

# Shaping the New Normal

International Collaboration when  
Assignment Flows dry up

Report written by Professor Michael Dickmann and Dr. Benjamin Bader



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### The RES Forum

T +44 20 7127 8075

E [office@theresforum.com](mailto:office@theresforum.com)

[www.theresforum.com](http://www.theresforum.com)

## This report is authored by:



**Professor Michael F. Dickmann**  
*Professor of International HRM,  
Cranfield University, School of  
Management, United Kingdom*

*Strategic Advisor  
to the RES Forum*



**Dr. Benjamin Bader**  
*Senior Lecturer (Associate  
Professor) in International Human  
Resource Management and  
Deputy Head of Leadership, Work  
and Organisation Subject Group,  
Newcastle University Business  
School, United Kingdom*

*Strategic Advisor  
to the RES Forum*

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Due to rounding, percentages in all figures and tables in this report may not total 100%.

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# In association with



**Ian Johnson**  
Senior Vice President  
Global Business Development  
T + 65 6817 8594  
E [ian.johnson@bgrs.com](mailto:ian.johnson@bgrs.com)  
[www.bgrs.com](http://www.bgrs.com)



Ian Johnson is the Senior Vice President, Client Development, for Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) and Asia Pacific (APAC) geographies for BGRS. He has senior oversight for client development, including assisting and advising multinational organizations to evaluate the operational, financial, and strategic benefits of an outsourcing relationship with BGRS.

With 20 years in global mobility, he has served as a Business Development Director in London; Director, Sales & Marketing, EMEA; Business Development Director, EMEA and APAC, and Senior Vice President, Global Business Development at BGRS. Prior to BGRS, he was General Manager, Germany of a global relocation firm, Managing Director of a global immigration consultancy in London, and Vice President of Sales and Marketing for Asia, Middle East and Africa for a global mobility company.

Ian received a bachelor of arts degree with honors in French, German, and international business.

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**Paul Bernardt**  
Managing Director  
T +31 294 415 012  
E [p.bernhardt@harmonyrelo.com](mailto:p.bernhardt@harmonyrelo.com)  
[www.harmonyrelo.com](http://www.harmonyrelo.com)



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**Mary B. Reilly**  
SVP Global  
Business Development  
T +1 303 219 7291  
E [mreilly@ineomobility.com](mailto:mreilly@ineomobility.com)  
[www.ineomobility.com](http://www.ineomobility.com)



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# Introduction

Multinational Companies (MNCs) have long made use of international assignments for various reasons, from skills transfer and people development, to collaboration, leadership and much more. However, international assignments are relatively costly and, therefore, must withstand a solid financial evaluation to justify the cost. Consequently, organizations considered alternatives - long before the outbreak of COVID-19. While virtual assignments and cross-border virtual teams have been established in several MNCs in recent years, the global pandemic has certainly accelerated this development.

In fact, the move towards the mobility of work rather than that of the worker has been mindbogglingly fast. We have jumped into a new world of work without the need for long-term planned change programmes and - due to the inevitability of the health threat - with little resistance. The implications for international work are profound.

“ People didn't know who they had where, where they were going, and didn't really know what to make of this situation. ”  
Senior GM Practitioner

Restrictions on international travel remain in place. With new immigration and quarantine policies, local lockdowns, and plenty of uncertainty ahead, it is time to rethink international collaboration. We need a more strategic view. MNCs are being challenged to consider the future of talent deployment, while exploring how to shape the New Normal. This report addresses these challenges. Following extensive interviews, we understand how MNCs can shape the New Normal from an organizational perspective, as well as exploring opinions and predictions from various Global Mobility (GM) leaders with experience of managing GM throughout the pandemic.

To provide a strategic view, we apply one of the most-established strategic planning techniques - the SWOT analysis. Systematizing, structuring, and clustering the input from our experts, we have populated our SWOT matrix for the GM industry in response to COVID-19. We observed that many of our experts are transforming their organizations into more virtually connected entities, through use of new technology. Learning from these best practises will help GM leaders to effectively pursue their companies' global goals and move from a reactive response to the COVID-19 crisis to a proactive approach, shaping the future of the New Normal. In other words, we highlight strategies that put GM leaders back in the driver's seat and kick-start their strategic planning. Our report concludes with a blank SWOT template. Based on our analysis, this template is intended for all GM professionals to consider the New Normal in their own organization.

# Foreword

by David  
Enser

Dear RES Forum members,  
friends, partners and readers,

Welcome to 2021 – and what a start to the year, at least here in Germany, where we are already back in lockdown. Travel is restricted and international working is limited to virtual collaboration, with many borders closed.

As such, there has never been a better time to reflect on virtual collaboration, and how the world of work continues despite the challenges we all face. After all, this is quickly becoming the new normal – at least in the short- to medium-term.

A fair comparison is the overnight return to distance learning. This is particularly pertinent to me, home as I am with my two boys, heavily engaged in their virtual studies using various digital aids, from learning apps to e-text books to MS Teams.

There are upsides to this. Peace and quiet vs the occasionally manic atmosphere in class. The chance to work at one's own pace. The time saved from commuting to school. Even the escape from annoying classmates!

Downsides include the lack of a social outlet and the absence of class camaraderie both of which will no doubt have an impact on social development. As a parent, we must be conscious of these things for our children, just as an employer must consider the same effect on any employees working remotely.

For both our kids and employees, there are also opportunities. The chance to develop independence, self-management and prioritisation. New possibilities for virtual collaboration. And an opportunity to develop the confidence to work directly with peers and actively flag problems to the boss (or teacher).



I see a potential risk when it comes to imparting complex technical knowledge. Extra consideration should be given to how people learn technical skills remotely, especially if starting from scratch. That said, I place great faith in human ingenuity and our capacity to find creative solutions to such challenges.

So, I urge you all to reflect on this topic for yourselves, and to use the enclosed SWOT template to develop your own thinking on the topic. Feel free to share your thinking with us at the RES Forum, either via [office@theresforum.com](mailto:office@theresforum.com), directly with me at [david.enser@theresforum.com](mailto:david.enser@theresforum.com) or via our social channels.

In the meantime, I take my hat off to teachers around the world – you have my eternal gratitude and respect for your efforts right now. And to the rest, I wish you all a happy and healthy 2021.

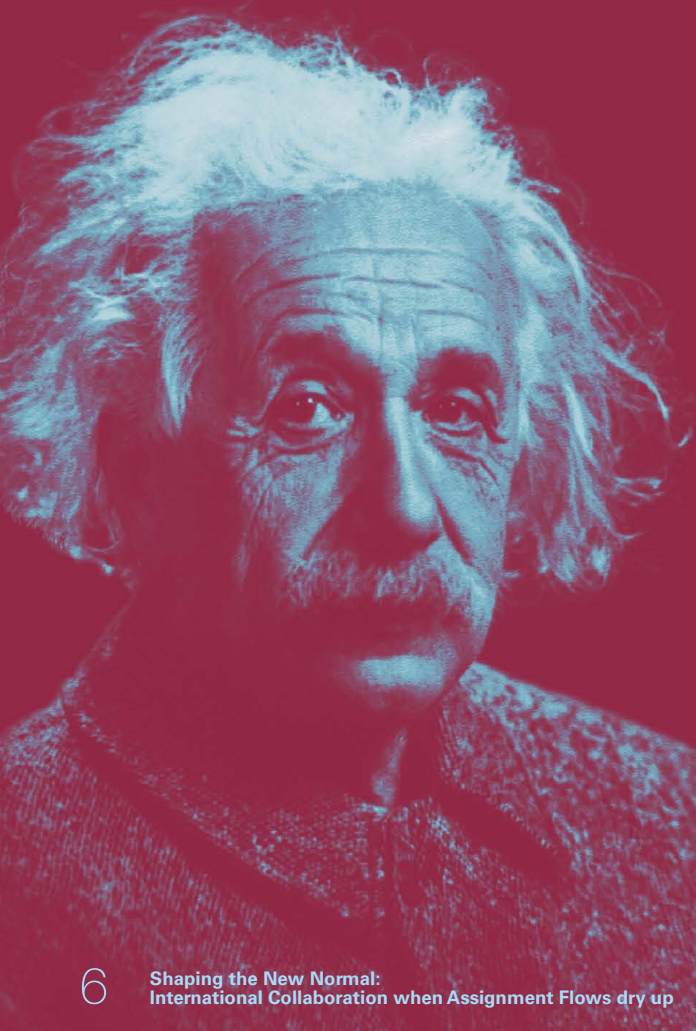
**David Enser**

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# The SWOT Analysis

“It is not that I’m so smart, it’s just that I stay with problems longer.”

Albert Einstein



Einstein was undoubtedly humble when he said this. However, the main point is that problems normally do not go away when you ignore them. In fact, the more time and energy we dedicate to a problem, the better our chances of solving it. No doubt, COVID-19 has caused a plethora of problems, many of which are relevant to GM. Following Einstein’s notion, we spoke to several Global Mobility experts, to ask about their current problems and how they are attempting to find solutions.

## In doing so, we learned three key things:

Firstly, successful solutions are often not the first that come to mind – in other words, to use a hackneyed phrase: think outside the box. Extraordinary times require extraordinary measures and COVID-19 has certainly proven to be extraordinary.

Secondly, despite the challenges, COVID-19 also presents opportunities for Global Mobility, both in the short- and the long-term. While we would not downplay the undoubted tragedies caused by the pandemic, COVID-19 has forced us to rethink, refocus and adapt to a New Normal. Much of that happened at “organizational light speed” and has led to possibilities that were unthinkable only a year ago.

Thirdly, to make use of the opportunities emerging from this crisis, we must challenge the old “territorial thinking” within our organizations. A fresh, more holistic view is needed. One that looks beyond traditional boundaries within organizations.



One that encourages more intensive collaboration between areas such as GM and talent management, between HR and line management and between local and global teams. Indeed, this might lead us beyond Global Mobility towards a global mindset for local and hybrid workers - those who can work from anywhere, at any time, with anyone.

To structure our findings, we are applying a SWOT analysis. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats and is depicted as a 2x2 matrix. Normally, it is applied on an organizational level, where Strengths and Weaknesses are more inward-focused and more immediate. Opportunities and Threats are typically more outward-focused and cover the future.

Therefore, when looking at Strengths and Weaknesses, we must question where the business has advantages and disadvantages over its competitors. In terms of Opportunities and Threats, a business must explore external elements that allow it to formulate and implement strategies to increase success, as well as external elements that could endanger its integrity and profitability.

Borrowing from this logic, we have provided a comprehensive analysis of the S, W, O, and T from the perspective of a Global Mobility industry that has dealt with COVID-19 for almost an entire year.

Strengths

Weaknesses

Opportunities

Threats

# SWOT Strengths

What is working well so far?

During data collection we asked our experts what is working well regarding the changes COVID-19 brought to the Global Mobility industry. First and foremost, we noticed that local talent gets its chance to shine. It's clear that organizations appreciate diversity and an abundance of local ideas and approaches, and that the use of digital technology has levelled the playing field. The greater use of digital meeting software and other communication tools has been rapid and largely effective, with little resistance. That said, it does come with certain costs that are outlined in the weakness part of the SWOT.

Due to the intensive global – local interaction, our experts observed that local ideas are more widely accepted by global leaders and, as such, reverse knowledge transfer is accelerating. Ultimately, a picture emerges in which local teams are leading and executing more initiatives, while gaining more attention in the head office for their responsiveness to domestic challenges. This is likely to impact talent management as well as future work

and career patterns. What's more, by identifying and nurturing more local talent, companies are better placed to mitigate changes to immigration requirements and restrictions. Sound, long-term practice in terms of talent pipeline management.

“ I think it's very much a chance for local talent and regional talent to shine [...] And I think local talent very much has a role to play. I've always advocated everywhere I've worked in my employment history that, you know, I want to build an expat cadre and next generation leadership culture through mobility, through offering international opportunities that ultimately is reflective of your end consumer base. ”

Senior GM Professional

Figure 1 SWOT of a REMOTE (Current) and HYBRID (future) Global Mobility World

<h3>Strengths</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Local ideas get implemented and diversity is more appreciated</li> <li>» Acceptance of digital working</li> <li>» Improved local talent pipeline and awareness</li> <li>» Local talent development to mitigate tightening immigration requirements for foreign talent</li> <li>» Local staff leads/executes and gains more attention</li> <li>» Enhanced (reverse) knowledge transfer</li> </ul>	<h3>Weaknesses</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Compliance and risk management needs a more granular understanding (e.g., of talent location)</li> <li>» Health and well-being of staff working 'at home' amidst a pandemic</li> <li>» Knowledge and skills gaps in some units</li> <li>» Emerging GM resourcing issues</li> </ul>
<h3>Opportunities</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» More sustainable practices through less travel and more technology use</li> <li>» Centre – local collaboration is viewed as fairer and more motivational</li> <li>» Local talent is more engaged</li> <li>» Rethinking the Future of Working and Living through moving work to people (as opposed to moving people to work)</li> </ul>	<h3>Threats</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Re-designing interfaces between GM and Talent, GM, and line managers</li> <li>» Change in power structures and working relationships</li> <li>» Effects of dispersed work and social isolation – 'we are social animals, not anonymous production robots'</li> <li>» Global leadership and cultural/ operational cohesion of the organization</li> </ul>

“ It's a blend of local talent learning the corporate culture from both local peers and colleagues with experience in other countries, for your company. It is mutually beneficial for both types of employees. ”

GM Leader

# ISW Weaknesses

## What are we struggling with?

The massive, rapid, and unexpected changes induced by the pandemic are a prime example of the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world. This is a world in which volatility and uncertainty are extremely high amidst a complex and ambiguous environment. In such cases, the environment, governments, and people dynamically adjust, experience feedback and experiment with the new.

The RES Forum experts gave examples of employee ideas and initiatives (or even demands) for new forms and locations of working. In one sense this was a good sign; in as much as global and local employees engaged with the new status quo and wanted to proactively shape it – working from a second home abroad, for example. However, it also showed that GM

departments did not have a granular understanding of where their international business travellers or global assignees were, or what sort of compliance risks they faced. It was also abundantly clear that working from home – often while balancing multiple responsibilities (and worries) for other family members – had a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of some of their global staff. In some extreme cases, organizations did not have comprehensive health insurance in place, which could further worsen a difficult situation. Lastly, halting new global assignments has created some shortcomings from a strategic and operational perspective. Some knowledge and skills gaps (the original assignment driver) have become pressing, potentially highlighting the limitations of purely digital interaction.

Figure 2 SWOT of a REMOTE (Current) and HYBRID (future) Global Mobility World



## Weaknesses: What are we struggling with?

“Resourcing and the pressure thrown at the GM team to handle all of the complex matters around travel, quarantine, risks etc., were all in addition to business as usual.”

GM Expert

### From remote to hybrid working after the pandemic

Capgemini recently surveyed over 5,000 employees, a large majority of whom did not envisage a return to the pre-pandemic normal, even when most of the population has been vaccinated. Instead, they prefer a move from remote working to a hybrid form of work in which they visit the office only two or three days each week. The joint EY and RES Forum research in 2020 demonstrated the likelihood that global work will take a similarly hybrid approach, with companies reducing global assignee numbers moderately and replacing business travel substantially.

This has further been strengthened based on comments and discussions in the RES Forum Live events\*. Given that local talent is increasingly taking charge, these developments might be even more pronounced in the future. Yet, while this might appear threatening for GM departments, it could also be an opportunity. We asked the RES Forum experts for their assessment of GM in the future and we have outlined the key opportunities and threats below.

\* For summaries and recaps of these events, please feel free to visit our Social Media channels.

“When travel ground to a halt we realised we did not have a granular understanding of exactly where our people were (...) so we literally had to telephone everyone to check their status, make sure they had somewhere to live, money in their pocket (payroll start dates disrupted in some locations due to local regulatory steps grinding to a halt), and ensure a clear line of communication for them in case of issues.”

Senior GM Manager

# ISW Opportunities

## What chances are in the New Normal?

Several of our experts identified digital nomads - those who can work from wherever, with whomever, on whatever - and wondered how strongly this trend will persist post pandemic. Our indication, both from the joint EY and RES Forum research, as well as other surveys, is that moving work to people (and, therefore, allowing staff some choice of where they work) will endure. It will sit with HR and GM departments to find compliant, motivating, and team-building ways to shape this, to the benefit of the organization and its people. It will certainly contribute to lower costs, less (organizational) travel, and more sustainable resource use, with a positive environmental impact.

We are witnessing fundamental changes to the world of work. Using more digital technology and a higher focus on local talent has a substantial impact on head office/local office collaboration. Local talent is likely to feel more challenged, responsible, and motivated. This globally fairer approach to work incorporates many opportunities for individuals to prove themselves and progress their careers, as well as helping the organization benefit from a more engaged workforce. Overall, organizations that actively balance the mobility of work and the mobility of people are rethinking the future of working and living. There are many opportunities here – but also some threats.

Figure 3 SWOT of a REMOTE (Current) and HYBRID (future) Global Mobility World

<p><b>S</b> Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Local ideas get implemented and diversity is more appreciated</li> <li>» Acceptance of digital working</li> <li>» Improved local talent pipeline and awareness</li> <li>» Local talent development to mitigate tightening immigration requirements for foreign talent</li> <li>» Local staff leads/executes and gains more attention</li> <li>» Enhanced (reverse) knowledge transfer</li> </ul>	<p><b>W</b> Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Compliance and risk management needs a more granular understanding (e.g., of talent location)</li> <li>» Health and well-being of staff working 'at home' amidst a pandemic</li> <li>» Knowledge and skills gaps in some units</li> <li>» Emerging GM resourcing issues</li> </ul>
<p><b>O</b> Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» More sustainable practices through less travel and more technology use</li> <li>» Centre – local collaboration is viewed as fairer and more motivational</li> <li>» Local talent is more engaged</li> <li>» Rethinking the Future of Working and Living through moving work to people (as opposed to moving people to work)</li> </ul>	<p><b>T</b> Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Re-designing interfaces between GM and Talent, GM, and line managers</li> <li>» Change in power structures and working relationships</li> <li>» Effects of dispersed work and social isolation – 'we are social animals, not anonymous production robots'</li> <li>» Global leadership and cultural/ operational cohesion of the organization</li> </ul>

“ Well, I think the digital nomad has emerged, whether it stays immersed is an interesting question. ”  
Senior GM Professional

# SWOT Threats

## What is frightening about the New Normal?

Rethinking the future of working and living should start with a look at how organizations function, how they design services and products, how they manage sustainability, and what gives them a competitive advantage. If working lives are to be different and local staff become more prominent, then organizations must redesign interfaces and collaboration patterns. Thus, they must reinvent the relationship between head office and foreign operating units, as well as revisiting the role of GM and how it works with talent and with line managers. Such (potentially radical) considerations will have implications for the power distribution in organizations and social networks, as well as affecting existing working habits, patterns, and relationships. Clearly, such significant change will give the perception of loss

(of power, control, and responsibility), and be met with some resistance. As a result, there are substantial risks that demand careful planning and effective change management.

Another threat is that working from home may lead to social isolation and other negative well-being effects. The 'social animal' description of one RES Forum expert is apt. In the post-COVID-19 hybrid working world, organizations must create opportunities and spaces for social interaction and team building, as well as engendering a sense of company identity. The last core threat is fundamental. Organizations that redistribute power to local subsidiaries – who, at the same time do not create a strong, unifying, and orientation-giving culture due to fewer opportunities to share culture in personal meetings and close interaction - run the risk that their foreign units drift away from the centre and become 'rogue' in how they work. Global leaders must consciously build and sustain a common culture in the post-COVID world. Proactive GM leadership can sensitize their colleagues to these threats and muster technology (and other implementation mechanisms) to effectively counter them, as well as using the opportunities to future-proof global work in their organization.

“ People will need to interact with people. Working in 'isolation' may be good for part of the workforce, but for many it will not work long-term. (...) We are social animals, not anonymous production robots. ”

Senior GM Expert

Figure 4 SWOT of a REMOTE (Current) and HYBRID (future) Global Mobility World

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Local ideas get implemented and diversity is more appreciated</li> <li>» Acceptance of digital working</li> <li>» Improved local talent pipeline and awareness</li> <li>» Local talent development to mitigate tightening immigration requirements for foreign talent</li> <li>» Local staff leads/executes and gains more attention</li> <li>» Enhanced (reverse) knowledge transfer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Compliance and risk management needs a more granular understanding (e.g., of talent location)</li> <li>» Health and well-being of staff working 'at home' amidst a pandemic</li> <li>» Knowledge and skills gaps in some units</li> <li>» Emerging GM resourcing issues</li> </ul>
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“ Due to the unstable situation of COVID-19 and for the sake of our employees, we decided to wait until a turning point to continue with further assignment. We did not take alternative forms of assignments, and instead, we used tele-conference as a main method to proceed with our current business and projects, if cross-border functions and teams are required. ”

GM Leader

# VIARoadmap

## for Shaping the New Normal

If it is to emerge stronger from the crisis, our SWOT analysis shows that the GM industry must focus on the transition from being reactive to being active - exploiting strengths and seizing opportunities, while not being restrained by weaknesses and threats. Based on these considerations, we have developed a SWOT matrix and raised some key questions. We invite readers

to answer these questions from the perspective of their own company, to get an overview of where their GM sits in New Normal. In other words, making use of the combined knowledge of an industry, the next step for GM professionals is to determine where their organizations stand, then to identify their own, personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Figure 5 Key Questions to conduct a SWOT Analysis of Global Mobility in Organizations

<p><b>S</b> Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» What underpins the current operational success of global work in my organization?</li> <li>» What pays off in terms of supporting staff (health, technology) who undertake global work?</li> <li>» How can we further strengthen the appreciation of local ideas?</li> <li>» How do we encourage international knowledge transfer?</li> </ul>	<p><b>W</b> Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» What are the compliance areas that we are struggling with to adjust to the New Normal?</li> <li>» What are the health and well-being issues and problems in our organization?</li> <li>» What support (now and in the future) do we not provide other companies do?</li> <li>» What are our current skill and knowledge gaps?</li> </ul>
<p><b>O</b> Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» How can we design new ways to encourage fairer, more motivational HQ – local collaboration?</li> <li>» How can we shape the future of global working in our organization?</li> <li>» What opportunities are there for GM – talent and GM – line management collaboration?</li> <li>» How can we adjust our global reward (and other HR) approaches to make the most of remote/hybrid global work and digital nomads?</li> </ul>	<p><b>T</b> Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» How can we sustain and develop our strategic GM position when assignment flows reduce?</li> <li>» How can we ensure that there are sufficient high-quality global leaders with the required global business and cultural understanding in the future?</li> <li>» How can we counteract the effects of centrifugal forces (where local units become more 'rogue') associated with fewer international assignments and more local power?</li> <li>» Are we prepared for another, unexpected global crisis to come?</li> </ul>

**Note:** While the COVID-19 pandemic affects everyone, companies experience varying, often idiosyncratic pressures. In addition, there are overlaps between, for instance, current strengths and future opportunities, or current weaknesses and future threats. Therefore, these questions are intended

as a rough guide rather than a blueprint. They are based on a combination of the SAFE model; the current effects of COVID-19; analysis of how the New Normal for GM might look; and various comments from the RES Forum experts.

# WVII Your Roadmap

## for Shaping the New Normal

Figure 5 asks the questions you might contemplate as you consider the state of GM in your organization. In Figure 6 we provide a blank matrix to be used as a starting point as you answer the questions asked in Figure 5. Einstein not only spent a lot of time on his problems, as a physicist, he was also a man of

numbers and structure. He has theoretically shown the relativity of time. We are convinced that spending time on problems with a solid, structured approach is beneficial to the quality and implementation of new and effective GM solutions. It is, therefore, a hugely beneficial use of your time.

Figure 6 SWOT Analysis of Global Mobility in \_\_\_\_\_

<p><b>S</b> Strengths</p> <p>» _____ _____</p> <p>» _____ _____</p> <p>» _____ _____</p> <p>» _____ _____</p> <p>» _____ _____</p>	<p><b>W</b> Weaknesses</p> <p>» _____ _____</p> <p>» _____ _____</p> <p>» _____ _____</p> <p>» _____ _____</p> <p>» _____ _____</p>
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# The Expert

perspective

Wow, last year I celebrated my 20th year working in Mobility. Interestingly, during a year where traveling wasn't possible and remote working became the new norm.

I wasn't much concerned about it at first. During my entire career I've worked in and managed virtual teams. I still do, and we have the tools to make it effective. However, there is a difference between just getting the job done (remotely) and enjoying the job you do. I must admit that I very much enjoy the personal interaction with my clients and partners. The celebration in the team when we deliver a project or brainstorm an innovation. When we don't recognize how the time flies by and order pizza, beer and wine. I miss it and I don't want to work exclusively remotely. The mix is what works best for me.

At the same time, I recognized that other teams, which historically had more of a "presence culture" saw how great remote work can be. There's no doubt I believe that the trend of remote work will stay- even accelerate - and when we meet at the office, we will enjoy the interaction with our colleagues all the more.

Consequently, as Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) consider formalizing remote work policies, processes and tools, I would like to share my personal SWOT analysis (with a focus on Germany).

## S - Strength

I found it amazing how fast MNCs increased server bandwidth, delivered the required infrastructure in terms of laptops, headsets, monitors, and accelerated the roll-out of tools such as MS Team. In record time, concepts for using the canteen were rolled out and groups were built to allow some employees to come to the office while others stayed at home. We scanned our office places using a barcode to notify the cleaning staff which parts to disinfect. And we kept the economy going on quite well.

## W - Weakness

I think we concentrated on how a job could be performed remotely. I personally would like to see more focus now on other topics as well. For example:

- » What frameworks need to be in place to help develop careers remotely?
- » How do we drive innovation beyond the performance of core responsibilities?
- » How do we take advantage of remote work and grow our business faster?

In general, we need more focus in Germany on how to grow our economy, become more innovative and be more disruptive. It concerns me that remote work is often discussed in the context of increasing work life balance. If we find that a job is nothing more than a list of activities to be executed one after the other, we should consider automating the job. Otherwise, we should think about bringing in the right talent at the right cost. Why pay someone a Munich salary if the job can be done literally from anywhere?

## O - Opportunities

There are also many opportunities. For example, we can aim to change our German management culture - often built on chain of command, with information and instructions managed from the top down. Leadership know each other - same generation, same universities, all living in the same area and predominantly male. I believe a successful remote work culture also requires a different management culture, much like in the US where getting things done, as well as personal freedom is very much enjoyed in the execution. But of course, everyone is held accountable and their performance is important, whether they work remotely or in the office.

Together we can eliminate the boring jobs and create new jobs focusing on innovation, human touch and achieving accelerated growth. We can reduce carbon footprint by eliminating travel and commuting, and we can reduce the amount of office space needed. We can define how we want to work together. This means supporting remote work and defining how and when we want to meet on premise.

## T - Threats

One big threat I see in Germany is the deterioration of education. When we anticipate more freedom for our employees, more accountability, fewer task driven jobs, more focus on high value solutions, and more innovation, we require the right skills, attitudes and behaviours.

Education should prioritise expertise, skills, attitudes, behaviours, and values that can be learned in one context and transferred to others. I am concerned that we have exponentially grown the number of courses and degrees which very much focus on the transfer of information instead of deep learning. My fear is that we educate for the old jobs instead of the new future of work opportunities.

**Thomas Efkemann**

Partner KPMG

Global Mobility Transformation, Technology and Outsourcing