Talent Mobility Trends: From Movement To Meaning

For more than a decade, global mobility has been evolving under the pressure of competing forces: talent shortages, employee expectations for flexibility, cost scrutiny, and rising regulatory complexity. Mobility is no longer solely about how efficiently organisations move people across borders, but by how clearly they can explain why they do so, for whom, and to what end.

Mercer's Global Talent Trends 2026 reveals a function in transition. Assignment models are fragmenting, international remote work is becoming normalised, and hiring from anywhere is increasingly mainstream. Yet governance, transparency, and talent integration often lag behind.

The organisations that will succeed are not those with the most sophisticated policies, but those that embed mobility into workforce infrastructure, grounded in explicit talent intent and sustained by trust.

Transparency And Logic: Re-Examining The Deal With Mobile Employees

Few organisations can clearly and objectively link international mobility to career progression. This single data point should give HR and mobility leaders pause. For decades, international experience has been assumed to be a career accelerator. In reality, in most organisations, it remains a promise that is implied rather than delivered, and rarely measured.

At the same time, transparency expectations are rising sharply. Pay equity legislation, particularly in the EU, combined with growing employee awareness, is making it increasingly difficult to treat mobility as a "special category" that operates outside standard reward and career frameworks. The traditional justification that mobility is too complex or too bespoke to explain is no longer credible.

The real challenge lies in designing segmented, explainable reward and career systems that reflect different types of mobility while remaining defensible. Equity in mobility does not mean uniformity. It means being explicit about why different assignment types are rewarded differently, how (or if) mobility connects to career progression, and what alternative career routes exist for those who cannot relocate. In 2026, mobility programmes must be logical, consistent, and transparent.

AI In Mobility: From Operational Relief To Strategic Relevance

Artificial intelligence continues to dominate conversations about the future of HR, yet Mercer's 2026 Talent Mobility Outlook* shows a cautious market. Only 23% of organisations plan to invest in AI for mobility, while nearly half remain undecided.

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When mobility teams articulate what they want from AI, their priorities are telling. Reducing administrative burden and streamlining assignment processes rank highest. Cost-efficiency, compliance, and talent outcomes (areas where AI could deliver significant value) are secondary considerations.

This reflects a deeper tension. Mobility functions are expected to become more strategic, more connected to talent, and more value-driven. Yet AI is often framed as a way to do the same work faster, rather than as an enabler of different, better decisions.

The real opportunity for AI in mobility is not automation for its own sake, but instead:

- Surfacing compliance risks earlier
- Improving visibility on cross-border activity
- Generating reliable data that links mobility decisions to career and workforce outcomes.

The question is not whether AI belongs in mobility, but whether mobility is ready to change how it works to use AI meaningfully.

Crossing New Boundaries: When Flexibility Becomes The Norm

Temporary international remote working, often referred to as "workations," has crossed a critical threshold. What began as an experimental perk has become a normalised component of mobility and retention strategies. Employees increasingly see this flexibility not as a benefit, but as part of the implicit deal with their employer.

From the organisation's perspective, international remote work has matured into a practical lever. It supports engagement and retention, expands access to international experience, and allows companies to respond to talent demand without defaulting to traditional assignments.

At the same time, this shift exposes the limits of fragmented governance. Business travel volumes are rising, yet responsibility for compliance remains dispersed across travel, finance, HR, and mobility. This is increasingly problematic because business travel sits on a continuum with short-term assignments, commuters, international remote work, and long-term assignments.

Every cross-border movement can trigger tax, immigration, social security, and duty-of-care obligations, regardless of how it is labelled. Treating business travel as "light mobility" is no longer safe. Mature organisations manage all cross-border work as part of a single compliance and risk framework, with clear ownership and visibility.

Hiring From Anywhere: A Strategic Tool, Not A Policy Loophole

Global talent sourcing is no longer a future aspiration. It is already happening, often

faster than governance frameworks can keep up. Internationally hired foreigners and locally hired foreigners are among the fastest-growing forms of mobility, alongside short-term and virtual assignments.

What is striking is how closely international hiring mirrors traditional mobility in practice. Most organisations apply similar remuneration approaches, relocation support, and allowances. Yet while 77% have formal policies for permanent transfers, only 25% have a specific policy for international hires, and over a third have no policy at all.

This gap between practice and policy is risky. Hiring from anywhere is not simply a workaround for mobility constraints; it is a strategic response to tightening labour markets and skills shortages. But only organisations that combine policy rigor with talent insight will be able to scale these models without incurring excessive cost, tax, and compliance exposure.

In 2026, the question is no longer whether to hire globally, but when it makes sense relative to other mobility options, and whether the organisation has the governance to support that choice.

Who Should Move? The Most Persistent Question In Mobility

Despite decades of experience, international assignments are still rarely managed as deliberate talent investments. Selection, development, and mobility often sit in different parts of the organisation, with limited integration. Recruitment selects, talent manages careers, and mobility executes the move.

The consequences are predictable. Many organisations lack clear criteria for assignment readiness, defined skill outcomes from international moves, and consistent tracking of post-assignment careers. Success is assumed, not measured.

Without shared frameworks, selection defaults to availability, manager sponsorship, or precedent. The fundamental question remains inadequately answered: who will benefit most from an international assignment, and what the business will gain in return?

Mobility will only create sustained value when it is fully embedded in talent strategy, skills development, and workforce planning. Until then, "Who should move?" will remain mobility's most important, and least rigorously addressed, question.

Building Skills For A More Demanding Mobility Function

Sixty-one percent of mobility professionals feel equipped to meet the demands of 2026. That confidence is encouraging, but it masks significant skill gaps. Compliance and technology consistently rank among the top challenges, reflecting the growing complexity of cross-border work.

The most pronounced gap lies in cost measurement, metrics, and reporting. Senior leadership is placing greater emphasis on justifying mobility spend, yet many teams struggle to articulate value beyond descriptive activity metrics. Return on investment remains elusive, not because it is impossible to measure, but because it is rarely defined upfront.

As mobility integrates new technologies and expands its scope, the need for financial literacy, data interpretation, and business case development will only intensify. In 2026, credibility will increasingly depend on the ability to translate mobility activity into outcomes that leadership understands.

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Protecting Purchasing Power In Uncertain Times

Economic uncertainty continues to heighten employee anxiety, particularly for mobile employees facing visible cost-of-living and housing differences. Protecting purchasing power remains a core objective of global mobility programmes, but it is becoming harder to balance fairness with cost containment.

Cost-of-living allowances remain the primary tool for long-term assignments and are widely reviewed, reflecting inflation and exchange-rate movements. Housing costs, however, are emerging as the most sensitive and volatile component, driven by affordability and availability challenges in many locations.

For short-term assignments and commuters, per diems remain effective, but repeated use can quickly escalate costs and tax exposure if movements are not monitored holistically. Across all mobility types, the challenge is the same: ensuring allowances are fair, understandable, and sustainable, while maintaining control in an uncertain environment.

The 2026 Imperative: From Moves To Meaning

Mercer's 2026 action priorities point to a clear direction. First, organisations must reframe mobility as a single workforce mobility ecosystem, encompassing business travel, remote work, assignments, and international hires. Fragmented governance is no longer tenable.

Second, talent intent must be made explicit. Clear criteria for who should move, who can work remotely, and who should be hired locally are essential. International mobility must be embedded into talent reviews, skills frameworks, and succession planning, with explicit outcomes defined in advance.

Finally, trust must be built through transparency and control. As employee financial anxiety rises and leadership scrutiny intensifies, mobility programmes will be judged on their clarity, consistency, and fairness. Technology and AI have a role to play, not as a cure-all, but as pragmatic tools to improve visibility, surface risk, and strengthen decision-making.

The defining question is simple, but demanding: can we clearly explain how mobility decisions affect pay, cost, compliance, and careers to employees and leadership alike? Organisations that can answer yes will move beyond managing traditional mobility. They will use it to build capability, confidence, and long-term value.

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OLIVIER MEIER
E: Olivier.meier@mercer.com

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