

Consistency, Transparency And Flexibility In Today's Approach To Global Mobility

One question I am always keen to ask candidates in interviews is “why are you looking to join us?”. It’s a good test of what candidates know about the company and can help to identify what their expectations are about the experience they’ll have if they come on board. The response I receive most often, particularly when working for large multinationals, has been “to have the opportunity to travel and to further my career through new experiences across the company” or words to that effect. So it seems that global mobility has become a key attraction tool for organisations looking for the best talent, particularly with millennials joining the workforce and moving their way up through the ranks. I mention this generation of employees in particular as research has shown that, of this group, 93% expect to live and work abroad during their careers(1).

It is becoming clear that many employees’ approach to working overseas is changing, with a much greater proportion looking to use this as an opportunity to develop new skills and further their careers. This has led to organisations starting to review and often change their approach to global mobility. The feedback from many large organisations is that they have experienced a continued increase in the number of employee relocations over the last few years, in spite of the difficult times many economies have experienced recently. This increase in relocation numbers is expected to continue to increase until 2020 and beyond(2). In addition, the number and variety of international destinations continues to expand as businesses grow and move in to new markets. This has added to the pressure to focus on how to structure and manage global mobility programmes to ensure they remain effective.

Having a great relocation programme is about more than just offering benchmarked and competitive relocation provisions. How you deliver them is what makes an employer of choice stand out. In my experience consistency, transparency

and flexibility are three key approaches that will offer your programme credibility, attract the best talent and keep expatriate engagement and motivation high.

Expats talk to each other. Not just about work or what bar in their host location will be showing the football. They talk about their relocation experiences and often what elements of support they received as part of their relocation package. It’s a topic that the new expat and those more established expats in the host location have in common so it’s a natural starting point for a conversation. It will soon emerge if the relocation support has been inconsistent or significant exceptions granted. With the rise in use of social media and instant messaging, ensuring that your expats have a positive experience is more important than ever. Some companies with larger programmes have in-house expat forums enabling this information exchange. As a result, having a consistent approach to running a global mobility programme is key. All employees relocating with an organisation under the same policy type need to have a consistent and positive experience, whether it be in the pre-assignment preparations, the on-assignment ongoing support, or through to repatriation planning and coordination. This consistency will maintain positive engagement between the employee and the organisation throughout their relocation experience. It is vital to making the mobility programme credible and to encouraging employees to think globally about their careers. If they have a positive experience the first time around, they will be more willing to go through the process again should the organisation need them elsewhere. If the employees have a consistent and positive experience, they will act as advocate for the global mobility programme in the business and really help to raise the profile and strategic impact that a mobility team can have in the organisation.

One of the things I like about being a global mobility specialist is that I get to support employees through a very personal and emotive experience. Flexing your style

and approach when working with a variety of employees of varying seniority and cultural background helps to build their trust in you as an expert adviser. So this raises a challenging question: how can I offer a consistent mobility programme but also tailor the programme to meet employee and location-specific requirements? The best solution I have seen to this quandary is to adopt a three-level structure for your global mobility programme. The first level is strategic: what are the principles we want to be guided by for all employee relocations across the organisation? This may include the aims of the programme, the organisation’s approach to mobility and its talent management strategy for example. No matter which locations employees are moving between, these principles should govern the process and the employee experience. This provides a consistent basis upon which employee relocation can be facilitated. The second level consists of high-level policy considerations. These outline the core provisions for each assignment type and the reasons why they are to be provided to employees. Again, these can be rolled out globally. The third and final level is a range of appendices on either a regional or country-specific basis which contain the detail on how the core policy provisions are delivered in specific locations to capture any local variations or compliance requirements. This ensures that the provisions remain relevant to the employee and offer them the appropriate support in each location. By building this three-level framework in to mobility programmes, organisations can ensure that a consistent approach is taken to global mobility (levels one and two) whilst reflecting location-specific variations (in level three).

Whilst taking a consistent approach to mobility gives the employees confidence in the programme, there needs to be transparency too. With an increasing focus on compliance by many governmental authorities, transparent processes should result in more effective risk identification and management and therefore more compliant programmes.

In terms of communications, transparency in how the relocation packages are presented to employees is key to obtaining their buy-in as well as increasing their engagement with their own relocation and the global mobility programme as a whole. Some of the concepts in expatriate policies and practices can be overwhelming if not delivered appropriately to the employee. It is important therefore that transparency around the package is provided through a pre-assignment briefing between global mobility and the employee as well as regular meetings or calls to provide ongoing support and clarity on the status of the relocation. Taking the time to do this means that employees can make informed decisions prior to relocating which, in turn, enables them to have more accurate expectations about what life in the host location is going to be like. All of the stakeholders in the relocation want the employee to turn up on day one in the host location excited and ready for the new phase they are undertaking in their career. If they turn up exhausted through the stress of the move and concerned about their financial security and their family settling in, then there is a much increased chance of early repatriation. Many organisations are providing expats with online access to their relocation documentation to increase the level of transparency further and this offers a central store for assignment-related information for all parties to work from throughout the assignment.

Local transfer policies are being offered by some organisations and this type of relocation is often associated with millennials, as well as those more mobile employees who would typically require less support during and after the relocation process and employees who choose to relocate rather than being asked by the company. To facilitate these moves, an increasing number of organisations are offering lump sum relocation allowances meaning that the responsibility then falls to the employee to determine how this budget is spent on relocation support. Consistency in these programmes comes from the amount of the allowance offered to the employee and this is generally based on seniority and family size. There is however, a huge amount of flexibility for the employee, who can then tailor their relocation support to meet their own needs. Compliance-related support is often provided in addition to the lump sum allowance to ensure that

these processes are completed correctly. This approach to providing relocation support massively decreases the number of exception requests as employees have full control over the selection of their relocation support. Recent research has shown that millennials like this autonomy when moving overseas(1) so this approach is particularly attractive to this generation of employees.

As organisations move in to emerging markets, the cultural diversity across mobility programmes is increasing and there needs to be an element of flexibility to allow the programmes to adapt to this. This is a good example of how the three-level framework discussed earlier is effective because local provisions aligned to cultural practices can be included in the appendices, whilst the overarching mobility principles and core policy provisions can remain consistent.

With the cost of international travel becoming more affordable and accessible (through online travel websites for example), people are generally more comfortable with travelling across borders. Therefore, when reviewing your global

mobility programme, you need to consider more than just the logistical support and compliance risks. Whilst these are obviously key to a successful programme, employees are now looking for a great relocation experience aligned with the new expectations they have about international relocation. Living and working overseas has become an expected part of many employees' career path now. By building a relocation framework to include consistency, transparency and flexibility in to the global mobility programme, organisations can provide a relocation experience that will engage and develop your workforce for years to come.

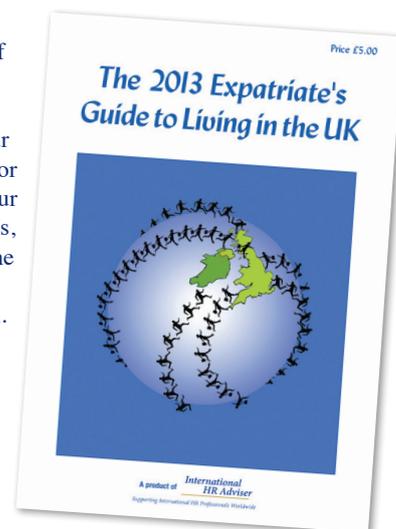
References: (1) Move Guides, Gen Y and Global Mobility, Published 2012
(2) PwC, Talent Mobility 2020, Published 2010



Tim Wells started his career in global mobility in the oil and gas industry 13 years ago and since then he has held a number of mobility roles, both in-house and as an external consultant. This experience has provided him with a wide range of perspectives on how different companies and industry sectors manage mobility. He is now Head of Global Mobility Consulting at Abbiss Cadres LLP (www.abbisscadres.com), a professional services firm providing a multi-disciplinary scope of operational and compliance services to domestic and international clients and their employees. Tim has spoken on a wide range of topics at global conferences, including attracting and retaining talent, the economic climate and its impact on mobility trends and practices, and expatriate compensation and benefits. He is a member of the judging panel for the Expatriate Management and Mobility Awards and also for the Association of Relocation Professionals Awards.

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