Reducing Friction In Global Workforce Mobility

Why Clarity Is Becoming More Critical Than Ever

Despite all the promise that our deeply interconnected and AI-enabled world holds, a successful employee relocation still involves a lot of critical, interdependent steps, handled by humans with specific knowledge and expertise. If employees and their family members don't understand who those people are, what role they have and why their help is needed at certain points along the journey before another step in the move can progress, frustration can quickly set in. No matter how robust your relocation policy may be, you run the risk of dissatisfaction and fatigue if employees are struggling to navigate it.

Connecting those dots with clarity can be even more challenging for human resource professionals who manage mobility as just one of several other responsibilities. If you've recently found yourself owning an expat population, coordinating extended cross-border business travel or managing relocation vendor relationships without a deep background in global mobility, you're not alone. One of the biggest challenges you might face is not attempting to improve the quality of the support your organisation offers, but gauging whether your employees understand how to access and make the most of it.

The Real Friction Problem

According to McKinsey & Company's 'State of Organisations 2026' report, 47% of respondents believe investments in innovation and a culture of continuous improvement are key to increasing productivity. As we've seen in our own research and multiple external HR studies, business leaders are focused on finding efficiencies, but not at the cost of sacrificing the employee experience or risking compliance infractions.

This is especially true in mobility, where companies rely on a blend of assignment types and flexible benefit choices to meet both business goals and individual employee needs. Whether your organisation takes a lump sum approach, offers fully managed end-to-end relocation services or a combination of both, you likely invest considerable resources in developing, maintaining and reporting on those programmes.

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And yet, many HR leaders report that employees still feel lost. They receive a letter of assignment and don't know what happens next. They call one contact, get redirected to another and then wait. New hires ask their recruiter a policy question and receive the wrong answer. They book flights before confirming move dates or checking that immigration processing is complete.

In most cases, relocation friction is not caused by a lack of care or investment. It stems from insufficient clarity and poorly timed communications. When employees can't navigate the support available to them, or receive conflicting information, the consequences can be significant. Top recruits may decline offers. Productivity can drop during the settling-in period. And the tools and services a company has already paid for might go underused, because employees either don't know they exist or don't know how to access them.

Where Friction Actually Comes From

Across a wide range of global employers, we tend to see four patterns surface consistently.

Disconnected Processes. Relocation involves multiple touchpoints: the internal HR team, a relocation management company (RMC), immigration specialists, destination service providers and tax advisors. Each party may be doing excellent work, but if the employee doesn't understand how these pieces connect or who is responsible for each stage, anxiety follows. Employees shouldn't need to know the structure of your vendor network in order to have a good relocation experience.

Unclear ownership. One of the most common employee questions during a relocation is: "Who do I call about this?" If the answer is "it depends," friction begins immediately. Mobility programmes often grow over time, adding services, providers and policies without always clarifying how they connect. The result is a structure that makes sense to those who built it, but can feel confusing to those it is meant to serve.

Information overload at the wrong moment. Employees often receive comprehensive policy documentation at the point of assignment initiation. This is well-intentioned, but a 50-page, detailed document delivered alongside an offer letter lands very differently than targeted guidance at each stage of the move. One mobility leader deploys short, milestone-based videos at key points in the relocation journey, such as just before a household goods survey, to explain what is about to happen and what the employee needs to do. None of the information is new, but it has significantly greater impact because it arrives at the right moment and is distilled down to a specific task.

Misinformation from well-meaning colleagues. Recruiters and line managers often set expectations about relocation

benefits before the relocation team or RMC is involved. When an employee is told informally what the package will include, or hears "the company will take care of everything," any discrepancy between that expectation and the formal policy becomes a trust issue. One organisation addressed this by building an AI tool to help recruiters ask straightforward questions and receive accurate answers before communicating with candidates, preventing incorrect information from entering the process.

What High-Performing Programmes Do Differently

Organisations delivering the strongest employee experiences in global mobility share a common characteristic: they have moved from thinking only about what support they offer to also considering how employees actually experience that support.

Most will take several targeted steps. They map the journey from the employee's point of view, asking where an employee might not know what comes next, where they might risk receiving conflicting information and where communication tends to go quiet. They create clear "who does what" guides in plain language, explaining who to contact for each type of question and what to expect in response. They invest in communication timing, not just volume, delivering guidance proactively at the moments when employees are most likely to need it. And they reduce the number of contacts the employee has to manage, often moving toward a single point of contact for core stages of a move. When employees know who to call and trust that person to have the answers, the experience changes significantly.

The Role Of The RMC

If you are newer to global mobility, you may be working with an RMC without a clear picture of what that relationship should look like. At its most basic, an RMC coordinates the services employees need during a move: household goods logistics, temporary housing, destination support, expense management and more. But the strongest RMC partnerships go further than coordination.

A good RMC should help you design and communicate relocation policy clearly, manage each stage of the employee journey proactively, consolidate information across the vendor network and provide data on programme performance and employee satisfaction. Employers should expect their RMC to act as a strategic partner, and one that brings market insight and practical ideas for how to reduce friction across the programme. The value of that partnership becomes most visible during the most stressful moments: when an employee is struggling, or when a key hire is at risk because the relocation experience has broken down. Ideally, you and your RMC will work together to prevent those moments from occurring in the first place.

Practical Steps You Can Take Now

You don't need a complete programme overhaul to reduce employee friction. We've seen several targeted actions make a meaningful difference for organisations of all sizes.

Focus on the moments that matter most. Identify the two or three stages where employees are most likely to feel confused or unsupported. These are typically the period immediately after an offer but before the official initiation is received, the point when multiple vendors become involved, or during the first few weeks in the destination country.

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Gather employee feedback at multiple touchpoints. Conversations with recently relocated employees will surface valuable and actionable insights. Ask where they felt uncertain, who they called, whether they received a clear answer and what they wish they had known earlier.

Review your "who does what" communications' clarity. Could a newly relocated employee, in week one of their move, answer the following without searching through documents or calling multiple people:

- Who is my main contact for relocation questions?
- Who manages my immigration status?
- Who do I call if something goes wrong with my housing?

If the answer to any of these is unclear, that is a friction point worth addressing.

Align with recruiters and hiring managers on policy accuracy. Establish a clear, simple reference that recruiters and hiring managers can use when discussing relocation with candidates. It doesn't need to be comprehensive. It needs to be accurate and set realistic expectations. The earlier you can become involved in the decision-making process, ideally before any offer is made, the better.

Clarity Is A Competitive Advantage

The organisations that deliver the best employee experiences in global mobility are not always those with the largest budgets or the most extensive service offerings. They are the ones that have made it easy for employees to understand what support is available, trust that it will be there when needed and navigate the process without feeling like they are figuring it out alone.

For those professionals carrying global mobility responsibilities alongside a full HR remit, this is an achievable standard. It doesn't require deep mobility expertise. It requires a willingness to look at the programme from the employee's point of view and ask, honestly, whether the experience reflects your company's culture and the investment your organisation has made.

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