

Mobility Matters

How global mobility can help retain your best people

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(KPMG in Australia is a KPMG International member firm)

The role of your global mobility team is clear: make sure your employees arrive where they are needed, when they are needed, and do not run afoul of any tax or immigration rules in the process. While this may have once been true, today's organisations are looking for more from their global mobility teams. The traditional goals are still critical, but the changing landscape of the global economy and the need to maintain a competitive workforce demand a more strategic approach. Global mobility teams can be "strategic enablers" of broader business goals.

This article addresses in practical terms what being "strategic" means for global mobility programs. It includes a focus on:

- working collaboratively with key stakeholders,
- seeking "buy-in" and proactive support (indeed participation) from high-level executives,
- sending more junior staff (e.g., of the "Millennial" generation) who are qualified on assignment, and
- finding more creative ways of incentivising and rewarding those who take assignments.

Global mobility programs: Some key points for developing and retaining top talent

Consider the following five ways global mobility can help retain your talented and skilled people.

1. Break down silos: Be more than international HR

Often, global mobility teams operate in isolation from the rest of the business. But global mobility can and should intersect with both the strategic goals and practical activities across your business. Rather than simply managing secondment logistics, global mobility can enhance an organisation's talent management, learning and development, employee value proposition, and collaboration objectives. It is important to always bear in mind that your mobility needs can help to identify and nurture your future leaders by providing roles and experiences that will challenge and develop them professionally and personally.



Assignee selection

Being strategic in selecting your assignees is critical. Selecting candidates based on past performance won't always yield successful international assignments or happy assignees. Consider their cultural adaptability and "global preparedness" (and that of their accompanying family members). The best candidates for global mobility don't just bring technical ability or work experience, they bring an open mind, a willingness to embrace diverse viewpoints and ways of operating, and a sense of adventure.

2. Promote mobility from the top down

C-suite executives can often be the "rubber stamp" for activities in global mobility programs: they simply approve international roles created to fill an immediate need and/or the projected costs that go with them.

However, though often untapped in this regard, senior executives can be key advocates for your program, proactively promoting assignments among their best people. If your people see your C-suite promoting your global mobility program, then they are more likely to view assignments as an interesting way of building credibility with their teams and bosses and developing their careers. This top-down approach also fosters a constructive role for global mobility as a vital part of the organisation's business strategy.

For example, at Fonterra global mobility is seen as critical to developing capability and engaging their people. So global mobility opportunities are embedded in quarterly talent and succession planning discussions, which are attended and sponsored by the CFO. At the three-year mark – in other words three years into each assignment – each assignee's case is reviewed and new overseas opportunities are identified, matched to each person's individual goals and the overall business strategy. That way, Fonterra aims to move its top performers on to new assignments every three years.

"Having senior leaders partake in these discussions is critical," says Nicola Spencer, Fonterra's Senior Global Mobility Advisor, "so decisions can be made quickly with a highly strategic lens. Sponsorship creates a more seamless mobilisation experience because the approval chain for the assignment is aligned from day one."

3. Share opportunities with your Millennials

Surveys tell us that Millennials want fast career progression and will readily change jobs to get it. No other generation changes employers more frequently for professional development, a more fulfilling role, or better compensation.¹

One way to help meet the varied and changing interests and needs of Millennials is to recruit them into your global mobility program. In particular, just graduating Millennials are in many ways ideal for mobility because they can be less tied to their home country, in many cases may enjoy travelling, and may be more open to international experience and adventure. Younger workers tend to view international assignments positively.² And it could very well attract future generations: a graduate recruitment program that stands out from the crowd may indeed help attract much attention and interest.

Most organisations don't offer international experience to staff until they have several years' experience. By offering international assignments to your younger workers earlier in their careers, you can potentially increase their loyalty while developing their talent.

Future leaders relish a challenge. So your rising stars probably see international assignments as a ticket to learning new skills, and developing personally and professionally while building an international network. At KPMG, we established our global mobility program "Tax Trek" for junior staff. This gives them the opportunity to undertake short-term international assignments with our tax practices worldwide, helping them to develop a global mind-set, build cross-border professional relationships, and think beyond borders, so to speak.





One Tax Trek veteran – who as a KPMG senior consultant – travelled to Tokyo from Perth on a short-term secondment recently. Now based in Switzerland, he told us, “This opportunity, early in my career, to work in a completely different culture, build global connections and share knowledge across borders, was something I couldn’t pass up. It was an experience I won’t forget – it not only led to personal growth, but strengthened my loyalty to the firm.”

4. Understand what your people need and offer it

Offer incentives (and not just cash)

Because your most promising people are going to be driven by challenges and career growth, as much as, if not more than, by cash rewards, offering international experience to them can be so important. One idea is, if you experience cyclical busy periods, you might want to set up a formal short-term office swap program. This can be a great way to provide international experience to your junior employees. It also means you can better manage workflow, lending support to other offices when they need it, and receiving your own support when you are busier. There are creative ways to give employees international experience and exposure – for example, if it squares with your organisation’s culture, consider allowing your “go-getters” to get involved with charitable work in communities overseas. What works for you and your employees will depend on the type of organisation, its overseas network, and resources, among other things.

However, roles in popular markets are limited – it seems oftentimes that New York and London attract more candidates than there are roles. The issue becomes how to encourage candidates for more challenging remote or developing destinations. Traditionally, most organisations have provided financial incentives. Hardship allowances, additional paid leave, and location premiums are common. But they can make these placements costly for the business, and may not improve assignment outcomes in the long run. There may be other ways of offering incentives for employees who may be wary of taking assignments in less popular markets, but that will depend on what motivates employees in your organisation, your corporate culture, and your resources.

Nimble anticipating and responding to employees needs

Global mobility professionals have seen enough to understand what can come up for assignees, pre-departure and on-assignment. Take moving. Moving is hard already; but moving from one country to another can be very hard. Some of your people will need a little help, others will need a lot. Making sure your people feel supported in their new roles and locations will go a long way to keeping them engaged.



Employees (and their families) can quickly become frustrated if they need extra support but don't get it as it falls outside of the global mobility policy. Constantly approving policy exceptions can resolve this, but that can turn out to be administratively burdensome, and sets precedents for future assignees to ask for (and get) the same thing. It can also undermine the mobility team, who may initially say "no" but subsequently be overruled.

What we have seen is that many organisations are now moving to provide flexible relocation policies.

Each person is allocated a set budget, points, or credits that they can use to select what they need from a suite of benefits. Don't need a hire car? No problem, you can put the spare points towards additional temporary accommodations, or extra air-freight instead.

For a moderate increase in administrative burden (which can be mitigated by self-service technology) and comparable or even reduced cost, this sort of flexible approach can enhance your employee's assignment experience significantly.

Next steps to consider

Cross-function teaming – Work collaboratively with human resources, learning & development, finance, and business unit leaders to find where your global mobility process intersects with their goals and activities.

Top down – Work together with senior executives to embed global mobility in pipeline planning and succession management. If their high performing, future leaders are earmarked for assignments, then your executives will take a serious and welcome interest in helping drive the global mobility program.

Early opportunities – Look at your graduate workforce and identify high-potential employees early. Source international roles suited to junior employees, and consider establishing a formal program promoting international rotations each year.

Non-cash incentives – Younger generations are looking at a variety of incentives – not just cash – to motivate them professionally and induce their loyalty. So, offer other, extra-curricular possibilities. For example, people working in developing communities often find the opportunity to undertake volunteer work a few days a month (while being paid) very rewarding, even enticing. Perhaps there are opportunities international charities can offer to teach English to local school kids, install water pumps for remote villages, or help conservation projects near your organisation's operations.

Relocation – Make sure that in setting your company's relocation benefits you:

- engage with your people to understand their needs;
- align your policy provisions with both market best practice and what your people tell you;
- use data analytics to understand where the costs and value of your mobility program are;
- regularly review and update policies, at least every three years so that they remain fit for purpose.

As the labour market tightens alongside relocation budgets, it becomes more important to make your global mobility spend go further and to offer the broader business more lasting and strategic value. Bringing a broader vision to global mobility programs means you can show real value to your business, which entails developing and retaining your people, while fulfilling needs across your local and global network.



Conclusion

The value to your business of getting global mobility right is high. Many organisations have seen the value in taking steps to transform their global mobility departments from reactive, check-the-box groups to essential partners that help drive employee professional development, loyalty, and retention from the most junior to the most senior levels, and build programs that contribute to the organisation's global business success. Your global mobility team needs to make sure it is aligned with the organisation's talent management strategies while also enabling broader business goals.

For many organisations, prospects for growth are in new overseas markets. Tapping in to these markets necessitates moving your best people to the source of the new business. Global mobility departments can and should play a critical role in helping their organisations identify the right talent, appropriately motivate them through creative and flexible programs and incentives, and get them safely and efficiently to where the organisation needs them worldwide.

Footnotes

¹ See for example: <https://www.robertwalters.com/content/dam/robert-walters/corporate/news-and-pr/files/whitepapers/attracting-and-retaining-Millennials-UK.pdf> (refer to statistics on page 3 (91% want rapid career progression, 69% say career progression keeps them engaged, etc.); also bottom of page 3 for "top three reasons Millennials change jobs"). In addition, see section 2 of the following survey: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/what-Millennials-in-the-workforce-look-for/>.

² See: <https://www.robertwalters.com/content/dam/robert-walters/corporate/news-and-pr/files/whitepapers/attracting-and-retaining-Millennials-UK.pdf> (refer to statistics on page 12).



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