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# *Resilience* and Global Mobility

Lessons learned and the road ahead

Written by Professor Michael Dickmann and Dr. Benjamin Bader



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An aerial photograph of a winding asphalt road through a forest. The road curves from the top center towards the bottom right. A small white car is visible on the road. The surrounding trees are in various stages of autumn, with some showing bright orange and yellow leaves, while others are still green or bare. The overall lighting is somewhat dim, suggesting an overcast day or late afternoon.

*“Change is the only  
constant in life.”*

*- Heraclitus, Greek Philosopher*

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# Technological Resilience in Global Mobility

by Damian Porter, Noah Mobility

Resilience in Global Mobility (GM) involves coping with disruption, adapting to changing circumstances and maintaining efficiency in mobility services.

COVID-19 is a striking example of a disruption that severely impacted our GM world. Borders closed, flights were grounded, and travel restrictions were enforced, leaving millions stranded and businesses paralyzed.

But people adapted and resilient practices emerged. Companies had to move employees quickly. All the while, employees moved themselves wherever they liked, without always realising the myriad of implications of doing so. Digital solutions played a significant role in helping us adapt. They allowed for virtual meetings, remote working and online training. Digital also reduced the impact of travel restrictions.

Very quickly, the pandemic changed our industry. The rapid learning curve brought GM to the 'top table'. It forced us to alter our processes and procedures. And it highlighted

the importance of well-implemented technology infrastructures that will stand up to future disruption. Organizations that had previously invested in digital infrastructure transitioned more smoothly and much earlier in the crisis.

## Better technology

As a provider to the GM industry with a relocation technology platform, we are aware of an increasingly interconnected world, where GM and technology continue to be important- and continue to evolve.

Companies demand better technology solutions, not only to manage the relocation processes, but also to support the recruitment and management of a global employee base. There are many efficient and cost-effective solutions available, all designed to make processes easier and more streamlined, while ensuring companies remain resilient, adaptable and flexible.

In response to companies seeking better solutions, technology providers have a responsibility to provide solutions that are fit-for-purpose, while helping to evolve the industry. The days of Excel spreadsheets are a distant memory, as newer solutions become business critical and more appealing to use.

## Technological resilience

From a technology perspective, resilience involves the capacity to withstand disruption, maintain critical systems, and rapidly recover from cyberattacks, natural disasters and hardware failures.

We must remain mindful of data management and cybersecurity. As businesses and individuals rely more on cloud storage and digital platforms, risks associated with data breaches and cyber threats increase. Resilient technology systems include robust security measures, backup and recovery mechanisms, and constant monitoring to detect and respond promptly to potential threats.

Resilience in GM and technology is indispensable for navigating the challenges and uncertainties of our interconnected world. The pandemic demonstrated the importance of adaptable practices and resilient technology infrastructures to overcome disruptions. In the GM world, the right technology can mitigate some of these issues.

The future of GM and technology lies in embracing innovative solutions such as smart cities, blockchain, and 5G networks to enhance efficiency, security, and sustainability. Moreover, fostering collaboration among governments, businesses and individuals will be vital to building a more resilient GM and technology ecosystem.

By prioritizing resilience and embracing technological advancements, we can create a world where GM is seamless, technology empowers growth, and societies are better equipped to overcome adversities on the path to a more connected and sustainable future.



# Introduction

In an ever-evolving world, where change is the only constant, organizations must be resilient if they are able to prepare and react to unforeseen challenges and disruptions.

From an academic perspective, organizational resilience refers to an organization's ability to withstand, adapt to, and recover from internal and external changes, crises, or unexpected situations, ensuring continuity of operations and sustained growth. It is a multi-faceted concept encompassing aspects of strategic adaptability, operational flexibility and risk management, as well as business continuity and adaptive capacity.

Resilience also helps organizations to rebound and flourish in the face of adversity.

COVID-19 not only reiterated the relevance of organizational resilience, but it also amplified its importance, especially regarding Global Mobility (GM). While every organization has been impacted in some way, multinational organizations with global operations have been at the forefront of these challenges. However, even without facing a global pandemic, multinational organizations face the added complexity of varying regional impacts, regulatory changes, and fluctuating market dynamics, underscoring the need for resilience.

This research report delves into this important topic, investigating the strategic and operational approaches of GM departments when building and maintaining resilience. To inform this report, we combine the results from several interviews, as well as a brief survey conducted during a RES Connect event. Moreover, we draw from extant academic literature, to broaden our understanding of how organizations interpret organizational resilience in GM.

Our first, and foremost finding is that, in the post-COVID world, organizations are no longer asking if they should build resilience, but how.

COVID-19, as well as other events- wars, dramatic technological step changes and environmental disasters- have drastically altered the global economic landscape and highlighted the importance of preparedness, flexibility, and agility.

More than ever, multinational organizations are required to navigate a myriad of post-pandemic issues, such as fractured supply chains, changing work structures, cybersecurity risks, geopolitical instability, and shifts in customer behavior. All of which demand robust resilience mechanisms.

Furthermore, the very nature of GM, with its interdependencies and cross-border operations, is a breeding ground for potential disruptions. These disruptions, if not appropriately managed, could cripple an organization. Therefore, fostering resilience has become a strategic imperative for multinational organizations, directly influencing their survival, competitive advantage, and long-term success.

To better understand what our respondents have in mind when talking about resilience in GM, we reached out to them with this very question. While some narrowed it to a quite succinct message, e.g., “being prepared for future disruption based on what we have learned in the past”, others provided longer and more detailed explanations. We analysed this data to see what the individual responses have in common, and where the biggest overlap is. The result is depicted in the word cloud below. Larger text means the respective term was mentioned more often.



This is very much in line with our academic literature review; therefore, we are going to structure this report along three key dimensions of organizational resilience: strategic adaptability, operational flexibility, and risk management. After having introduced those in detail, we outline their importance for GM and provide practical examples that illustrate how and why organizational resilience can help organizations achieve a competitive advantage.

The relevance and urgency of organizational resilience in GM, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19, cannot be overstated. As we traverse uncharted waters into the world of New Work, an in-depth understanding of organizational resilience, along with the strategies to bolster it, is paramount.

To benefit from this research- above and beyond the findings from other organizations- we introduce the RES Forum GM Resilience Score. This is a useful tool to help determine the level of resilience in your organization, to showcase your strengths and to identify potential weak spots.

# Strategic Adaptability

This can be understood as an organization's capacity to revisit and realign its strategies in response to changing circumstances.

Based on an organization's ability to identify key threats, seek out opportunities and then to act decisively, it encompasses an organization's decision-making speed, their agility to implement change, and their capacity for innovation. Strategic Adaptability is crucial for organizations to anticipate disruptions, revisit their strategies in real-time, and exploit emerging opportunities. It also underpins an organization's ability to sustain its competitive advantage in an unpredictable and complex environment, particularly in a global context.

In other words, Strategic Adaptability describes to what extent an organization can change its strategy when the need for this arises. Consequently, this implies a certain level of contingency planning and close monitoring of the relevant environment. As one of our respondents put it, "only when you know what is going on can you factor it into your decision-making"



A compelling example of Strategic Adaptability is Microsoft. In the last decade, Microsoft made a strategic shift from a product-centred approach towards a cloud-first, customer-centric model.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, this adaptable strategy allowed Microsoft to capitalize on the increased demand for cloud-based services and remote work solutions. In response to the ever-increasing need for remote-working tools, Microsoft expedited the deployment of Teams and, by April 2020, reported 75 million daily active users. A significant jump from 20 million in November 2019. In 2023, the number of active daily users has surpassed the 300 million mark.

Microsoft's Strategic Adaptability demonstrated an ability to pivot swiftly and take advantage of emerging opportunities during a crisis. This highlights the role of Strategic Adaptability in fostering organizational resilience, where circumstances can change rapidly across different regions. While this example may appear somewhat extreme, we believe it very much highlights how big of a game changer Strategic Adaptability can be.

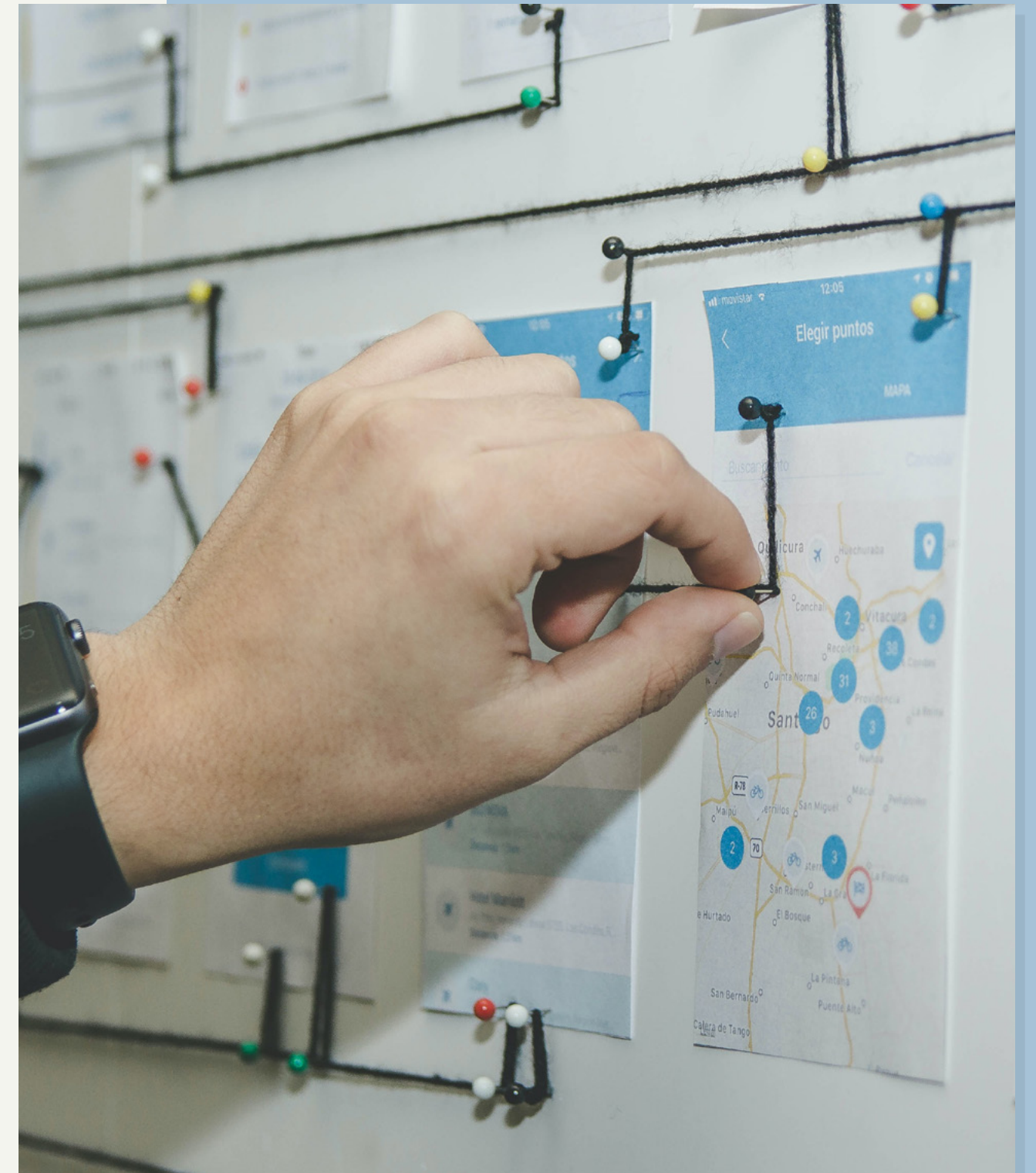
# Operational Flexibility

While Strategic Adaptability looks at the big picture and is outside-oriented, Operational Flexibility denotes an organization's ability to adapt its processes and workflows to maintain operational continuity in the face of disruptions.

In this regard it is an essential aspect of organizational resilience as it allows organizations to adjust their operations in response to unexpected situations, ensuring business continuity. In a GM context, Operational Flexibility encompasses capabilities such as flexible work arrangements, the capacity to relocate operations, adaptability of supply chain processes, and responsiveness to variations in local market conditions.

Our recent research report on international remote work illustrates how Operational Flexibility can benefit from the seismic shifts we have seen in international work post COVID.

[Reference: <https://theresforum.com/annual-report/>]



Again, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with numerous examples of how Operational Flexibility, as a dimension of resilience, can help organizations to overcome adversity.

International (air) travel is a core element of GM, and the aviation industry certainly was among the most-affected sectors. Consequently, when global travel restrictions resulted in a sharp decline in passenger flights, airlines faced a significant loss of revenue. In response, KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, among other carriers, exhibited notable Operational Flexibility by converting passenger planes into cargo planes.

Recognizing the heightened demand for cargo transportation due to disruptions in global supply chains, KLM swiftly adapted their operations to tap into this new business opportunity.

By removing seats from some aircraft and using vacant passenger cabins, KLM could carry additional cargo, such as medical supplies and other essential goods, to various parts of the world. This not only allowed the airline to maintain some degree of operational activity, but it also enabled them to contribute to global efforts in combating the pandemic.

This example demonstrates a high degree of Operational Flexibility, where KLM was able to repurpose its existing resources- in this case, aircraft- to cater to a new market requirement, showing a quick, innovative response to an unprecedented global crisis.



# Risk Management

Risk Management pertains to an organization's ability to anticipate, identify, assess, and mitigate risks.

It encapsulates a wide array of techniques designed to reduce uncertainty in achieving objectives.

Our research report on Managing Risk in the New Normal details the challenges and opportunities connected with risk management in GM and offers an organizational self-assessment tool.

[Reference: <https://theresforum.com/annual-report/>]

While this report approaches GM risk management from a holistic point of view, in the resilience context, Risk Management is not merely about handling adverse events but also about learning from these experiences to improve future resilience.

In other words, it supplements existing risk management by retrospective analysis feeding into future planning.

Risk Management takes on additional layers of complexity, as multinational organizations need to consider diverse geographical, political, and cultural contexts, each presenting unique risks. Therefore, Risk Management in this context is not only about managing existing risks but also about anticipating risks that could arise from changing local conditions, regulatory shifts, or geopolitical developments.

One classic example of Risk Management contributing to resilience is the multinational technology corporation IBM. Well before COVID-19, IBM had a robust Risk Management strategy in place, which included detailed business continuity plans and the capability to operate remotely. As a result, when pandemic-induced disruptions began, IBM was able to transition most of its global workforce to remote work within a week, thereby maintaining operational continuity.

A side-effect, or maybe an evolution, of this Risk Management strategy is the fact that in 2021 IBM's CEO predicted to have a hybrid remote-work model in place for 80% of its global workforce after the pandemic. [Reference: <https://www.businessinsider.com>]

This is only possible because the company is aware of and proactively manages the (new) risks connected with that development.

IBM's proactive Risk Management strategy ensured they could quickly adapt to the sudden need for remote work and maintain business continuity during a crisis. This underscores the significant role of Risk Management in building organizational resilience. Particularly for multinational organizations operating in varying contexts worldwide.

# Writing Resilience into the GM Playbook

by Louise Worbey, Global Head of GM, KPMG International

In July 2020 I wrote an article titled “flexibility and agility post COVID-19.” In it, I proposed that the flexibility and agility already embraced by GM functions would be invaluable in adapting to whatever new normal came from the pandemic. GM leaders would need to articulate the skill sets of their teams and support senior leadership through the changes- particularly in terms of ways of working and talent deployment. Doing so would be a significant advantage for those weary GM leaders still trying to get a foothold, let alone a seat, at the top table.

Revisiting that article, I realised that I never used the word resilience- an oversight on my part. As I reflect on the subsequent years, it’s clear that we all needed to find a measure of personal resilience, team resilience and organizational resilience in our everyday work.

## Rewriting the playbook

The need for security support and to track the whereabouts of assignment personnel will trigger certain protocols and processes. Whether global or local, these events can impact you as a GM professional, as well as affecting your team and your organisation.

I still vividly recall the assignee impact and follow up support required following 9/11, the July 2005 London bombings, the Fukushima Nuclear accident, and the Paris terror attacks in November 2015.

It is a cliché that the only constant is change, but the post COVID environment is showing no signs of slowing down, with events in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia once again testing even the most robust business continuity plans. In January this year, the Eurasia Group published its Top Risks for 2023, declaring, “we remain in the depths of a geopolitical recession, with the risks this year the most dangerous we've encountered in the 25 years since we started Eurasia Group.”

In that context, I agree with the RES Forum’s assertion that “organisations are no longer asking if they should build resilience but how.” And I agree that this involves more than simply pulling a business continuity playbook off the shelf. In fact, it’s time we considered rewriting the playbook to suit the new normal.

### Changing course

As well as rewriting the playbook, now is the time for leadership to reset the tone and change-manage any adaptations in service offering, supply chains or through repurposing exercises.

This paper defines strategic adaptability while considering the potential speed for change and the ability to quickly pivot. I suggest that a considerable number of large multinationals will score low on any tool that measures these factors. In many cases, existing long term strategic planning inhibits the speed and desire for an alternative strategy. Besides, any adaptations can be as challenging as a tanker changing course mid route- often best avoided, unless critical to the survival of the business.

The level of adaptability can depend on the industry sector and the organisation's financial health and obligations. For example, professional services consultants pivoted quickly during the pandemic to support public sector initiatives. NHS England hired a

team of KPMG consultants to build the seven temporary Nightingale hospitals. Deloitte was appointed by the UK Government to create a network of COVID testing facilities. While EY worked alongside the UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to provide guidance for various business sectors on how to reopen after the lockdown.

While partnering with government was not a new strategy, it received renewed focus to respond to the needs of the time. This combined seamlessly with the Big Four's operational flexibility to channel resources into supporting a national priority.

Post pandemic, previous strategies were revisited and, in many ways, re-established with modifications. However, for some organisations the change in strategy was irreversible. In the case of cashless payments, changes in retail spending behaviour and access to healthcare, there appears to be little possibility of going back. For organisations in these sectors, the strategic adaptability required has been considerable.

## Innovation is no barometer of agility

I hesitate to agree with the view that adaptability is interconnected with an organisational capacity for innovation. However, in GM our capacity for innovation and a solutions focused approach does give us an edge over many other departments. As such, operational flexibility should be something every GM team is familiar with and ready for.

Most GM professionals will tell you that no two days are the same. Anyone that has been in the industry for more than a decade could write a book about the many weird and wonderful requests that demand a “creative”, flexible response. Remote working and virtual assignments are not new. They existed pre-COVID, but on a very different scale. Both have taken hours of senior GM leadership time, assessing how they complement or contradict existing policies.

We’ve asked many questions. Do they increase flexibility, retention, attraction and assignment volumes? Or do they add to complexity, risk, administration and even discrimination? Do the benefits bring enough value, or does the cost – financial and otherwise – outweigh the benefits?

Whatever the answer, it appears too late to put the genie back in the bottle. Let’s be honest, most organisations have seen a fundamental shift in how we work and how we respond to requests to work in ways we’d never previously considered.

## A survival imperative

Risk management is where I believe the RES Forum Resilience Score will see its widest variance. The different levels of risk tolerance I’ve seen in member firms within the same organisation is substantial. That’s before you consider the differing risk tolerance between different sectors and industries.

At the highest scoring end, we find entire departments of specialists whose job is to predict and anticipate future risks- economic, geopolitical, environmental, regulatory, social. Meanwhile, other organisations can access the geopolitical risk dashboards and reports published by investment houses.

I think risk management is one of the pandemic’s most positive legacies. Being prepared is no longer an afterthought, it’s an essential component of future proofing organisations against risk. And it’s taken seriously in this age of active disruption – or, as Dr Bader puts it, it has become “a survival imperative”

# Resilience Is Key

From our conversations with GM experts, resilience clearly emerged as a crucial attribute for organizations operating in the GM industry.

Based on the priorities of our respondents, we have identified three core dimensions of organizational resilience:

- Strategic Adaptability
- Operational Flexibility
- Risk Management.

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Strategic Adaptability empowers organizations to revisit and realign their strategies promptly in response to changing circumstances. It fosters the agility to anticipate disruptions, adjust strategies, and exploit emerging opportunities.

Operational Flexibility enables organizations to adapt their processes and workflows to maintain operational continuity during disruptions.

Risk Management involves the anticipation, identification, assessment, and mitigation of risks, contributing significantly to an organization's resilience profile.

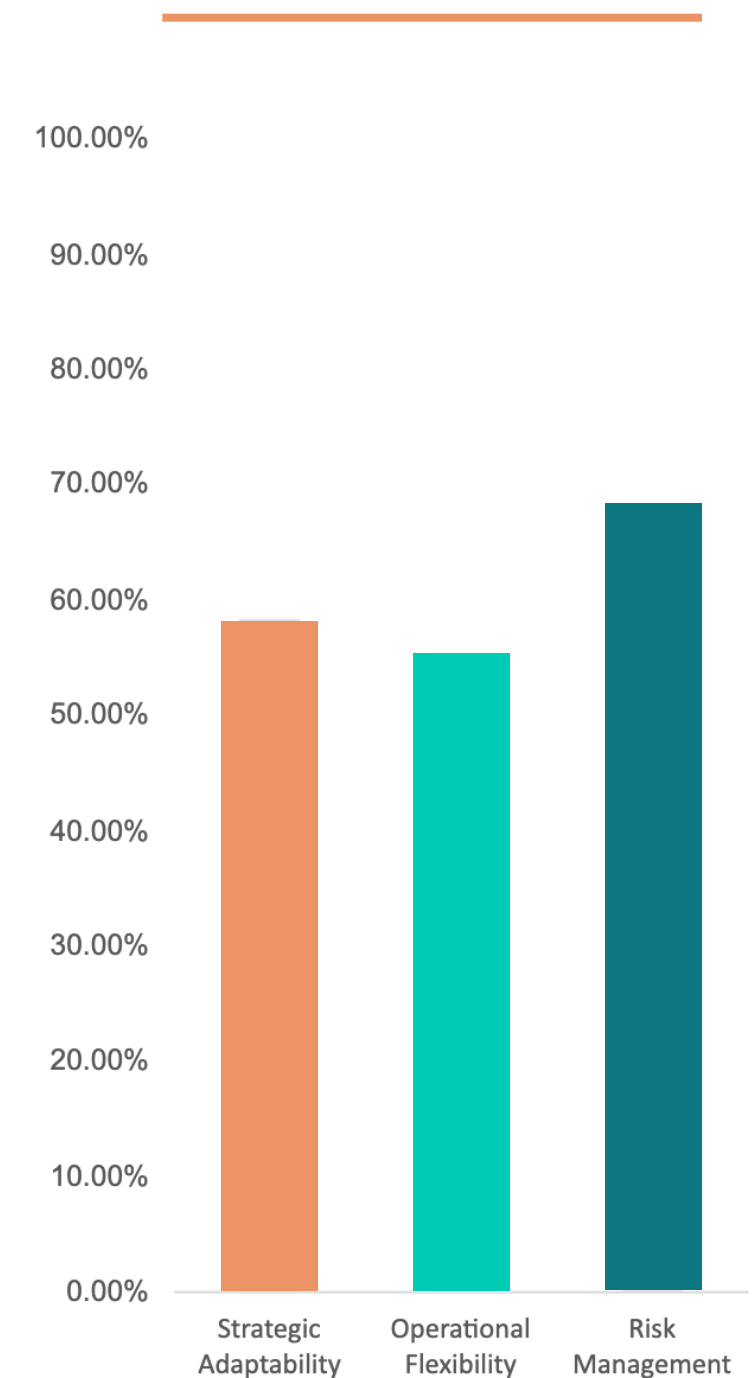
Of course, we were also interested to learn about the level of resilience in the organizations of our respondents. Therefore, we asked them to rate, as a

percentage, the extent they feel their organization is resilient on each of the dimensions. While these results are based on only a brief overall assessment by the respondents, they do paint a clear picture.

While Risk Management seems to be sufficiently anchored in most organizations, a resilience level of close to 70% still indicates exposure to vulnerability and potential for improvement. Strategic Adaptability and Operational Flexibility just passes the 50% threshold, demonstrating an even greater need for organizations to invest in their resilience.

We appreciate that this data is not representative, but based on discussions with other GM experts, we believe it is fair to say that the values are not too far off. To get more accurate results, we recommend you do the RES Forum Resilience Score at the end of this report.

Average levels of resilience in the organizations of our respondents



At the end of the day, resilient corporations, such as Microsoft and KLM, illustrate the value of these dimensions and demonstrate how the proactive application of these resilience aspects can lead to successful outcomes even amidst global crises.

In contrast, organizations that lack resilience face a substantial risk of operational disruption, financial instability, and strategic failure. In the GM context, the lack of resilience can lead to amplified consequences given the diversity of geographical, political, and cultural factors at play.

In the post-COVID world, organizational resilience is not just a competitive advantage; it is a survival imperative. The GM industry, like many others, faced significant disruption during the pandemic. Yet, it was the companies with robust resilience frameworks- those who could adapt their strategies, flex their operations, and manage risks effectively- that weathered the storm and emerged stronger. This observation underlines the idea that resilience is not just about withstanding crises, but also about leveraging them as catalysts for transformation and growth.

Building resilience requires deliberate planning and effort, but the benefits – continuity, stability, and the capacity for transformation in the face of adversity – are immense.

Organizations that fail to prioritize resilience may find themselves ill-equipped to navigate future challenges, with potential consequences ranging from operational disruptions to strategic failures. As the world grows increasingly interconnected and unpredictable, the ability to bounce back, learn, and grow from adversity will remain at the heart of sustainable success.

If you want to take the first step to gauge your organization's resilience, we gladly invite you to complete the RES Forum Resilience Score on the next page. Perhaps you are already in a top position. If so, great. However, if you identify gaps and weaknesses, this can be the catalyst for a journey to make your organization more resilient. The need to do so is, in our experience, more evident than ever.

# Resilience is the fee for a seat at the top table

by Carla Foden, Growth Leader and Managing Consultant at Gallagher

Pre COVID-19 GM was seen, in many cases, as a non-revenue generating blocker. The idea that GM could be a major player seemed to be blue sky thinking. Only those with significantly sized programmes had the luxury of being pro-active and strategic.

## **Post pandemic, there has been a clear and significant shift**

Our clients tell us that they have found their voice. And they're finding themselves involved much earlier in the conversation. In many cases, GM is now seen as an enabler for growth, helping businesses expand into new locations, while being part of a strong Employer Value Proposition that helps attract top talent.

As great as this long-awaited wish is, the shift has happened in a very short time. As a result, mobility teams needed to call on all their reserves of resilience. Indeed, now

many of our clients find themselves juggling the strategic side of mobility, whilst still needing to manage the day to day (and ensuring a high level of service) without the tools to help them navigate the world of New Work.

The need for agile processes, flexible approaches and strong partnerships with other HR functions has become key to GM success. As has the aforementioned resilience, which remains critical.

With ever-changing external impacts like ESG, work from anywhere, GDPR and tougher country regulations, GM should be regularly reviewing processes and policies, not relying on old ways of working.

## The ever-changing face of the industry

The provider world is also changing rapidly. With consolidation, new entrants and new solutions, as well as ongoing developments, it's important to recognise that the new normal most likely means the old ways are no longer fit for purpose. Change is inevitable, within every aspect of programme management.

But how does Global Mobility approach this, when the ask for extra budget and investment is still generally seen as a no?

For our clients, it typically starts with extensive research, surveys and feedback of their populations, conducted through external partners. This helps them clearly understand their strategy and gives them the means to overcome obstacles and challenges. As a result, they can properly execute a business case that explains why change is needed, based on evidential numbers and real-world case studies.



# The RES Forum

## Resilience GM Checklist

In the following, we introduce the RES Forum GM Resilience Score. You will find 12 statements about your organization's practices in the context of GM and handling international assignees.

Rate each statement in relation to your organization on a scale from 0 to 10.

A score of '0' represents "Strongly Disagree" (indicating that the statement is not at all reflective of your organization's practices) while a score

of '10' represents "Strongly Agree" (indicating that the statement is very much reflective of your organization's practices).

Try to be as objective as possible in your assessment.

Once you've assigned a score to each statement, proceed to the next part for instructions on how to calculate your organization's resilience score.

## Strategic Adaptability

My organization promptly adjusts GM strategies in response to changes in the external environment (e.g., changes in immigration laws, geopolitical shifts).

We regularly revise our GM goals to accommodate changing international conditions.

Lessons from past disruptions in international assignments are incorporated into our strategic planning.

Our organization encourages innovation and adaptability in managing international assignees.

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



## Operational Flexibility

We can swiftly modify international assignment plans in response to disruptions (e.g., repatriation or localization).

We have flexible work arrangements (like remote working capabilities) that enable operational continuity during crises for our international assignees.

Our organization can efficiently relocate international assignees if needed.

Our operational processes can adapt swiftly to accommodate new GM opportunities.

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



## Risk Management

Our organization has robust risk management strategies specifically for managing international assignees.

We proactively anticipate, identify, assess, and mitigate potential risks to our international assignees.

We have detailed contingency plans for our international assignees that can be enacted swiftly during disruptions.

Our organization effectively communicates risks and risk management strategies related to international assignments across all levels.

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Now that you have rated each statement, it's time to calculate your organization's RES Forum GM Resilience Score.

Begin by summing up the scores for each dimension separately. Each dimension's total score will range from 0 (lowest resilience) to 40 (highest resilience). Add these three totals together to get a grand total score, which will range from 0 (lowest resilience) to 120 (highest resilience).

To normalize this score to a scale of 0-100 (making it easier to interpret), divide your grand total by 1.2. For example, if your grand total score is 90, the normalized score will be 90 divided by 1.2, which equals 75.

This normalized score is your organization's resilience score. A score closer to 100 indicates a high level of resilience in managing GM and handling international assignees, while a score closer to 0 indicates areas needing significant improvement for better resilience.

Remember, this score is a tool for self-reflection and growth. Use it as a guide to identify areas of strength and areas where your organization can enhance its resilience in global mobility.

*If you are interested in learning more about resilience in GM, please contact the RES Forum with your queries and questions, we are here to help you!*

Mail to: [office@theresforum.com](mailto:office@theresforum.com)

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As part of Gallagher Multinational Benefits and HR Consulting, our Global Mobility advisory teams are specialists, who can help clients translate intent into practice, by simplifying the complex, fast moving, costly and time-consuming world of Global Mobility. We work with our clients to identify opportunities for implementing the most practical approach for their company when redefining and developing agile strategies.

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# The RES Forum

The RES Forum has the **tools, knowledge** and **community** to help mobility professionals keep pace with changes in the industry, and help the industry keep pace with the needs of mobility professionals

Through research, analytics, eLearning, events, and policy templates & consultancy, we provide support and guidance to help mobility professionals navigate the ever-changing GM landscape.

We enjoy the exhaustive knowledge of our consultants, academics, Strategic Advisory Board and Technical Partners, as well as our international community of senior in-house HR and GM professionals, which includes 1,000 members in over 45 countries.

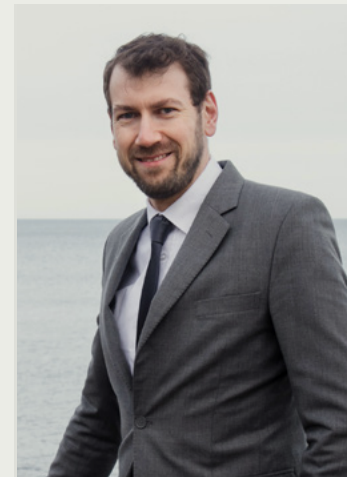
In conversation with leaders and experts from across the industry, our academics study the most pressing topics within the world of GM and cross-border working. Then we share their collective insight to provide clarity, tools and advice to help our members through the many challenges they face.

The RES Forum is an independent organization. We are not influenced by external parties or third-party vendors.

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*With thanks to everyone who contributed their insight and knowledge.*

*Without you, this report would not have been possible.*