

# Cross-border deployment of talent

in Times  
of Crisis

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

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#### About The Res Forum

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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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# Introduction

During 2020 the worrying developments and news stories in relation to COVID-19 seemed, at times, to be relentless. Even though the announcement of effective vaccines has provided reasons for increased optimism, the developments during the pandemic have pushed individuals, organizations and societies to embrace major change. Thankfully, human beings are supremely capable at adapting to developments, to master and shape them. Socrates once remarked that “the secret of change is to focus all of your energy not to fight the old but on building the new”.

Global mobility (GM) work has been massively affected by the COVID pandemic with many organizations having to put new international assignments on hold, stopping all non-essential international business travel and structuring their operations in such a way that work has moved to staff rather than the historical norm in which employees came to work. These developments have been extremely rapid, they are being reassessed and refined almost in the moment during these tumultuous months and they may alter their shape again once humanity has COVID-19 ‘under control’.

“The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not to fight the old but on building the new.”

Socrates

The RES Forum has set out on a series of interlinked research activities to chart the key GM developments in these times of crisis and to explore innovative, evolving and provocative insights into how the GM community can successfully navigate the key challenges. While our surveys allow us to predominantly trace the GM policy trends and identify pockets of innovation, our research will also use expert interviews to gain a more detailed understanding of the why, how, when these changes are happening and under what circumstances. This report presents you with our first survey exploring strategic and operational aspects of GM resourcing before, during and after the COVID-19 crisis. We have canvassed the RES Forum 1000 company-strong membership during autumn 2020 (methodological details and all references are on the RES Forum website) which gives us GM expert opinion from leading-edge multinational firms operating in a large variety of industries. Our respondents, predominantly Heads of GM or Heads of Global Rewards, are best positioned to provide relevant information to explore effective GM strategies, policies and the impacts on GM in these volatile and uncertain times.

# Foreword

by  
Ian Johnson

‘There’s nothing like a crisis to help define who you are’. Never have these words rung truer for the world of global mobility. The COVID-19 pandemic thrust the vast majority of organisations’ global mobility experts, as well as their supply chains, into the limelight as companies scrambled to cope with the onset of a worldwide emergency, the likes of which has never been witnessed before. The immediate task at hand was to locate and account for the global workforce, which for many global mobility teams meant a realization that the technology and processes in place were inadequate to react quickly, comprehensively and with confidence. Many were left having to rely on stitching together information from a multitude of sources, both internally and through external suppliers, to come close to having peace of mind regarding the location and wellbeing of their people.

A need for collaboration and access to the latest information became increasingly critical against a backdrop of governments closing borders to prevent the spiraling infection rate. This was not the time for creating blanket policies and company-wide edicts. It was a time for duty of care, for creating solutions to meet the individual needs and circumstances of employees and their dependents, and for reacting on a real-time basis to the ever-changing options available for cross border and in some instances, domestic, travel.

## ‘Eye of the Storm’

As the dust settled and mobility teams and their leaders got the opportunity to come up for air, there was time to reflect: What have we learned? What worked? What didn’t work? How can we improve and, critically, where are the opportunities? Many global mobility teams found, and to a large extent still find themselves in the eye of the storm, having managed through the first wave of the pandemic and now looking to implement new strategies,

technologies and processes to cater for the ‘new normal’ and baby steps towards a return to cross border movement. As part of that ‘new normal’, at least for the foreseeable future, contingencies will need to include areas never before thought of, such as the need for quarantine upon arrival in the destination and pre- and post-flight COVID-19 screening. Duty of care has never been higher on the priority list of companies, with healthcare facilities and countries’ proven ability to cope with the pandemic all influencers in employees’ decision-making as to whether to accept an assignment.

Global mobility, as a result of the crisis and its ongoing impact, has the opportunity to shift from identity crisis to playing a pivotal role in their organisation’s talent strategies. As this research shows, global mobility teams can and should now play an integral role in shaping the news ways of working – from remote working and work from anywhere, to creating flexible solutions that enable effective, safe people deployment and cross border collaboration. This leads to one final question: is 2021 the year that we see a move away from the term ‘global mobility’? This research shows that the role played today and into the future by those currently wearing the global mobility ‘badge’ is so varied and interlinked with so many other parts of the organisation, that maybe there has never been a better time to redefine who we are.

# I Strategic GM shifts during and after COVID-19

Companies pursue a large variety of strategic aims with their GM approaches (Suutari, Brewster, Dickmann & Mäkelä, 2020). Most prevalent amongst these are to control foreign subsidiaries in terms of financial objectives, risks and key strategic goals; to integrate policies and practices across the global network; to coordinate worldwide operations so that they share a common culture; to develop global leaders who gain in-depth understanding of cultural differences and different managerial styles by physically working abroad and to have transfer of technical knowledge in person from the country-of-origin to other subsidiaries (Edström & Galbraith, 1977; Harzing, 2001). More recent significant drivers for GM strategies include to strengthen business continuity e.g. finding a rapid substitution in case of a capability gap; to reverse transfer technical knowledge in person into the country-of-origin; to enhance the cultural adaptability of assigned staff and business travelers; to enhance the resilience of assigned staff and business travelers; to accelerate strategic talent pools needed for future workforce planning and to accelerate the development of specific diversity groups (Dickmann, 2021: in press).

While many assignments are geared to a combination of these goals, each assignment's business case should aim for a positive contribution to the overall organization. The pandemic has meant a massive reduction to new assignments and a rethinking of some existing ones – what is the impact on the strategic aims of global mobility comparing before, during and after COVID-19?

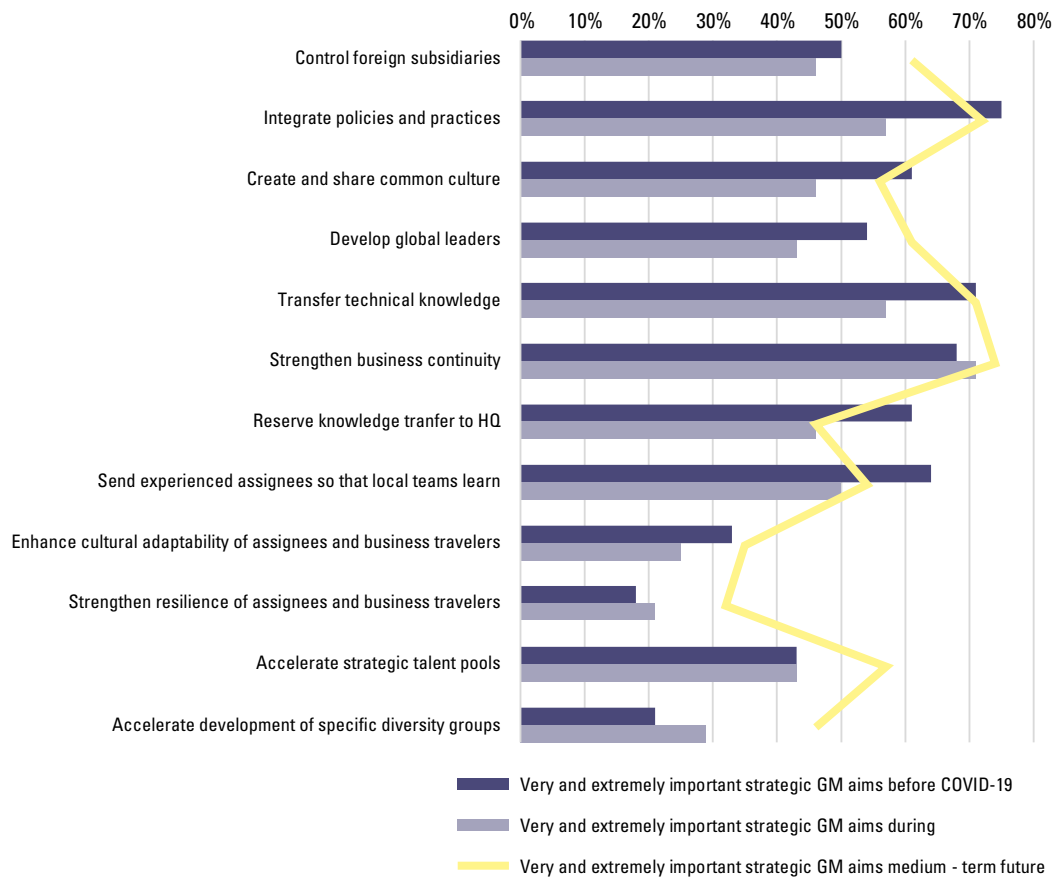


Figure 1 Importance of Strategic GM Aims Before, During and After COVID 19

During the pandemic most strategic GM goals have become less important. Only enhancing the resilience of assignees and business travelers and accelerating the development of specific diversity groups – including foreign talent – has increased in importance. In addition, it is clear that companies value strongly any efforts to strengthen business continuity. It is likely that there is a strong link between enterprise resilience during crises and continued business investment in GM. Where companies deem that the quality of crises response and business continuity was low it might have substantial effects on their willingness to invest in GM and on the standing of GM departments.

The differences in strategic aims between before and after the pandemic is pronounced. The GM experts expect less emphasis on reverse knowledge transfer into the corporate centre (-15%) and less effort to develop local teams through sending experienced business assignees abroad (-10%) in the medium-

term future (1-3 years). In turn, they believe that the control of foreign subsidiaries (+11%) will increase overall. In the current context it not surprising that organizations want to work towards strengthening assignee resilience (+14%). In addition, global talent management will increase in importance. One in seven firms plans to accelerate their work with strategic talent pools (+14%) and one in four wants to develop specific diversity groups more strongly (+25%).

A key affected area in the future is, therefore, knowledge transfer and local team development through assignments. This raises the question as to whether technological approaches of knowledge sharing can compensate these effects or even go beyond the learning advantages achieved through colleagues working physically close together in each other’s presence. The strong focus on technology investment and use in the crisis will lead to a stronger codification of knowledge but transferring tacit

knowledge embedded in experience and transferred through physical interaction and shared presence in a location is likely to remain a challenge. This implies that GM departments, other senior leaders and host teams need to work towards creating the trust and interaction that allows the sharing of tacit knowledge in virtual interactions.

A secondary effect may be that COVID reduces the willingness to accept an assignment offer. GM

departments are already envisaging that they need to concentrate on assignee resilience. There are several options to address this challenge. Companies could incorporate resilience more strongly in their assignee selection criteria. Already, they plan to increase the importance of their strategic talent pools which may lead to a better employee value proposition for talent pool members. In addition, augmenting talent diversity may tap into overlooked resources thereby widening the reach of GM programmes.

## Learning Points and Recommendations

### 1. Augment Resilience of Assignees

Incorporate appropriate criteria in GM selection (e.g. identify and utilize assessment tools that measure the adaptability of assignees), provide resilience training, implement further support measures such as mentoring, coaching and buddying systems.

### 2. Explore measures to strengthen a shared culture

The higher use of technology and fewer assignments augment the need for mutual understanding and shared basic assumptions, values and norms. Use methods such as the culture web to clarify, formulate and shape a common culture. Invest in virtual team building using the (envisaged) shared culture as a

blueprint while being conscious of diversity and inclusion issues.

### 3. Work on sharing tacit knowledge

Tacit knowledge is embodied in experience and insight and has been described as people knowing more than that they are able to tell which makes it hard to codify and integrate in technology-supported interaction. Other people may, however, infer tacit knowledge from stories and increased interaction which may include 'show and tell about your work in detail' or storytelling approaches. Design more informal interaction into virtual team processes.

Planning the future when moving work to people

What the experts say

C&B Consultant, Shanghai, China

“ How to improve flexibility but limit risk to the company ”

In general, each multinational corporation has a unique configuration of GM drivers and goals and will need to explore the needed adjustments in order to not lose sight of the key underlying strategic drivers. One of the developments they will need to factor in are

changes to who undertakes GM work, how and where, including moving work to people, reassigning jobs and responsibilities, moving work entirely online or even stopping some international activities.

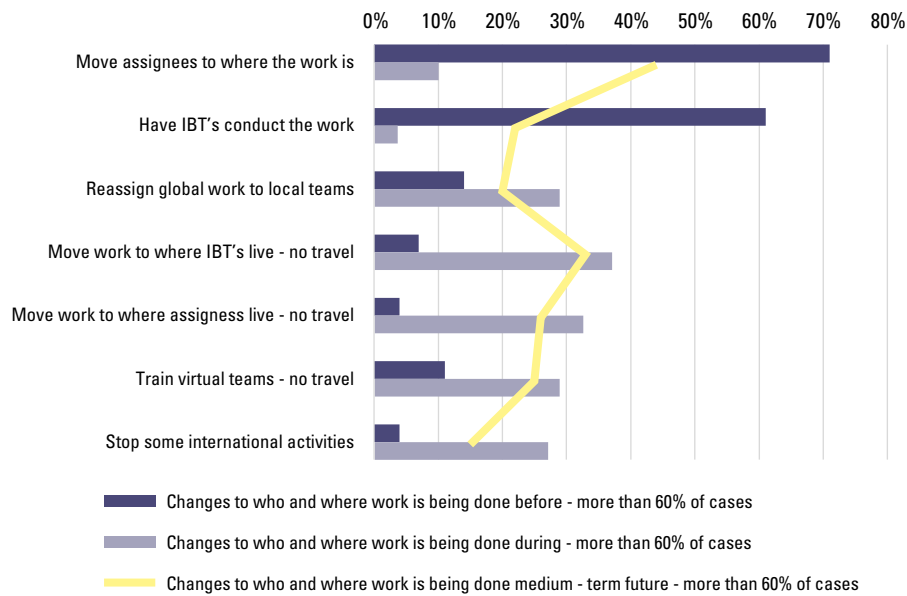


Figure 2 Changes to Who Undertakes GM Work and Where

This report looks at the scenario where companies indicated the location and execution of their GM work for the majority of their cases (60% or more). There are currently significant changes going on in terms of who undertakes GM work and where this work is happening. Clearly, organizations used to have a strong preference to deliver GM work through assignees and international business travelers (IBTs) before the onset of the pandemic. GM experts will know how COVID-19 has affected the international work in their own companies with dramatic reductions of assignment and IBT flows and a counterbalancing increase of efforts to assign global work to local teams, move work to people – i.e. where assignees or IBTs currently live – and to use virtual teams. Will this trend

of moving work to people and reducing international assignments and cross-border travel persist and might it crowd out physically working abroad? In fact, what might be the impact on GM departments?

The GM experts indicated some dramatic medium-term changes for their companies. They expected a substantial reduction of traditional short and long term assignments (by 27% compared to pre-COVID) and business travel (by 39%). In turn, MNCs will make a strong effort to continue moving work to where their talent lives with about a quarter more firms enabling their staff (who would normally be assignees or IBTs) to work from home without the need to undertake international travel. One in seven additional MNCs

will push virtual work more to replace global moves and some firms actively consider stopping some of their global activities altogether. When asked about the reasons for these developments and the envisaged more extensive use of technology in the future the survey respondents quoted compliance to duty of care

and cost issues. Only seven percent felt that one of the drivers of future use of technology was the avoidance of dual career issues or family considerations indicating that GM leaders might have moved to a 'back to the basics' mindset in these times of crisis.

## Learning Points and Recommendations

### 1. Revisit and refine global assignments

The reduction of short and long term assignments means a relocation of tasks to local units and makes local talent management (as well as its integration into global talent planning) more important. In turn, local talent management should incorporate how to develop the global capabilities of local talent.

### 2. Rethink global leadership interaction and operational delivery

The impeded international business travel means an adaptation of leadership competencies (shifting to virtual skills), changes to leadership patterns and, potentially, an emergence of more local leaders.

But global leaders will also be needed. If leaders will have less opportunity to gain global skills through experience in different locations, they may need more targeted coaching and development to build both global business skills and understanding as well as virtual leadership skills.

### 3. Understand compliance and harmonization issues from moving work to people

The locational freedom that virtual work provides staff needs to be aligned with laws and regulations and, ideally, a company-wide approach that is seen as fair and consistent should be developed.

Planning the future when moving work to people

What the experts say

GM Manager, US Midwest

“ More harmonized remote and distance-working tools across the whole Group of sites and subsidiaries ”

COVID 19 has meant that where employees choose to be located may not be so important in delivering their work but may expose organizations to legal and regulatory challenges. We asked the GM experts what cross-border employment constructs their organization had already implemented or was thinking to develop. The responses indicated that many companies have increased their cross-border compliance efforts and implemented better cross-border tracking. Some also had developed a time-limited (e.g. 4-week) work from anywhere option or granted an increased time allotment for mobile work. One expert remarked that “Teleworking’ has emerged by necessity as a

solution to challenges vs by design....however, this has the price of being administratively complex. This has the advantage of retention of talent...”. Future work arrangements were predominantly seeking to develop ‘work from anywhere’ approaches that would be compliant and harmonized across the organization. Visionary GM professionals also wanted to link these to talent strategy and total rewards considerations, especially if there is a perception in the company that assignment candidates are harder to persuade to work in environments where they see more personal dangers for themselves and their families.

### Planning the future when moving work to people

#### What the experts say

Bob Church Jr.,  
Senior Manager, Global Mobility Tronox

“ Work from Anywhere” is under consideration; further scoping is underway to determine if we want to and if we could structure such an offering to ensure compliance and talent strategy/ total rewards considerations ”

This scale of change will have a massive effect on how organizations will operate internationally, how they integrate their transnational units and how they generate, develop and share knowledge. At issue is whether companies are aware of the likely effects of these changes and whether they are prepared for these?

‘In the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity’ (Albert Einstein). COVID 19 and the GM reaction in organizations entails many challenges, changes and

opportunities to manage the strategic standing and appreciation of the GM department. We wanted to understand the changes to the GM brand and the perceived importance of GM work. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to have had a positive effect on the strategic and operational standing of GM departments in so far as it has become clearer to senior managers how important the duty of care and business continuity planning is for the ability of the organization to perform and its global staff to feel supported.

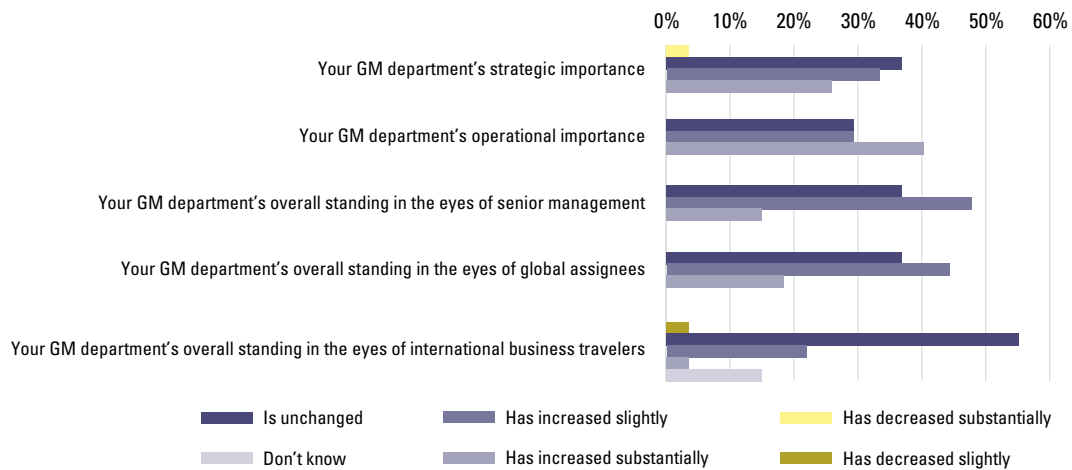


Figure 3 Development of GM Departments' Importance

While it was incredibly rare that the standing of the GM department suffered during the pandemic, three out of five GM experts believed that the strategic and operational importance of the GM department has increased and that their standing in the eyes of senior management has improved. Indeed, more than 60% also argued that their standing in the eyes of

global assignees has been augmented, while fewer (26%) thought this about the opinions of international business travelers. This raises the question of how these advances can be sustained and what ideas and activities GM professionals should develop and implement now to make global work more future proof.

## Learning points and recommendations

### 1. Sustain the increase in GM strategic importance

Now is the time to plan for the future when COVID is 'under control' which the emergence of high quality vaccines makes more likely. This needs to take a holistic approach to global business objectives and how these can be supported by global mobility as well as global and local talent management. The interface GM – talent is highly important and should be strengthened so that coordinated approaches are implemented. Overall, the strategic threat of dwindling assignee numbers should be addressed through a more fundamental and wider strategic approach.

### 2. Sustain the increase in GM operational importance

Address key operational issues such as the legality and effectiveness of working from home/working at the location of choice with quality and speed.

### 3. Sustain the increase in reputation in the eyes of assignees

Strengthen your organization's GM policies and practices, including crisis/business continuity planning, global reward (incorporating hardship), communication and resilience-incorporating selection fit for the world when COVID is 'under control'.



# II Operational & individual aspects during and after COVID-19

We know that health and security aspects have a strong impact on people's willingness to work abroad (Dickmann, Suutari & Wurtz, 2018) and understand much about their decision parameters. The RES Forum survey explored the importance of the key decision drivers before and after COVID-19.

Before the emergence of the pandemic, the key drivers for global talent were professional challenges and having the relevant job skills for working abroad (both 74% very or extremely important), followed by impact on career, skills development (both 70%) and job on offer (63%). For the post-COVID world, GM experts predict that the physical safety, especially health related factors (with 81%) and safety in terms of crimes and violence (63%) will emerge as two of the top five drivers of the willingness to live abroad.

To prepare for these changes MNCs need to rethink their duty of care and crisis response. They might have to systematically assess the location context, characterizing the degree of hostile environments and might have to consider whether to invest heavily in local talent, radically change their global reward packages for hostile environments or, in the extreme, stopping assignments altogether where the employee value proposition has become unattractive.

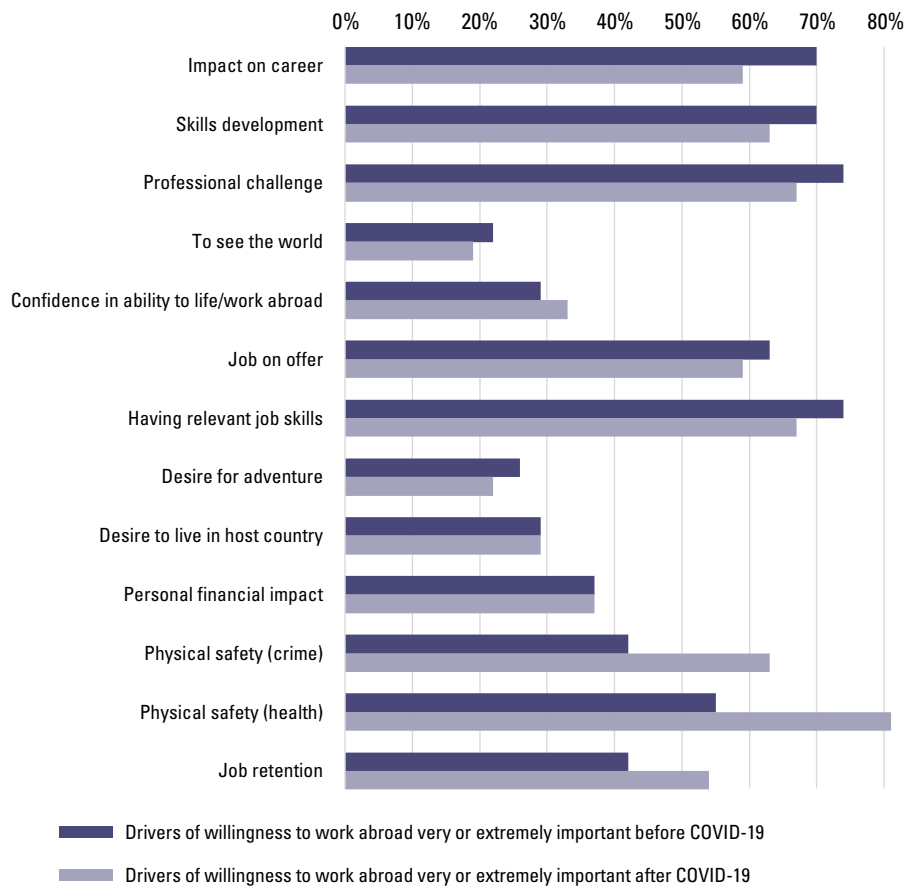


Figure 4 Changing Individual Drivers of Willingness to Work Abroad

## Learning Points and Recommendations

### 1. Understand the Location Contexts

Work towards having an up-to-date and nuanced understanding of different assignment locations. This should include an assessment of the physical, psychological and institutional dangers of countries (see Raupp, Dickmann & Parry, 2019).

### 2. Develop effective Duty of Care policies

Multinational organizations need to address the increased sensitivity of assignees to threats such as health, criminality, violence or political instability as well as local discrimination tendencies regarding gender, age, religion or sexual orientation.

### 3. Re-Imagine the GM Value Proposition

While currently assignees are especially sensitive to health dangers and other physical and psychological threats, there is an enduring trend that they are often driven by the underlying organizational 'deal' i.e. the reward, competency development, career, job and retention factors. Make this value proposition attractive to your target population.

# II Conclusions



We are witnessing massive changes in the world of global work triggered by the strongest pandemic since the Spanish Flu approximately a century ago. Given the restrictions in physical meetings and national as well as international travel, multinational corporations have shifted towards a stronger recent reliance on virtual technology, meetings and cooperation. We have evidence that current developments in GM are likely to result in a negative impact on global MNC cohesion, cultural learning and international business acumen. Companies may need to increase training and coaching initiatives in these areas to ensure their organizations have the capabilities needed to succeed in a world that remains highly interlinked across borders. Our report has charted a range of current and likely future trends and has developed a number of recommendations how GM professionals can make their organizations fit for the future when COVID-19 is 'under control'.

We already wanted to know the likely effects of greater technology use on strategic goals in the future. We found that the changes induced by the COVID pandemic and the higher reliance on virtual technology, meetings and online work do come at a cost.

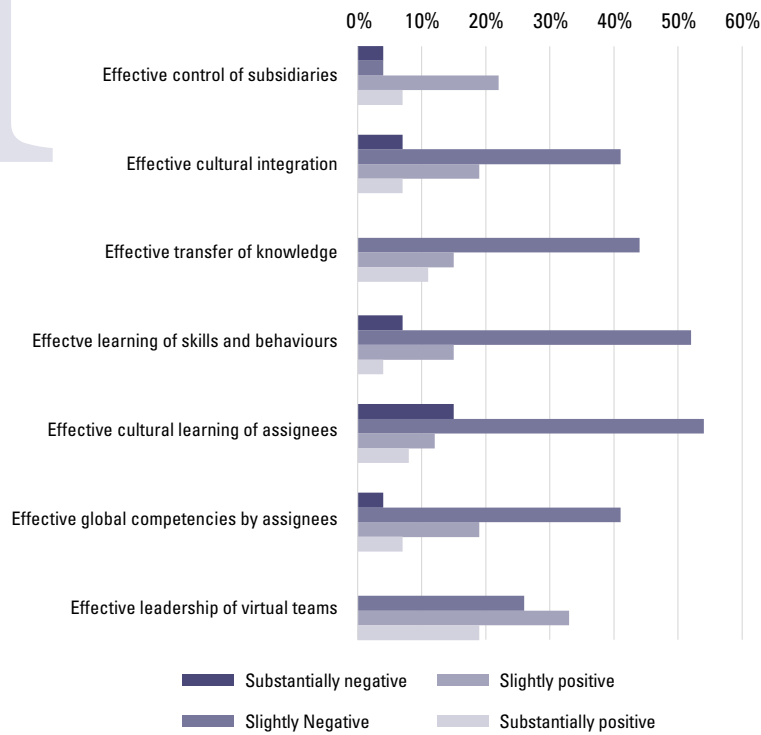


Figure 5 The Effects of Higher Reliance on Virtual Work on Strategic Goals

In the medium-term future (1-3 years) GM experts expect overwhelmingly (slightly) negative effects on cultural integration, knowledge transfer across borders, the overall acquisition of culturally sensitive skills and behaviours, broad global leadership competencies, and host country-specific cultural learning. Interestingly, GM professionals believe that foreign subsidiaries might be controlled better due to the more frequent and broader interaction with management teams from the home country. Not surprisingly, on balance a positive effect is expected for the effective leadership of virtual teams.

Overall, some of the key and fundamental objectives of global mobility in MNCs are being challenged by the reduction of global assignments and international business travel. MNCs need to become creative and design initiatives to balance these negative effects lest they expose themselves to global skills gaps and a situation where centrifugal forces within organizations may threaten the effectiveness of integration, action and shared culture that is so crucially important for the success of multinational enterprises (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 2002). But these developments also provide opportunities for GM professionals. Their work is currently seen as more relevant to business continuity and success. Given the massive expansion of virtual work GM departments could strengthen their linkages to (global and local) talent management, workforce and succession planning. Using this strategic opportunity could mean that GM professionals become more pivotal players within their companies, touching the lives and careers of more staff than before the pandemic.

# IV Expert

perspective from  
Lindsey Stiff Hare

## You have a seat at the big table, now how to keep the spotlight on Mobility!

For many of us mobility professionals, the pandemic has shown us both the good and bad in our roles. The craziness of everyone asking for data overnight, the lack of good systems to pull data (that is quite possibly on an excel spreadsheet and not in any system), together with the magic of finally being noticed, and people now understanding what we do!!

Those of us that have been in the industry for years, for me that is now over 20 years, trying to do the “tap dance” in front of leadership to be part of the strategic conversation, as opposed to an after-thought as an operations team, has been at times frustrating.

I have often asked myself why is this the case, but mobility is often seen as a scary monster of problems that leadership does not want to hear about. Immigration, tax, social security, the trailing partner and what we are to do with them and overall costs can make the attention on mobility a mind explosion for the C-suite executive, who just wants a ‘no noise’ solution to move their person from point A - B. Sometimes we came out of the woodwork when some brave C suite soul decided to take us on, the rest will leave us like Monsters Inc firmly in the scary mobility closet!

In my last company, that I had the pleasure of working at for 13 years I used the opportunity that many of the C-suite were my customers who were themselves relocating. I built trust and respect from them during their moves, and tried to use their follow up calls/ meetings with them to ask later to formally present to them concerning their employees that had mobility/

immigration needs. For me, that was the right approach, and it ultimately led to me presenting at the CEO’s leadership team on several occasions to talk about immigration challenges, planning for talent and overall cost opportunities. From there, I then asked those C-suite execs if I could attend their business line team meetings to spread the mobility knowledge and finally we got there.

It took time, patience and a lot of team groundwork with other HR areas of expertise, to understand what their challenges were so as to make sure that I linked a mobility solution to a problem, or told the story in direct relation to their goals.

Many of you will relate to the above, and maybe the Covid pandemic was your opportunity to do the “tap” dance. Now, how to you keep that attention? I would suggest telling the story to them, as opposed to being on the back foot and waiting for them to ask. Data is going to be key here, so do you have what you need to tell the story that you have been longing to tell?

Is your story that you need to be a more attractive company to work for, but your mobility programs don’t reflect this? Alternatively, perhaps your story shows that your company is stuck in a 1990’s mindset where having a global mindset may better serve your goals? Or perhaps your story is one of mobility contributing actively towards key talent retention?

Whatever your story, get ahead of the year end and ask to present now, especially if costs are being looked

at for 2021. All leadership is interested in budget, so in my experience, it is always a good way to keep them engaged or gain their attention.

Leverage your relationships with the HB business partners, they are close to the business line issues and you can support each other by partnering with them. Work with your finance teams to understand the numbers they need to adhere to. Work with your Talent teams to understand who they deem as top talent and what the gaps are to keeping them.

### Finally, when you present keep these things in mind:

1. Be confident! Enjoy your “tap” dance time!
2. Make sure you are clear with your story
3. Make sure that the benefits of what you/ your team can do are clear to who you present to
4. Keep it simple, remember mobility is scary and a mind explosion to many, keeping it high level is essential
5. Seek feedback and prepare to pivot to ensure you are hitting the mark for the next presentation
6. STAY IN THE LIMELIGHT, and keep seeking opportunities to offer your services for HR strategy

**Lindsey Stiff Hare**  
**Global Mobility & D&I Leader, North America.**

