

Report  
Research  
**RES FORUM**  
2020/2021

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# International Employee Engagement

throughout and beyond COVID-19

Report written by Professor Michael Dickmann



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## Report The RES Forum Research 2020/2021 3

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The RES Forum is an independent, highly engaged and international community of senior in-house International Human Resources professionals with more than 1600 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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#### Note from the author:

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

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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 Global Connection

Global Connection is an independent, international expat partner support organisation. We support the partners of employees on international assignments worldwide. Our expert consultants, coaches and trainers work with each expat partner to contribute to their wellbeing on assignment, increasing the likelihood of a successful posting. With over 25 years' experience, Global Connection is still the only supplier with a global scope to focus 100% on expat partners. We cooperate with leading multinationals who regard partner support as an investment. They understand that the services we provide contribute to the success of the posting and encourage mobility among the workforce.



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## About PerchPeek

Perchpeek was created in 2018 when Paul and his two co-founders, Oliver Markham and Dr Aasis (Ace) Vinayak, realised how painful relocating can be. Their combined experience in business development, machine learning and real estate led them to create a UK property marketplace, dubbed 'Tinder for renting'. In late 2019, they pivoted the business in response to the specific pain points many people experience when relocating. PerchPeek now provides an end-to-end relocation service for a new generation of relocators - those who can work from anywhere - as well as helping some of the world's top companies attract and retain top talent.

# Introduction

In crises, employee engagement is more crucial than ever. Across the media, multitudinous reports tell of rising job insecurity in many industries, as well as the many work challenges and mental threats brought about by the pandemic. Travel is highly restricted, and employees are acutely conscious of health dangers.

It seems that global mobility (GM) departments are between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, virtual technology enables many employees to conduct global work from home, whilst cost pressures push organisations to consider reducing global assignments and business travel, even after the vaccine makes health risks more manageable. On the other hand, previous RES Forum [research](#) shows that firms do not expect dramatic changes in short and long-term assignments. Although, they might have to increase the rewards of working abroad.

How can GM professionals successfully overcome these tensions and create stronger global employee engagement throughout and beyond COVID-19?

This report explores the various aspects that shape global employee engagement. Combining responses to a recent RES Forum survey with expert statements and the SAFE model<sup>1</sup>, individual and organisational factors that shape engagement are presented. The SAFE GM model captures the dimensions of Smart talent management, Agile GM strategy advice, Flawless GM programme design and Efficient global employee effectiveness management.

The report delineates transactional and transformational ways to understand GM engagement and enables GM practitioners to assess and refine their engagement approaches. Overall, in the current volatile and uncertain pandemic situation in which the very essence of GM work is being challenged and redefined, this report intends to shed light on the engagement options that exist, enabling GM professionals to move towards a more strategic GM engagement approach.

Engagement is seen as the employee's positive attitudes towards their work and their employer, leading to high energy levels in the job and in employee wellbeing. Highly engaged assignees will show vigour, dedication and absorption, characterised by a willingness to invest oneself in work with enthusiasm, pride and immersion into one's job challenges.

Engaged employees are vital for organisations. Engagement is associated with intention to stay, higher performance, improved unit results and higher business returns (Bakker, 2015; Dickmann & Baruch, 2011). Engagement is what an individual assignee experiences and, because it is related to cultural adjustment, it changes in intensity over the course of a global assignment. Because it is also influenced by the host unit context and the approach to GM, there is an opportunity for GM departments to shape their policies and practices to better facilitate engagement. This is especially important as COVID-19 might have affected assignment candidates' willingness to go abroad and may have endangered the achievement of organisations' strategic GM objectives. This report captures the key individual and organisational GM engagement drivers using the SAFE GM dimensions.

“ The volume of assignments - while high in numbers - represents only 1% of an enormous employee population. So global systems updates and innovations tend to require significant work-arounds to enable Mobility to effectively use them (even when Mobility is “at the table” from the start). ”

Senior GM Leader

# Foreword by Paul Bennett

Has there ever been a more nerve-wracking time to embark upon a relocation? Whilst the allure of pastures new pulls stronger than ever for many (who can blame them after almost a year of lockdown?!), relocations over the past 12 months have undoubtedly been some of the most fraught in recent history. Even with positive vaccination news, for employees considering the big move, there are a plethora of new concerns to face at every stage of their relocation. This report evaluates some of the challenges faced for engaging employees in this new normal.

At PerchPeek, we see issues and barriers to employee engagement in each of the three phases of the relocation, pre-move, during the relocation itself and then during the acclimatization phase. At every point, technology is proving itself ever more important in engaging employees, particularly as the majority of the workforce remains working remotely.

Pre-move, there are just quite simply more curveballs than your average relocation used to face. Firstly, many employees are questioning the need to relocate if they aren't required to go to the office in their host location. Once persuaded, it doesn't get any easier, with delays to visas, travel bans and changes in testing requirements requiring near constant communication and expert knowledge.

“ Even with positive vaccination news, for employees considering the big move, there are a plethora of new concerns to face at every stage of their relocation. ”

On the flip side of this, research shows there has been a 135% increase in employee driven relocations. Many employees don't understand the tax / compliance issues faced with relocating themselves and, as such, will simply move “on the quiet” if they don't deem their company to be flexible enough for them. This has led to an alarming rise in Stealth Expats and using technology to figure out where employees are based is proving increasingly crucial. Regardless, engaging and educating employees of the tax / compliance issues involved in relocation has proven critical to keeping employees satisfied.

During the move, last minute changes are rife and can easily negatively impact the employee experience. From cancelled flights to last minute quarantine requirements, employee moves are requiring ever more adaptable support. This has stretched HR / GM teams as the need for 24/7 expert support has become a near necessity during the pandemic and employees expect answers it's hard for teams to provide.

Finally, post move, there are few of the regular engagement touchpoints that help to get an employee settled into their new life. There's no office to meet people, in person social events or real ability to get “stuck in” to their new life. Whilst, historically, you might have been able to rely on a strong local office culture to engage mobile employees, GM teams are now having to over-communicate (or engage vendors to do so) to help them acclimatise. Perhaps, even more relevantly, newly mobile employees might not be clued into local news outlooks and so there's a duty of care to keep them up to speed with local laws / quarantines. Working in a remote-first world necessitates over-communication and this is even truer for mobile employees.

# GM Engagement and the organisational perspective

The pandemic has challenged how GM strategic objectives can be achieved and tested the policies and processes of GM package design, business continuity planning and flawless compliance.

“ A key barrier is our lack of international mobility strategy. Senior managers having different agendas and needing to make cost savings. ”

GM Expert

It is in times of crisis when strategic planning and operational excellence is truly tested. The RES Forum survey sought to understand the strategic impact of COVID-19 on organisational GM success. Our survey showed that the underlying strategic goals for global mobility have hardly changed. Where organisations pursued strategies of worldwide integration or local responsiveness, where they aimed for international innovation and knowledge transfer, or where corporations focused on developing future global leaders, they generally envisaged small or no changes. This is likely due either to these aims being rooted in how the firm gained competitive advantage or in the difficulty and slowness of turning around ‘super tankers’. But our research illuminates some interesting changes in relation to GM work. Our data shows that compliance with duty of care and with business continuity planning, cost considerations and coordination with Talent Management, as well as the pursuit of strategic GM objectives will increase in importance for the success of the organisation after the pandemic.

## Importance for success of organisation pre / post COVID-19

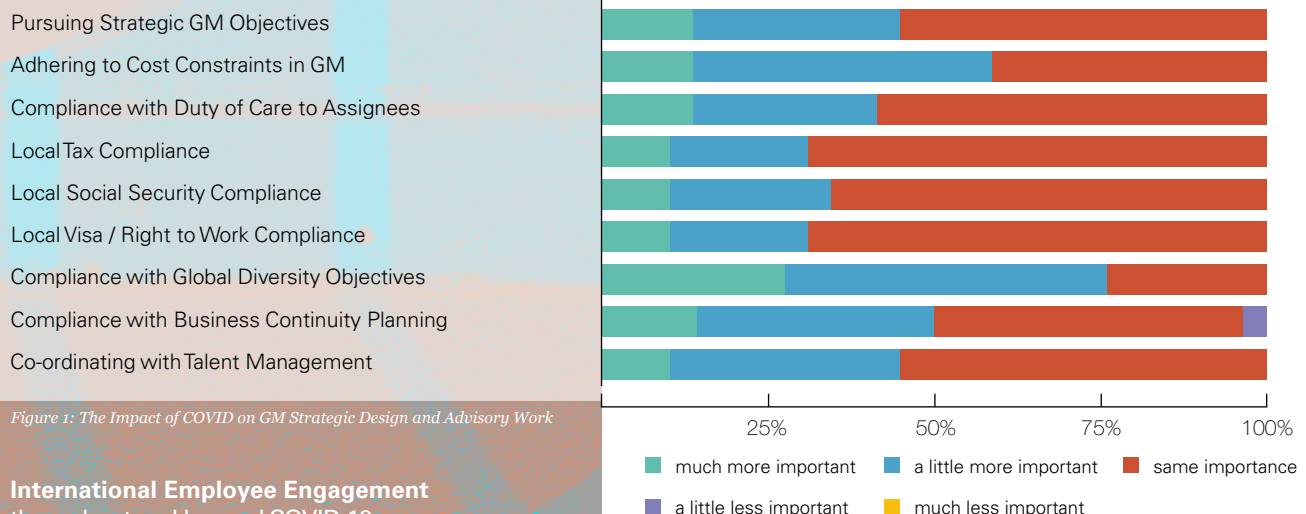


Figure 1: The Impact of COVID on GM Strategic Design and Advisory Work



# The organisational perspective

Figure 1 also demonstrates how key advisory and GM design work will become more important due to the pandemic, in line with the increased challenges faced by GM professionals. One of the key opportunities for GM experts is to envision the future of global work and to shape a compelling business case that serves the interests of individuals and the organisation.

Added to this is the increased importance of compliance with global diversity objectives. It could be suspected that this change comes from a shift towards local talent development and an increase in promotion of local employees into leadership positions. This is something we anticipate exploring in more detail in a future research paper.

“Constant pressure to take risks to the very edge.”

Senior GM Professional

The flawless GM programme design role includes error-free compliance and the design of attractive reward packages. The pandemic has demonstrated the extensive barriers that governments can erect in terms of cross-border travel. It has also led to increased awareness of assignee health (and other dangers) when living abroad. And it has brought about the realisation that many of the implicit attractions of living abroad – the excitement of being embedded in another country, travel, adventure, cultural learning, etc. – can quickly be curtailed. As a result, it might be feared that future assignees will demand substantially increased assignment premiums.

Our survey data shows a subtle shift to higher salary increase expectations in a few companies. Compared to the pre-COVID-19 situation, few companies envisaged higher salary demands and even fewer worried about an uplift in rest & recuperation expectations. While these programme design considerations depend on the individual context of the company, as well as the assignment and the GM candidates’ expectations, risk management seems to be a more pressing challenge. When asked what would keep GM leadership awake at night, several experts mentioned risk assessment and management.

### Expectations of Expatriate Premiums

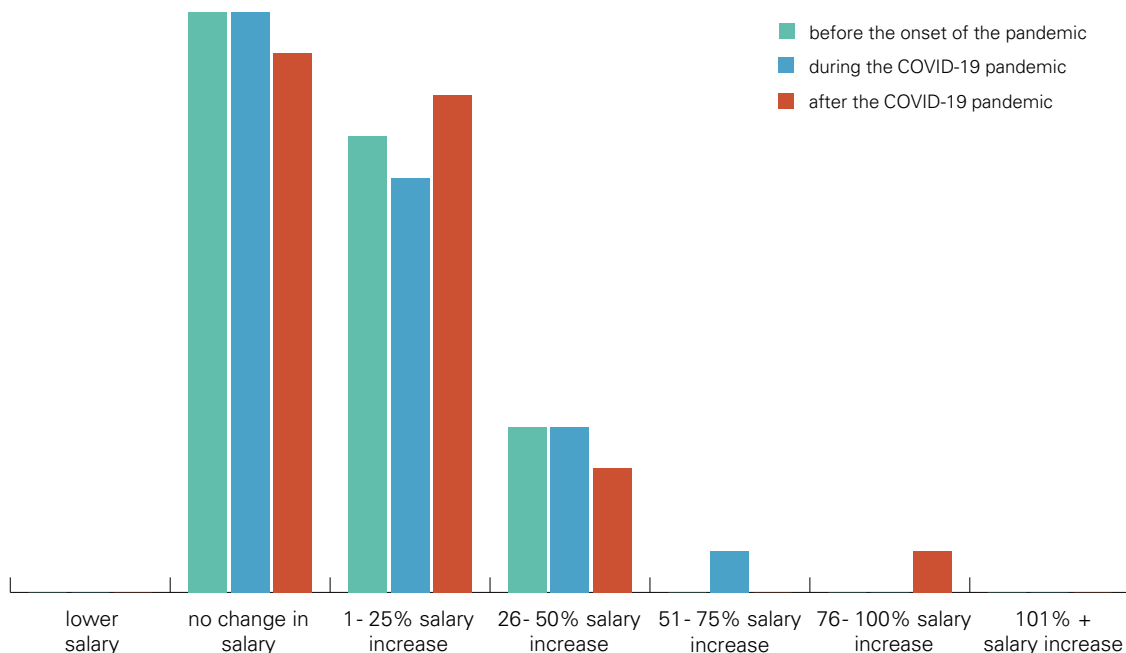


Figure 2: Expectations of assignment premiums: Assignees will not ‘ask for the world’

# The organisational perspective

The survey analysis, GM literature and the SAFE model allowed us to draw up a framework of GM engagement from the organisational perspective. It uses the roles of agile strategic advisor and flawless GM programme designer and is structured to reflect the assignment cycle of Pre-Departure, During Assignment and Post Return.

Figure 3 outlines several areas and activities that GM leaders must consider when creating the right vision, systems and approaches to design a GM proposition that is compelling to top management and GM candidates. To successfully address the inherent challenges, GM experts need a good understanding of current trends in the world of work,

the global business objectives of their company, and of GM package design, as well as risk and compliance management. They will also benefit from highly developed political and networking skills with which to manage their relationships with senior leaders of the organisation, the line managers of assignees and local teams abroad. Given the many stakeholder interests involved, this will not be friction-free and GM leaders will benefit from diplomacy and negotiation skills.

Therefore, the key to successful GM engagement within the organisation is the ability to navigate intra-company tensions.

## Engaging Global Assignees: The Organisational Perspective Agile Strategic Advisor & Flawless GM Programme Designer

Pre-departure	During assignment / travel	Post return / next position
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Envisioning the future of global work</li> <li>• Compelling business case</li> <li>• Attractive reward package</li> <li>• Vendor management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seamless local management liaison</li> <li>• Risk assessment and management</li> <li>• Management of host team &amp; local situation</li> <li>• Error-free compliance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refining GM strategy</li> <li>• Assessing achievement of assignment objectives</li> <li>• Using data analytics for improvement</li> <li>• Creating &amp; communicating GM EVP</li> </ul>

### Navigating the Tensions to create GM Engagement:

- Mobility of work vs working
- Proactive strategic positioning
- Interfaces to line managers, senior management and local management
- Responsiveness & Duty of Care

GM professionals in their wider roles create the vision, systems and processes to advance the organisation's global goals, manage risks and provide duty of care while coordinating approaches to support assignee engagement

Figure 3: The organizational perspective on how to create the right strategies, policies and practices to engage GM assignees



# GM Engagement and the individual perspective

Because of COVID-19, much of the GM employee value proposition has come under increased scrutiny by current and potential assignees. Health, safety and wellbeing considerations have become more important in the decision to work abroad. In this section we analyse the effects on smart global talent and GM people effectiveness management.

“ We need clearer talent development strategies and need to ensure appropriate roles upon repatriation. ”

Senior GM Professional

We start by exploring developments in assignees' willingness to accept risks after the pandemic. Figure 5 shows that the GM experts who provided data estimate a strong trend towards assignees accepting less health risk for themselves, their partners and their children. In addition, there is a minor trend for global workers to accept less security or compliance risks. Clearly, companies need to take their duty of care seriously and carefully manage the risk perceptions of their GM population.

Willingness of assignees to accept risk post COVID-19

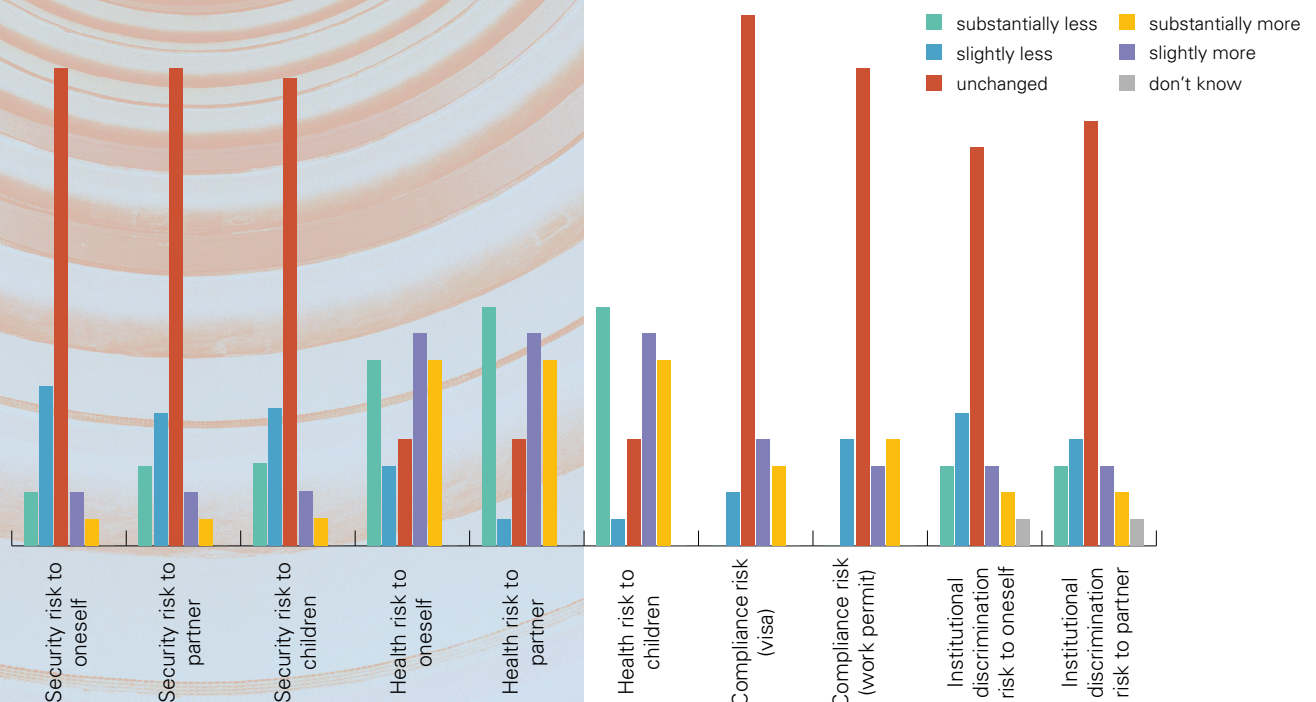


Figure 5: Assignees will be less willing to accept health risks after the pandemic

# III

## The individual perspective

In addition, GM professionals should work to understand the drivers of assignees and their families in more depth, then to strengthen the non-monetary GM value proposition. High quality global talent development and more rapid career progression will add to GM engagement. Our survey asked how important a better prospect of personal developmental and career opportunities are in engaging international employees once the pandemic is under control. Figure 6 shows that personal development and career expectations are stable overall but have become slightly more important for retention and long-term performance.

Our research, informed by GM leaders and supported by academic and professional literature, as well as the SAFE model, allows us to present several factors that are crucial to managing the individual aspects of GM engagement. Figure 7 (on the following page) illustrates key elements of the efficient global assignee effectiveness and smart global talent manager roles of GM professionals that are linked to the engagement of global workers.

“ One of the three initiatives to strengthen assignee engagement needs to aim at providing the right employee experience. ”

GM Expert

### Engaging assignees through developmental opportunities

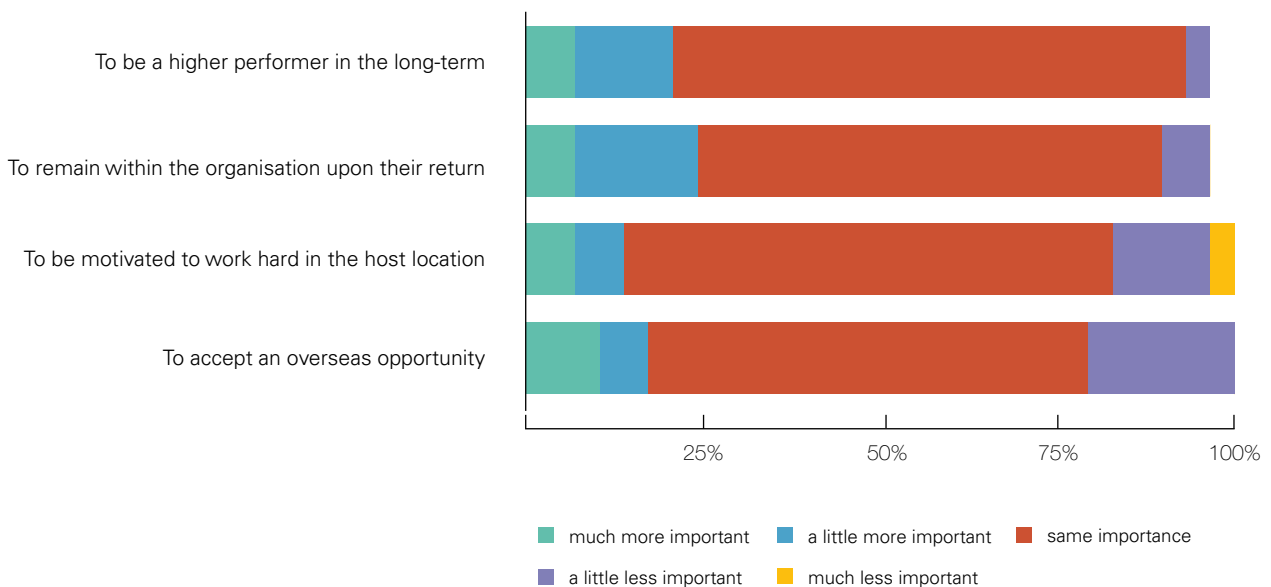


Figure 6: The Importance of developmental and career progression opportunities for selected outcomes

# The individual perspective

## Engaging Global Assignees: The Individual Perspective

Efficient Global Employee Effectiveness Expert and SMART Global Talent Manager

Pre-departure	During assignment / travel	Post return / next position
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development Planning</li> <li>• Career Planning</li> <li>• Family and personal interests integrated</li> <li>• Work with Meaning and Purpose</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health, Safety &amp; Well-being</li> <li>• Global Business Acumen</li> <li>• Job Autonomy &amp; Support</li> <li>• Valuable experience &amp; Fun</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job Security</li> <li>• Use of Learning &amp; Networks</li> <li>• Career Progression</li> <li>• Appreciation &amp; Interest in Experiences</li> </ul>
<p><b>Creating Engagement Drivers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisational, Unit &amp; Team leadership</li> <li>• Core Competency Development</li> <li>• Honesty, Transparency &amp; Trust</li> <li>• Effective GM – Talent Management Interface</li> </ul>		
<p>GM professionals as Global Effectiveness Experts and Talent Managers understand how to create the ability, motivation and opportunity for assignee engagement and core global competency development</p>		

Figure 7: The individual perspective on how to manage GM engagement drivers

Figure 7 lists key focus areas from the assignment cycle where GM engagement can be improved to better attract assignees and help manage their experience. While these include career, development and wellbeing elements, they go beyond the content of GM policies and practices.

In addition, they include behind the scenes work in terms of interfaces and liaison roles, as well as the general principles of honesty, transparency and creating trust. Creating the ability, motivation and opportunity for individuals to be engaged when working abroad will increase work effort and assignee dedication.

# Combining individual and organisational foci to augment GM engagement

This report used the SAFE model to develop a framework that incorporates individual and organisational perspectives to manage GM engagement. Obviously, there are many stakeholders in this process. And much is at stake, as outlined by one respondent:

“ The tools and processes that our Mobility team are currently developing and designing require engagement from a large ecosystem within the organization to support the employee experience. This means, mentors, business leaders, HR, in home and host, Mobility, as well as the employee have a role to play. Ensuring everyone is committed and involved will make these rewarding programs. Without that, the initiatives will dissolve. ”

Senior GM Leader

To get a more holistic assessment we asked all respondents to outline their three key initiatives to strengthen GM engagement. The answers resulted in the word cloud depicted in Figure 8.



Figure 8: Word cloud of key initiatives to strengthen GM engagement

# Combining individual and organisational foci to augment GM engagement

The respondents had a large array of key initiatives in mind which, presumably, were geared to their specific context, assignee policies and population. While some were highly strategic ('reassessing the future of (global) work'), others were focussed on operational necessities ('cost estimates'). The initiatives also encompassed the individual ('more personal contact', 'mobile talent management') and organisational ('a seat at the table at an early stage', 'policy review involving stakeholders') levels.

Clearly, the pandemic has changed the GM playing field as it made assignees more risk sensitive. It is crucial for GM professionals to understand these general developments, as well as the specific situation in their organisation. It is also important that they develop refined approaches to GM engagement. This report has depicted some of the likely developments to help guide the discussion on what management levers exist and to aid a holistic and effective approach to GM engagement.

GM engagement will look different after the pandemic. Achieving it will continue to benefit organisations and individuals alike.

# Appendix I

## questions to concentrate on when refining GM engagement

### Engaging Global Assignees: The Organisational Perspective

Pre-departure	During assignment	Post return / next position
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does this assignment support the business case?</li> <li>• How can an attractive, effective &amp; fair reward approach be created?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we achieve error-free compliance?</li> <li>• How can we manage risks and crisis reactions well?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we use data analytics to improve GM?</li> <li>• What have we learnt to refine our GM EVP?</li> </ul>
<p>What are the key tensions that need to be overcome to create GM Engagement?</p> <p>What does our vision of the 'Future of (Global) Work' look like?</p>		

### Engaging Global Assignees: The Individual Perspective

Pre-departure	During assignment	Post return / next position
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is attractive in career &amp; development planning?</li> <li>• How can family and personal interests be integrated?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can health &amp; well-being be assured?</li> <li>• How do we create valuable experiences, meaning &amp; purpose?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do we support transfer of learning?</li> <li>• How do we create good repatriation experiences?</li> </ul>
<p>How can we create an effective cooperation between GM and Talent Management?</p> <p>How can we improve long-term career planning?</p>		

# The Expert perspective

## Fill expat partners with confidence and reap the rewards

**When devising strategies to encourage effective international employee engagement in the time of Covid-19 and beyond, multinationals must seek ways to build and maintain trust with spouses and partners.**

### A joint decision

Let's agree that the typical candidate for an international assignment is a dedicated, driven individual. They see an international assignment as a great career opportunity. But if they are married/partnered, moving to another country (perhaps another continent) is a joint decision, one that has been made more complex because of Covid-19.

### Known unknowns

The partner/spouse also recognises that this is a great opportunity for their significant other. However, unlike an assigned employee, they are unsure how they will fill their days in another country. Even if they conveniently have a portable career, they still have to go through a period of adjustment, build new social networks and find fulfilment outside of their occupation. In short, many 'known unknowns' await them.

### Addressing doubts

Through our work at Global Connection we are reminded on a daily basis of the emotional challenges that expat partners/spouses must face before and after relocating to a new country, where they have no job and no social network. Some years ago, I was an expat partner, too. I had huge reservations about following my husband and delayed my departure. Even after I 'took the plunge', I had serious doubts about the assignment and contemplated throwing in the towel.

### New concerns

I share that personal story only to highlight that long before Covid-19 emerged, partners had their doubts, both before and during assignments. The pandemic has, of course, created new concerns for expat partners. Last summer, Global Connection sent out a survey to get a clearer idea of how partners in our community felt about current and future assignments in the time of Covid-19. More than 1,000 participants responded and we are more than happy to share the results with any interested parties.

### Through thick and thin

It is, of course, crucial that we know what is on the minds of the expat partners and partners of international hires in our community. That way, we can address their concerns and ease their anxieties. Yet, while circumstances have changed because of Covid-19, I wish to stress that, in essence, our approach remains the same. Pandemic or no pandemic, we provide personalised support to our clients' expat partners so they can relocate to a new country with confidence, adapt and integrate within their community, view their expat lives on positive terms and successfully complete an assignment.

### Give them confidence

Although the pandemic might very well see more focus on the importance of partners to Global Mobility, my fear is that the fortunes of partners are mostly tacked onto the general categories of health, wellbeing of family, and security. The danger here is that GM teams will overlook the importance of partners' individual status and sense of self-worth. Let's not forget they have passions and life goals, and an assignment presents them with opportunities, too.

### The bottom line

So, here's my advice: engage them, offering personalised support, not only to reassure them on matters of health and security, but also to earn their trust and give them the confidence so that they can feel fulfilled and succeed as an expat partner. Last, but not least, if the bottom line is under more focus because of Covid-19, this is also a cost-effective approach with a significant payoff for multinationals.

**Jacqueline van Haften**

**Managing Director**

**Global Connection Expat Partner Support**