

Pandemic Legacy: Roles and Capabilities of Global Mobility (GM) Departments to Manage Global Workers

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Overnight, COVID-19 challenged the status quo of individuals, organisations, and countries.

While the global economic recession of a decade ago fundamentally placed Chief Finance Officers (CFO) at the core of the crisis, the human nature of the current crisis highlights the role of Chief Human Resource Officers (CHROs). Leaders had to make many fast decisions that fundamentally affect people's lives. These include who should stay at work and who should go home; how and where people could work digitally; when international assignees could go home; what the priorities are and how those priorities can best be communicated to employees. At the organisational level, decision-makers have had to undertake various actions to alleviate the impact of the pandemic. In most cases, these actions relate to managing distance and rethinking boundaries. What is the Pandemic legacy? Will the pandemic effect lead to a major retrenchment of international mobility, or will it gradually be re-established? Will companies take the opportunity to reduce numbers (and costs), or were they right to believe that international mobility was the best way to ensure their businesses' efficient running? What are the shortcomings of the current approaches, and how can successful strategies be developed?

Changing the traditional approach to international work

Rethinking how MNEs use global teams, virtual collaboration, and international assignments could constitute important elements in a reconfiguration of the IHRM function. There is an opportunity for IHRM research to collect relevant and valuable evidence to facilitate global work in the future by examining the role of the IHRM function during and after the pandemic. Even large organisations with sophisticated pre-pandemic IHRM policies are likely to rewrite the rules. The current literature energetically debates what is happening in many GM departments regarding changing their traditional approach of moving people to their international work and, instead, moving international work to people. As travel restrictions ease, employers and individuals will make decisions about whether, when and where they feel safe to travel. IHRM scholarship can offer an evidence base to assess the many impending changes to careers that globally mobile individuals are likely to experience, and to develop insights into how their organisations can select, develop, support and manage these.

The substantial changes to the experience of working abroad and its career effects, as well as to the role of GM professionals, are important to understand for career counsellors. These might mean that any career interventions aimed at individuals or organisational approaches need to acknowledge the changing playing field of global mobility in a highly volatile, uncertain and sometimes hostile world.

Insights from the Academy of Management Annual Meeting 2022

I attended the Academy of Management Annual Meeting in Seattle (2022) and had access to many ongoing publications that are currently unpublished. Below, you can find three conclusions as a summary of the key findings of these articles.

01

The number of assignments used by MNEs may not return to the same level as before the pandemic.

There are different forms of global work, such as long-term assignments (LTAs), short-term assignments (STAs), and international business travels (IBTs). LTAs are the more traditional and expensive form (at least one year of living and working abroad). The drivers of these types of global work are still out there, such as leadership development, knowledge sharing, competency gap filling and control and coordination.

However, the Pandemic showed organisations that, depending on contextual factors, such as the industry, many of these drivers could be performed remotely in combination with less expensive types of global work, such as IBTs and STAs. The articles discuss the contextual factors that these combinations best work on and in which context remote working might compromise the international expansion of organisations.

02

The rise of remote working. Moving work to people rather than people to work.

The Pandemic triggered the rise of remote working as a flexible work arrangement to deal with the ban on global mobility at the peak of the Pandemic. Therefore, after the Pandemic, some segments of workers learned that they could deliver their jobs from wherever they were. A huge number of employees started to request flexibility in their work location. However, managers observed strategic and operational concerns. Articles discuss different cultural and institutional shock types while dealing with compensations, assessments, taxes, insurance, etc. There are good practices about when such flexibility work and when it does not.

03

Overall implications for the future management of global mobility.

Articles found that the future envisaged by global mobility managers differed across diverse industries. On the one hand, global leaders in knowledge-intensive industries expect a reduction of costly and traditional forms of global work, such as LTAs. In contrast, less costly forms, such as STAs or IBTs, would recover. In parallel, remote work continues to expand and is likely to partly replace the use of global mobility. On the other hand, global leaders in the consumer goods sector argue that remote working came to stay for group functions (e.g., HR, IT, marketing). At the same time, business lines would tend to recover their typical degree of mobility from before the pandemic. Group functions also deal with intensive knowledge management. However, the manufacturing facilities of business lines seem to demand more face-to-face interaction.

Reconfiguration of GM departments after the Pandemic legacy

The above scenario shows an urgent need to develop and leverage more innovative and flexible forms of global mobility to support organisations in adapting to the volatility, complexity and uncertainty in the global environment. Many initiatives to implement flexible work arrangements fail because there is a distinct lack of strategic linkages of global mobility and/or HR functions when applying those. In a recent publication, Professor Michael Dickmann and I use the Smart, Agile, Flawless and Efficient (SAFE) Model of Global Mobility (See Dickmann, 2018) as an alternative to manage global mobility after the Pandemic. The model supports organisations in re-establishing strategic linkages disrupted by the Pandemic, such as global leadership development, knowledge transfer and acquisition, competency gap filling and control and coordination. You will be able to access the publication as requested as soon it is available.

