (e.g., sales) and get respective rewards, HR naturally struggles to do so for various, well-known reasons, including GDPR specifications, which can sometimes limit its use. Overall, this would allow the GM specialists to fulfill

It is, however, the conviction of some Delphi experts, that technology is key for HR and GM to directly measure and indirectly assess the contributions of GM to the success of the organization.

Technology

an outlook

In our interviews, we were confronted with a broad and fascinating perspective on the topic of technology in GM. In fact, the most futuristic (and tongue in cheek) vision of technology was teleportation. Despite its attractiveness, this is a vision that will be consigned to the world of sci-fi – at least for now. While no one is seriously expecting sci-fi technology, it's clear that they are not even calling for super-advanced and complicated technology. If we push to implement existing technology in HR and GM, most of our experts would be quite happy. For that reason, we find no reason to expect a tech revolution. Rather, it should be an evolution. In this regard, we have learned from tech start-up managers and their corporate clients, that external providers may be in a strong position to drive this evolution.

For instance, from a Big Data point of view, if we look across different industries it seems likely that different organizations have similar assignment cases than occur within one organization. Also, more organizations (combined) have more international moves. Going back to the expert who raised concerns about the availability of data points, it

seems only logical that external providers can fill this gap and help organizations make better use of their own data.

Essentially, although technology is not “the answer” to all problems, it certainly is an enabler. Therefore, we are convinced that we will see much more use of technology in GM than in previous years. COVID-19 has certainly accelerated the openness for more and new technology and even though the speed of implementation could possibly be higher, our interviews show a clear direction. What is most important though is that organizations make sure each new technology is implemented with a clear strategy and business case in mind. The right sort of GM technology serves to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the GM programme and, thereby, supports the SAFE roles of GM. What's more it also serves to increase the sustainability and reduce the environmental impact of working abroad³. To go back to Lyndon B. Johnson once more, using the miracles of technology to preserve our environment allows us to have a better glimpse of the world as it was created, rather than one that we got 'through' with.

Digital maturity

self-assessment tool

To see where your organization – more specifically, the GM department in your organization – stands regarding new technologies, we encourage you to complete this brief self-assessment. It is based on Westerman et al.'s (2012)⁴ work on digital maturity and we adapted it to the GM context. For each of the eight boxes, decide for your own GM department to which statement you are closer. When you are done, sum up the numerical values in your chosen fields. Theoretically, you can achieve any value between 8 and 48. The higher your score, the higher the digital maturity of your GM department. It only makes sense if you complete this assessment honestly. And, of course, this is only the start of gauging the level of digital maturity in your organization. If you are interested in learning more about this topic and want to benchmark your individual results against anonymized data of other organizations, please get in touch with the RES Forum.

⁴Westerman, G., Tannou, M., Bonnet, D., Ferraris, P., & McAfee, A. (2012). *The Digital Advantage: How digital leaders outperform their peers in every industry*. MITSloan Management and Capgemini Consulting.

Least	1	2	3	4	5	6	Most
In managing our international assignees, we use only few digital instruments							In managing our international assignees, we use a great number of digital instruments
Our GM department underestimates the advantages of digitalization							Our GM department fully exploits the advantages of digitalization
Our GM department uses few digital applications							Our GM department uses many digital applications
Digital applications are not implemented in a sufficient way to extend the aims of our work							Digital applications are properly implemented to extend the aims of our work
Our GM department trusts proven technologies							Our GM department regularly implements new technologies
Our GM department does not need new technologies							Our GM department is always open for new technologies
Our GM processes rely on proven (mostly low tech) approaches							Our GM processes use highly efficient digital technology
Digital applications are irrelevant for our cross-border work							Digital applications are an advantage for our cross-border work



Expert Perspective

Technology, disrupting even the most analogue countries

Katrin Ruland, CEO and Founder, Noah Mobility

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, terms like “remote work”, “work from anywhere” and “digital nomad” are common in just about any industry.

This seems to be the future of mobility, as I see it. There’s not just one path forward, but many. Remote work remains a hot topic long after the first lockdowns of March 2020, and individual requests to work from anywhere have piled up on our corporate clients’ desks for well over a year now.

The mobility landscape is changing rapidly and even the traditionally analogue country of Germany has been forced to embrace digitization. In addition to large corporations, institutions like schools and state departments had to make rapid changes with regards to digitization.

The trend toward technology solutions for more efficient use of resources is clear, not only in Germany, but globally.

Amidst the industry transformations, all relocations remain centred around human beings. Personal interaction will not, and should not, be neglected or removed.

Successful relocations rely on a harmonious interaction between the assignees, the relocation company, HR departments and, ultimately, the interface. Technology can play a central role, but the employee experience must not be negatively impacted.

Today’s global mobility challenges demand that we understand traditional processes, while getting creative in paving new ways. Only by leaning on each other’s expertise and best practice, can we scan for blue skies ahead.

And when those skies fully reopen to global travel, assignments (traditional or novel) will take off again too.

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11

Expert Perspective

Technology supporting sustainable transformation

Hanish Vithal, Chief Information and Technology Officer, SilverDoor Apartments

Sustainable transformation is at the forefront of most industries, competing directly with building innovative and integrated digital solutions. More than ever in the Global Mobility (GM) industry, it has become key to combine both approaches. Alongside this, it's important to balance providing the best technology – with savings and world class experience – against considering the future of the planet through environmentally friendly practises.

The challenge is how to address this in GM. Knowing that digital transformation such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML) and cloud computing has rapidly provided competitive advantages to organisations, does the sustainability piece not hamper progress?

In our view, no. It doesn't.

Sustainability allows an organisation to create positive environmental and societal impact, even while strengthening their competitive advantage through digital transformations.

For instance, AI and ML allow organisations to lower emissions and run greener operations. At the same time, many cloud computing providers are moving to a carbon negative strategy, making technical services and apps more sustainable.

This is further supported by a worldwide sustainability agenda, outlined in the 17 United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasise the role organisations must play in addressing the SDGs.

Such agendas have shown a shift in global attitudes. Examples include customers wanting to purchase or use services and products that have a positive impact on the environment. Regulators providing concessions for businesses in favour of sustainable practises. Financial institutions figures indicating large investment in sustainable activity. And employees demanding better, more sustainable workplaces.

We encourage GM to simultaneously integrate environmental, social, and governance (ESG) as part of their digital transformation offering.

As such, we've identified some quick tips to drive sustainability transformations within GM:

1. Develop a sustainable transformation / development strategy
2. Build new resources and offerings with sustainability at their core
3. Harness sustainability through growth and opportunity
4. Untap emerging markets and lead the way

We believe sustainability transformation will provide GM with a competitive advantage for decades to come.

This transition should begin today – if it hasn't already.

After all, a clean, green and sustainable planet is good for everyone.

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12

Contact

About The RES Forum

The RES Forum is an independent, highly engaged and international community of senior in-house International Human Resources professionals with more than 1850 members in over 45 countries. We are not influenced by external parties or third-party vendors. We share information to make our working lives easier and to assist in solving difficult work challenges.

We collaborate on shared projects and initiatives, and we learn together. Our agenda, set entirely by our membership, is delivered through a spectrum of services including data analytics, Global Mobility and International HR thought leadership and advanced learning and accreditation programmes in the area of Global Mobility management.

The RES Forum cooperates with leading academics in the field of Global Mobility. The main goal is to enhance the practical perspective of the RES Forum with a more academic research approach. We aim to match the understanding of pressing issues in HR management with research expertise in order to achieve academic thought leadership in the field of global HR management.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following who supported the writing and production of this report:

- Chris Kline, **Mobility Empowered**
- David Enser, **The RES Forum**

Thank you to all the RES Forum Members who took part in the research for this report. Without you, this paper would not have been possible.

