

Global Mobility: Leadership Requires Presence

Report Methodology

The following are very early findings of a report sponsored by Santa Fe Relocation. The research involves interviews with senior staff with experience of significant relocation of staff. The project is being led by Dr Phil Renshaw (Visiting Fellow, Cranfield University) and Dr Jenny Robinson (Visiting Fellow, Henley Business School). Both are published academics in the fields of Global Mobility and Leadership, in addition to having experienced international assignments in their respective business careers.

Although this project is in its early stages, the initial findings are already consistent and worthy of sharing.

Every year businesses in every country send large numbers of key staff on international assignments. The report asks if there really is sufficient value to justify these moves?

Due to the Global COVID-19 Pandemic, we have experienced a 'natural experiment' that has helped us to answer this question and the answer from our initial findings appears to be 'yes'.

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Good research tries to hold steady several variables and alter others to see what happens. In social science this is extremely difficult because there are so many variables. However, COVID-19 presents an almost global natural experiment because one week we all worked in an office and the next, we all worked from home. The variable that was altered was physical presence.

For many years, people have asked whether deploying employees on international assignments is truly good value for money:

- Why could this work not be done remotely?
- Why could this work not be done by occasional visits through commuting?
- Why could this work simply not be done by local talent?

The pandemic has provided an opportunity to explore whether some of these alternatives are better. Or, whether physical presence matters and why that might be the case.

In short, is relocation worth it or do modern technologies and agile ways of working diminish our appetite for international assignments? What questions drive the business case?

This research allows us to look back on the forced social experiment to find out what happened when the world decided to work from home.

Virtual And Hybrid: We Are All Experiencing This

Our research makes it very clear that most organisations have had to manage 5 basic variations of international assignments through the pandemic:

The 5 Types of Assignments

The report has identified 5 types of foreign assignment:

1. The traditional physical overseas office-based role.
2. The Overseas-based virtual worker – unable to work at the host office location.
3. The overseas-based hybrid worker.
4. The home-based virtual worker – the intended expatriate who came home or never reached their intended country.
5. A commuter-style virtual and hybrid cross-border worker.

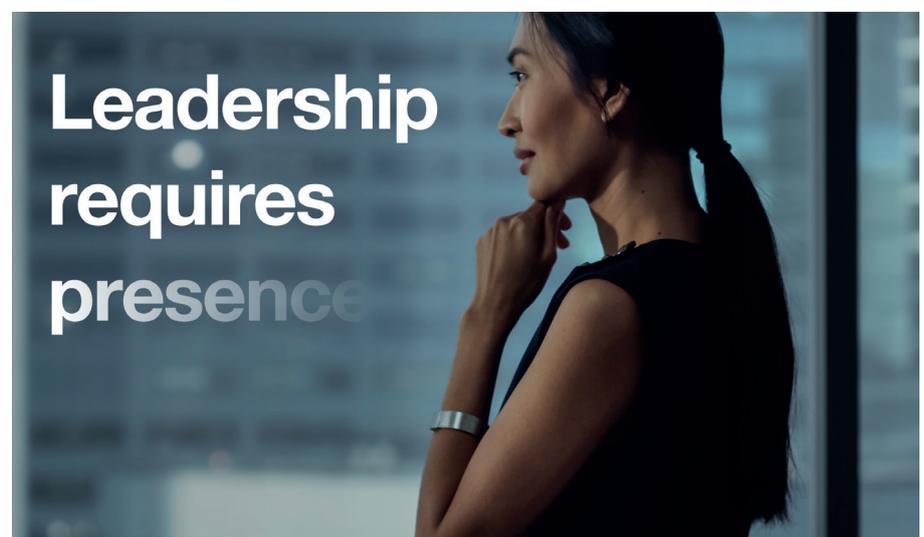
Consequently, simple definitions of International Assignment have been revised in response to the overlay of hybrid working with global mobility creating complexity that was hitherto either hidden or not in wide use.

Visibility

One valuable outcome from these complexities is the positive impact and visibility that the Global Mobility (GM) function has achieved. As businesses around the world sought to manage the risks and protect their employees, many businesses identified unofficial 'off the radar' assignments. Furthermore, as employees sometimes moved quickly, before official sanction was possible, so GM has been brought in to assess the consequences.

Enhanced Standing

Considerable benefit has been added quickly by explaining and evaluating the many risks and costs to the organisation that were



hidden, being created and continue to arise. The value and standing of GM have been markedly enhanced.

Leadership Requires Presence

Whilst organisations do not always factor in the development of leadership skills in their assessment of value for international assignments, a great many recognise that expanding the global nature of their leadership talent cohorts is a valuable outcome and a source of competitive advantage. Leadership breadth and depth is core to the value proposition behind these assignments, whether implicitly or explicitly.

It remains clear, based on the feedback from those that we have interviewed that this value is only truly achievable through physical assignments. In short, whilst it is possible to lead virtually, it is not optimal.

Physical Presence Matters

Many explanations are given for why physical moves are required. This starts with one very simple fact that time-zone differences are often too large to enable real relationships and real teamwork when not physically present in day-to-day business activities. At a simple biological level, we work on a diurnal (daytime) rhythm which needs to be

maintained. Exhaustion kicks in if we try to consistently work to a different timeline to the one we are living in.

Even when time zones are not so large, several other factors seem to be important and relevant. Issues such as the speed of learning, the dynamics of teams, the ability to build real networks and rapport and the transfer of culture are all believed to rely on physical presence. These factors also help explain why leadership development grown through international assignments considerably exceeds that achievable through virtual or hybrid alternatives. These important considerations demonstrate how value is released through these assignments.

The bottom line, both figuratively and literally, appears to be that physical presence (whether short-term or long-term) is both necessary and sufficient to develop true global leadership capabilities through international work. Being physically present enables leadership presence!

The research is ongoing at present and if you should like to discuss it further or indeed participate with a leadership colleague from your organisation, Phil or John Rason, Group Head of Consulting at Santa Fe Relocation, would be delighted to hear from you.



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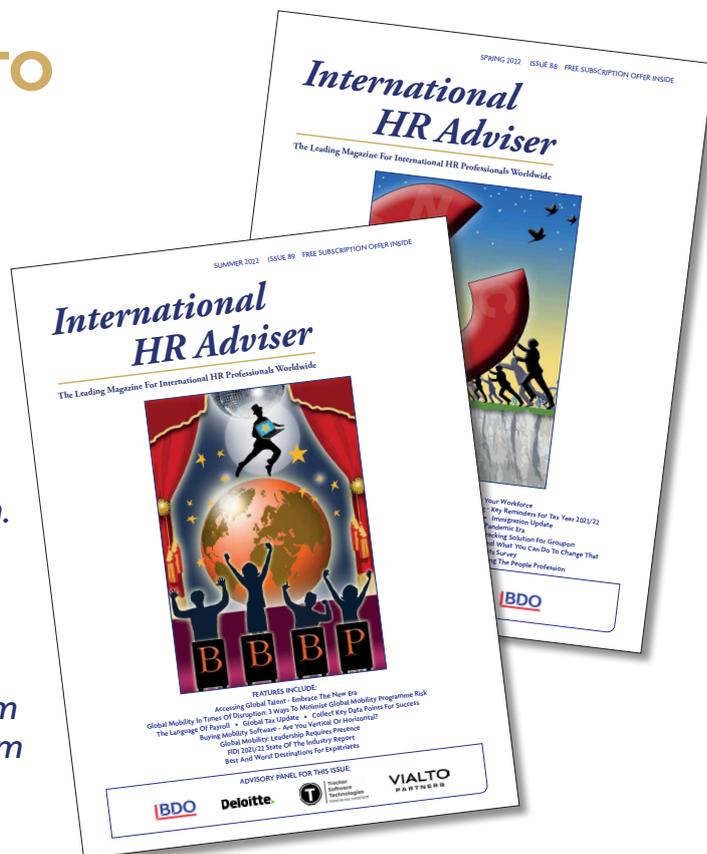
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