

What Is Your Strategy for International Employee Mobility?





Executive Summary

Having mastered the intricacies of logistical deployment, international employee mobility leaders are looking to the next frontier: to address the strategic elements of mobility and support their organizations in a more deliberate way. We can successfully move household goods from here to anywhere, but can we decrease the number of assignments that fail? We have policies to address expatriate compensation, but can we increase repatriation retention and post-assignment career satisfaction?

The first step to becoming a more strategic player is to identify the elements of international employee mobility that help the organization meet its business objectives. During the first quarter of 2010, Brookfield Global Relocation Services (Brookfield GRS) conducted in-depth interviews with sixteen senior international mobility leaders in Europe and North America, in a number of industries, in order to ask questions about the direction and nature of mobility strategy within their companies. Included were the financial, pharmaceutical, manufacturing, consumer products, information technology, logistics and oil and gas sectors, and over the course of conducting the interviews, several avenues to developing strategies for international employee mobility emerged and were explored:

- How are **assignment parameters** changing?
- What aspects of their international mobility **program design** contribute the most to its success?
- How does mobility **service delivery** support business needs?
- How do companies develop their **policy** to meet the new business needs?
- Do companies see **assignments as a business investment**? How is the value equation articulated to the rest of the organization?
- What **advice on developing strategy** does mobility leadership have for those who are embarking on strategy development initiatives?

During the past couple of years, where global economy woes led to a downturn in the number of international assignments in many companies due to cost saving initiatives, these mobility leaders utilized this period as an opportunity to refocus their programs on the link between mobility and business objectives.

The outcome is the emergence of the international employee mobility practice as a strategic partner in the organization impacting purpose, function and alignment of the international assignment program.

Assignment parameters Changes in assignment parameters are one of the first outcomes of change in the strategic approach to international employee mobility. Moves such as cross border commuters and developmental assignments are not new to many of these organizations. What is new for many of them is their inclusion as an assignment type under the mobility program umbrella.

Program design Learning from best practices and incorporating new ideas where they best serve one's own organization has become a key strategic focus for international employee mobility leadership. Among these are strategies leading to an increased focus on elements such as assignee selection, preparation and repatriation planning. These are ideas that have been around for a while and have now come into their own as organizations focus on the long-term value of assignments to the company's business success.

Service delivery How international employee mobility delivers its services has been a key focus for a long time. Does it make the most sense to centralize? Decentralize? Regionalize? These questions speak to the impact that industry-specific factors have on employee mobility. Individual company differences, such as business objectives, corporate culture and geographic location are factors, but the overarching structure of mobility programs is very similar within industry groups. Why a company has assignments, whether they are within a region or into countries outside the home region, and what type of return assignments are expected to generate: all of these elements seem to align along industry practices more so than other factors.

Key Areas of Focus

Assignment parameters

Program design

Service delivery

Policy

Assignments as a business investment

Advice on developing strategy

Policy Perhaps the most visible sign of strategic orientation is in a company's policy. Almost all the leaders interviewed identified meaningful policy change as one of the outcomes of their strategic focus. This pharmaceutical company summed it up for many:

We don't make changes [to policy] to save money. The reason has to be linked strategically to business.

Major policy changes taking place include the introduction of commuter assignment policies, developmental assignment policies, policies that are talent-driven rather than assignment driven and, still, cost-optimized policies.

Assignments as a business investment Perhaps nothing speaks as directly to strategy development within international employee mobility as does the representation of assignments as a business investment. Becoming part of the corporate strategy arena, communicating initiatives and value, supporting key business initiatives and bringing new ideas to the table to help solve emerging challenges are some of the ways these international employee mobility leaders are helping their business counterparts to see assignments as a business investment.

Advice on developing strategy Insights provided by the sixteen industry leaders interviewed incorporate just about every element of the international employee mobility arena and serve as a blueprint for others who want to develop and lead a strategy for international employee mobility:

1. Get on the same page as the business units
2. Pick something readily do-able to start
3. Introduce new ideas to the organization
4. Act strategically
5. Partner with the partners
6. Vision the future for employee mobility in the organization
7. Metrics matter
8. Revisit the alignment within the organization
9. Get the most out of the policy
10. Get to the table sooner

The result? A veritable top ten list of how international employee mobility can succeed as a strategic function in today's corporate environment.

International Employee Mobility from Yesterday to Today

In the early days of corporate international employee mobility, assignment management was, in essence, a fulfillment activity. Experienced professionals took long term assignments in countries where companies wanted to start up operations, had acquired operations or were seeking to market their products or services. In response to these business needs, mobility programs provided the fundamentals of making assignments possible. In these early times, the practice was heavily compensation focused. This was in the 1950's and 60's, the era in which the home country 'balance sheet approach' was born.

This approach dominated the next two decades. Through the 1990's, corporate strategies evolved, and the appearance and activities of international employee mobility changed as a result. Companies that had established operations across the globe sought to transfer corporate culture and practices. This extended international employee mobility to include inpatriation as well as expatriation. The assignment of Third Country Nationals (employees who are not citizens of either the headquarters or host countries) added complexity to compensation approaches and regulatory compliance. Later, short term assignments came into vogue as a solution to reducing the cost of long term assignments and to meet the needs of new corporate strategies including project work and joint ventures.

Even today, for companies new to international employee mobility, meeting the tactical challenges remains a focus of their global mobility program. But by the early 2000's, experienced corporate employee mobility leaders began to recognize new dynamics influencing their role. More types of assignments, assignees recruited from all over the world, different personal situations for expatriate families, a focus on cost control and the war for talent led mobility program leaders to see the need to think about international mobility in more ways than managing deployment.

These companies began to look at issues related to the value of assignments over the long term – meaning beyond the term of the assignment. Return on investment, post-repatriation integration, assignment selection practices and linkages to talent management and succession planning became common concerns. In short, international employee mobility began to take on a strategic bent all of its own.

This evolution of mobility leadership from tactical to strategic is still ongoing. Many leaders, especially those with relatively new programs, rapidly changing programs or small programs, are beginning to examine their role in developing international employee mobility strategy that aligns with business and human resources objectives.

Strategic Elements Contributing to the Achievement of Business Objectives

Below we will examine in greater detail the six avenues that emerged over the course of conducting the interviews to include a strategic application as well as specific quotes from participating sixteen mobility leaders.

Changing Assignment Parameters

Changes in assignment parameters – the structural elements such as assignment types, timing, and objectives – are one of the first outcomes of addressing international employee mobility more strategically. Addressing these changes is the most common strategic initiative reported by those interviewed, regardless of industry. Interestingly, this outcome, like so many strategic initiatives, springs from a very logistical situation. Many companies reported a decline in the number of international assignments last year over previous years; a finding echoed in the Brookfield GRS 2010 Global Relocation Trends Survey, which reported that 46% of companies saw a drop in their international assignee population during the past year. As an example, an information technology company that moved 1,200-1,500 employees around the globe five years ago moved 700 last year.

Not surprisingly during a global recession, corporate cost savings was the primary reason for the decrease as identified by the interviewees. What was interesting, though, was mobility leadership's response to this business change. As long as the business management was looking at assignments more carefully, many mobility leaders responded by introducing a more strategic approach to assignment decision-making.

One approach in developing a more strategic orientation to international employee mobility was to define the reasons why the organization utilizes international assignments, how different assignment types support different business objectives and what are the components of each assignment package. The approach used by an information technology company is representative of the approach voiced by several leaders:

We identified five investment strategies that are supposed to be reasons for assignments: business development, which is the largest; technical, which addresses customer needs; professional development for high potential employees talent retention, which is an employee-generated initiative; talent attraction, which is small; and knowledge transfer, which is also small.

Another assignment parameter change that a number of those interviewed had in common was a shift in the business rationale for assignments. Although the crux of an assignment is the job that needs to be filled, the filling of that job is becoming more of a long-term career consideration, not just a skill-based one. As one consumer goods company noted:

Now, 70% of assignments are job-based and 30% are career-based. The company is looking to flip those concentrations.

This is the genesis of the link between international employee mobility and talent management. There is a shift to viewing assignments more for their developmental opportunities rather than solely for their tactical purpose. This is a result of aligning international employee mobility program approaches with what the business says it needs, and it is a strategy voiced by interviewees in many industries including these from the pharmaceutical, logistical and automotive sectors:

[International assignments are important because] we need to see the world through other people's eyes.

Our assignments are becoming developmental in nature. We need to expose people to different countries, different ways of doing business.

We are more focused on professional development than in the past, leveraging our global scale. Every major function has global eyes – so every future leader needs global experience. We are shifting our program to align with recruiting objectives.

Another parameter change impacting international employee mobility strategy is location – both where assignees are going to and where they are coming from. While in the past assignment parameters were drawn around the needs of headquarters-based employees going ‘out’ on assignment, many companies in industries such as consumer products, logistics, transportation, pharmaceutical and oil and gas are responding to business conditions that will see more assignees from and to less traditional locations. International employee mobility leaders are shifting the very structure of their program to respond to the changing demographics of their assignee population.

We are looking to get people earlier in their career into international mobility. These would be more short term six months – one year assignments. Especially given our growth in India, China, and Brazil, we need to look at other models to get people out of those countries and into international mobility. I do not believe that the old model of sending expats in will meet the needs of our developing markets.

US outbound had always been our largest group of assignees. Now, assignments are transitioning to be more developmental in nature, and we recognize the need to expose people to different countries, different ways of doing business.

- Consumer products company

Strategy development application:

It is highly likely that the way an organization does business is changing, and as a result, international employee mobility needs to change with the business in order to be effective. This may extend beyond the traditional boundaries of international assignments or relocation – for example, the inclusion or expansion of commuter assignments. Or it may be that the up and coming locations for recruiting assignment candidates may require different resources or programs. Think broadly about the implications of business changes and the possible impact they may have on the mobility program parameters. Be proactive in making suggestions about how mobility can be repositioned and redesigned to support these changing business needs.

Program Design's Impact on Program Success

Corporate leadership has always depended on its mobility professionals to design effective assignment programs. In the beginning, the focus was primarily financial. Financial concerns are still a key driver, but even the definition of financial concerns has gone beyond 'keep them whole' to address cost competitiveness, regional/local applicability and, of course, return on investment. Interest in programs that address the extended lifecycle of an assignment – pre-assignment through post-repatriation – has emerged as a key focus. International employee mobility leaders need to know how individual program components or services contribute to the overall success of mobility support. Interestingly, almost all the leaders interviewed identified different elements of their programs as meaningful contributors to their programs' success.

We are doing a good job on candidate selection, which includes the spouse. This has slowed the timeline down significantly and we have had to educate the organization to move away from quick moves. But it has definitely contributed to the success of assignments in the past decade.

- Logistics company'

Selection is key, because if people leave the organization following assignment, that is a big financial loss.

- Pharmaceutical company

Our industry is changing vis-a-vis margins, so cost pressures are more of an issue for mobility than they were in the past. We have seen a paring of enhancements. At the same time, we have to counter the image that assignments are bad or costly, that they have their applications. To achieve our goals we developed different types of programs. We used to have two – long term and short term assignments. Now we have ten.

- Pharmaceutical company

We are getting more involved in strategic workforce planning for our organization. For example, the company is focusing on emerging markets. Traditionally, this might mean a standard expatriate program to move employees from established to emerging markets. But we are looking at it to determine what emerging markets want.

- Pharmaceutical company

What stands out is the focus on strategic elements of program design rather than the services delivered. Even candidate selection is essentially a strategy-based component (to ensure that assignees have the highest likelihood of a successful assignment). It would appear that many of the practical program services – household goods shipment, temporary accommodations, home leave – have been ironed out in leading companies to the point where there is now an opportunity to focus on the more strategic elements. Even in industries considered to be highly traditional and project-oriented, such as oil and gas, the focus of the relationship between program design and program success is taking on long-term planning components:

Six months ago we rolled out an International Work Profile attached to each person's record to capture their experience. We also ask what factors drive your decision-making for assignments, so we actually know what each potential assignee's drivers are. This really helps with selection. This process has taken hold really well. In fact, we had a 60% response rate by day two!

- Oil and gas company

Strategy development application:

Cutting edge is not just for 'other companies'. With many of the practical services involved in international employee mobility designed satisfactorily to meet current needs, mobility leaders have the opportunity to turn their attention to determining how their program meets longer term needs. A number of programs – from candidate selection to repatriation planning – have been around, but underutilized, for quite some time, and it appears that leading companies are looking hard at how these strategically-focused services can make a difference to the success of the mobility program and the business it serves.

Service Delivery

How international employee mobility delivers its services may not have the same appeal as other elements such as talent management integration, but it is the most visible aspect of the program to assignees, their families and to managers. The age old question of how to structure international employee mobility service delivery is still on the table, though the emphasis has changed from 'how does it serve our [employee mobility services] needs' to 'how does it meet the needs of our customers [assignees, families, business units, corporate leadership]?'.

To centralize or decentralize, that is one question. There is an adage that says, whether your service delivery model is centralized or decentralized, wait a few years and it will change. But it appears that leading companies are finding that there actually is a 'right' approach for them, one that is based on their global footprint, their corporate culture and the types of assignments that predominate.

Consider this from a rapidly globalizing logistics company:

At the moment, we are still fairly decentralized. But administratively we are moving to a global platform. We know we need more coordination, especially with short term assignments, which we work on more than long term assignments. Yet, the structure was built for long term assignments!, so we know we will need to change the structure to provide appropriate support going forward.

Or this from a technology company that has seen the approach swing from decentralized to a more centralized position:

About five years ago, our program was decentralized and has now progressed to a more streamlined, coordinated model. We built centers of excellence. We have an SME for mobility who capitalizes on our external partners to decrease internal administrative burden and focus on strategic work. This is similar to the model that has been implemented across many HR practices. Within mobility, it has reduced individually negotiated packages and resulted in a more market based, core centered approach.

From a transportation company that has seen its operations expanding regionally:

Since 2004 we are one team globally, with representatives in each regional center. This seems to be working out well.

The recent evolution in this pharmaceutical company demonstrates the real change the global companies are undergoing in how they deliver their services worldwide:

Everything has changed in our mobility function in past two years. We were very HQ driven. This worked because most of our moves were into or out of the HQ country. Now we have about 350 country combinations. The centralized unit did everything themselves – even served as local HR for a lot of topics. In 2006 we revised our HR function worldwide, transforming HR into three pillars: shared service center, business partner, center of expertise. Strategic aspects of mobility, e.g., policy development and exception management, are part of the center of expertise. A separate team does operational work in the shared service center.

As with most aspects of international employee mobility strategy, trends run along industry lines. Industries for which international assignments represent a strategic initiative have different goals than industries where assignments exist to meet customer and/or project requirements. Consider the experience of this transportation company:

We have had to help the business understand the importance of compliance. We elected to centralize our program - not just saying we are centralized, but really being centralized. Compliance improved – no more 6-8 month business trips.

In addition to the structure of the program, the placement of the international employee mobility program on the organization chart has become more of a consideration. Perhaps because of its roots as a predominantly compensation-oriented endeavor, international employee mobility has tended to be aligned with Compensation and Benefits functions. With its future in talent management ventures, leading practitioners touched on the impact of reporting in through HR, as this pharmaceutical company did:

Our team sits with Talent and Strategic Workforce Planning, a skill center, not a service center. We used to report into Rewards/C&B and it's good that we still have links there. It has been quite a mindset change. We are more connected to the 'why' now.

This underscores how important it is for international employee mobility to create and maintain links across many functions, not just within the functional area into which it reports. It is a strategic approach for mobility – to demonstrate that mobility service delivery is a strategic function within the organization.

Strategy development application:

Service delivery needs to be viewed as having strategic value as well as practical importance. Consider how the mobility practice is organized globally – its alignment with other staff functions such as HR and Compensation and Benefits and how its structure complements the business operations. Determine how the structure of the program serves its customers – and take advantage of external relationships to build a structure that advances the function's strategic goals.

Policy

All discussions on strategy hit on policy at some point. Policy approach, content, exceptions: they are the most visible signs of strategic endeavors within international employee mobility. Most of the leading companies update their policies regularly – annually or biannually. In these updates they modify existing provisions so as to decrease exception rates: clarifying language, broadening or narrowing uses, increasing amounts, adding eligibility, eliminating underutilized components and incorporating new ones.

The strategic leaders also look at their policies on a broader level and assess the structure, design and alignment of the policy, viewing policy as an instrument in the toolbox of international employee mobility. Given the challenges that these global companies are facing, policy strategy among the international employee mobility leaders focused on how to ensure new mobility patterns required by the business are addressed successfully in policy.

One pharmaceutical company took on commuter assignments:

Our commuter plan accommodates employees who do not want to move for personal reasons. It covers travel and accommodations for commutes of 1-2 hours typically. We have 20-30 employees on this plan right now. These 'assignments' are usually up to two years and often end with another job in the home location. We came to this program by evaluating exceptions.

Another pharmaceutical company focused on talent management initiatives, a work still in progress:

We have a Global Opportunities policy for emerging talent. It gives them opportunities to do different things in the organization. It is still an experiment, and it has been a bit of a challenge in some ways.

It was noteworthy to see the scope of sweeping change to policy that has occurred in many of the leading companies and how many cited far-reaching policy change as a key strategic focus, as evidenced by this information technology participant:

In the past two years we have transformed our policies from an old-fashioned approach that really did not address business or talent management needs. We created a framework that addresses all aspects – integrated all elements and addressed different business needs by function and geography. The Approach is talent driven – every move is evaluated: what is the reason? It is a decision-tree approach, which brings a fairer experience [than menu-driven approach] for employees, delivers a more consistent experience for employees and managers and is not difficult to administer.

It is important to remember the overarching parameters that dictate policy: industry is one, as are business reasons for assignments, geographic dispersion of candidates and assignments and, of course, corporate culture. It is quite a feat when a company can take these factors, mix in best practices and emerge with a policy that serves their customers – employees, families, management, administration – well.

Here is how one oil and gas company went about it:

We have come a long way in just a few years. In 2007, we did not have a policy. Every project would strike its own deal. We developed a core/flex package that builds in pre-defined options to allow negotiation with prospects, but also provides for key elements in a standard way.

Policy is one of the main areas where industry culture plays a large part in international employee mobility strategy. This observation from another oil and gas industry company underscores how something that works in another industry or corporate culture just does not apply to them:

Working in a project environment has unique challenges. Mobility support is often viewed as an incentive or perk, not assistance to support parity. In an industry like ours, expatriates expect to be able to bank their base salary and live off assignment benefits. That is why they take assignments. So it is very difficult to incorporate new approaches.

What drives innovation is not that every idea is enacted, but the fact that leaders are constantly looking at new ideas to assess how they might benefit the business needs of the organization. Sometimes, the review leads to the conclusion that a new policy approach is not needed, as was the experience of this pharmaceutical company:

We considered an 'IA lite' policy during our last policy review, but the cost savings were not significant enough to add another policy to the program.

What is key is that international employee mobility leadership looks at business objectives and assesses how the policy does or does not support them and adapts or develops policy to do so. Sometimes these changes are narrow, related to different circumstances in different locations, and sometimes they are broad.

One consumer goods company manages the juggle between global and local as needed:

We are looking at more cost effective packages. We use a global policy. We have a standard and flex model, but do not differentiate between regions. For challenging/new locations, we adapt. For example, in northern China, we buy houses because rentals are not readily available. For local transportation, we do not provide drivers unless the assignee cannot read the language. In America, we provide added transportation because of different living environment/norm. For the most part, we do expect people to adapt to local norms, such as housing in Japan.

This information technology company took the opposite approach – incorporating as much flexibility into the global policy as possible:

While we have had the same policy for a while, we made some changes a couple years ago after doing some extensive benchmarking. We use a menu approach that builds in flexibility. Six provisions are required and the rest are flexible. Even within flexible provisions there can be flexibility within a benefit as well (e.g. days of temporary living). What we noticed is that managers tend to use the same approach for similar circumstances – so businesses have established standardization within their entities.

Strategy development application:

There are many models for policy approaches out there and, as the pace of global expansion increase, new variations, appear with more frequency. The key to effective policy strategy is to link the approach to the business, assignee population size, administrative structure and company culture of the organization. Each of these factors is important and may be defined differently in different companies. For example – policy may be dictated by company-wide culture or it can be based on the will of key leaders. Company leadership itself can be authoritarian or egalitarian – it does not change the fact that it is critical to know what leaders want or expect, but it impacts how an individual international employee mobility leader goes about adapting policy to meet business needs. This is why, even though there are plenty of great ideas out there being used by many great companies, it is essential not to just jump on the next-best-thing bandwagon but to consider if and how an idea is applicable to one's own organizational nuance.

Assignments as a Business Investment

Mobility is not a strategic business partner if no one else acknowledges (or is aware of) how the program contributes to the success of the business.

International employee mobility leaders have been trying to definitively assess return on investment of international assignments for years. The challenge is two-fold. First, meaningful, measurable assignment objectives must be agreed upon. Second, the considerations can be significantly different for every company, as well as for different assignments, making it difficult to learn from other companies.

Evaluating assignments as business investments is a lot of work. Broadly, it can be divided into three processes: define the goals, measure the activity and evaluate the result. It is an endeavor that many of the leading companies have attempted and although it is difficult to mimic how another company evaluates its international assignments as business investments, it is possible to learn from the process undertaken in order to develop an appropriate approach.

This consumer goods company's experience is representative of many of those interviewed. Progress has been made on the first step – to define why international assignments are important to the company's business objectives and to articulate assignment expectations. Not as much progress has been on steps two and three – to measure the activity and evaluate its result.

We have a value-added assessment for each and every assignment to justify the additional 2-3 times salary cost. The requestor must state why a local employee will not work and state the objectives for the assignment along with other criteria. Conceptually, the idea is that there are some responses that could be 'show stoppers'. Unfortunately, sometimes story lines evolve to meet the desire to go.

We try different things. For objectives, a standard part of the value agreement is to groom a successor. But we know people are staying on assignments because there is no successor and post-repatriation position available. This also blocks mobility for others.

People find it very difficult in a rapidly moving environment to have those discussions [about added value]. Have a need, fill it. We have not made the connection yet regarding value and options.

One information technology company is pressing ahead:

*Management is definitely starting to see assignments as an investment – we now have assignee **candidates**, not just assignees. Now we need to focus on linking evaluation of success to our business strategy for that assignment. For example, for professional development, what measurement criteria are applied - did they go into a better job after repatriation? For business development, was the customer need met? While progress has been made in seeing assignments as investments, the next step in the evolution process is into something more stratified.*

Perhaps because they are 'newer' industries with less tradition to consider, or because they face increased global business pressure that leads to a higher rate of change, information technology companies are making more progress:

Through business justification process, consensus is reached with the business and finance regarding assignment objectives and post-repatriation expectations. We also do ongoing tracking and have touch points throughout the assignment to keep the dialog going to ensure the objectives of all parties – including the assignee – are aligned.

Learning from the journey – not the results – of best-in-class companies is always a priceless opportunity. Here is what one pharmaceutical company has been through:

We have been working with one division that moves a large number of people in a low margin business. They would love to save money and even gave us a target number. After we analyzed all the expenditures, though, it was clear that the solution was not to take cost out from the program, because there was not much optional cost – it was basically mandatory. So the next consideration was to assess if all these assignments were needed. Even then, the difference in cost to put a local or an expat in the position was not huge, and given that we were working with a group of ten senior leaders who all had international experience, it became clear that the expatriate experience was a key component.

This information technology company is well on its way to making the connection between assignments and business value:

There is a difference between skill or project based assignments and developmental assignments in terms of the long term (post-repatriation) value to the company. The former assignment can be measured against results during the assignment, while the latter requires long-term results. That said, they both require criteria to be known in advance and then evaluated at the end. We do not want to go from nothing to one-size-fits-all, but instead to analyze the impact of assignments based on the strategy.

Two major types of assignment objectives – skill based and developmental – have two very different measurement criteria and, therefore, very different outcomes in terms of their value proposition. The skill based is more immediate – in essence, the assignment has to pay for itself. The developmental is long term – what does the company expect to achieve post-assignment that makes the investment of time and money worthwhile.

Most companies acknowledge the challenges mobility practices have had in establishing numerical value calculations. Some companies, such as this pharmaceutical firm, have been able to make progress by tying into HR development strategies to demonstrate how assignments benefit the organization over the long term.

There is an increasing awareness of the importance of developmental opportunities now, looking at assignments as more than just filling jobs. This is due to having lost key people and recognizing that to grow the company it is necessary to share experience across borders. In operations where leadership has been on assignments, they are now putting together a mobility strategy as part of their HR strategy.

Strategy development application:

A key component of the assignments-as-a-business investment assessment is to have leadership throughout the organization on board. Their buy-in is essential to establishing business goals and, therefore, assignment objectives. This should be considered a great opportunity to strengthen the integration of mobility with the business. This is done by starting the dialog, sharing metrics and outcomes and helping those throughout the company to be able to say how and why assignments are key to their business strategy.

The next step is to establish how assignment value is to be measured, in the short and long term. This is the step that trips up many organizations, but the way around this barrier is to work in concert with the business. There is no point to utilizing measurements that do not matter to the business. Agree on what will be measured and put the mechanisms in place to do so.

It is also important that the third component – evaluating the results – has transparency, so this is yet again an opportunity to involve the business. After all, the success of the assignment is about how it meets the business needs. If the goals were not accurate, if the measurement criteria were not effective, if the results were not what were expected, then it is up to all the players – mobility and business – to determine the cause and to decide what changes are needed. Mobility is an expert at the table, equal to the business expert and the talent management expert and the administration expert. Do not miss this opportunity to contribute as an equal.

Strategy Development Advice

Developing strategy is not a standalone activity in international employee mobility. It is an integral element of a company's business and HR strategy. The opportunity for mobility leaders is to recognize the commonalities across different assignments, in different departments, achieving different objectives for different managers and to address those commonalities in an overarching mission and/or value statement that can be agreed upon by all parties. Once this is in place, the next step is to identify where the organization wants to go, define the gaps, and develop an international employee mobility strategy that addresses those gaps and contributes to the company's long term business success.

The insights provided by industry leaders during the interviews distilled into a veritable top ten list of how international employee mobility can succeed as a strategic function in today's corporate environment:

Get on the same page as the business units. If they seem to be off track, do the work necessary to help them get on track. For example, is there a disconnect between what senior leadership says are the priorities and what managers request of mobility? Work with senior leadership's positions to design written guidelines for mobility.

In the words of one pharmaceutical company:

Push the organization to articulate the why and what assignees will do post-repatriation before assignments. Recognize that senior management's view of mobility impacts assignments and mobility strategy. So change in senior leadership is an indicator to view/review mobility strategy.

Pick something readily do-able to start. Strategy development can be a long, encumbering process, but it can also be a quick win. Identify some gaps that can be addressed readily and move ahead quickly on those. For example, is discussion of strategy limited to talk of cost cutting? Do the math and explain the actual cost difference between an expatriate and a local employee. Show which costs are mandatory. Survey past expatriates to find out from them what could have been done differently or in a less costly way. Address the issue, but help put it in perspective, too.

To earn a seat at the strategy table, international employee mobility needs to transform its image from tactical/fulfillment to one of strategic partnership.

Introduce new ideas to the organization. What are the new ideas other companies are looking at? Consider them all before dismissing any. When the focus is on any particular set of issues, it is tempting to ignore others that do not fit it. After all, we all have limited bandwidth. But these new ideas are strategically important to the organization – even if in the end they don't turn into something meaningful. If ideas are important enough to generate discussion within the mobility leaders' area of expertise, they are important enough to be considered for the organization. Do not wait to be asked – explain why mobility leadership should be part of the succession planning discussion. Invite yourself to the table.

We spend too much time on 'how can we reduce costs' while we might get more benefit from looking at 'how can we get more value out of the experience'.

- Financial services company

Act strategically. Would it not be better to be able to respond to a request such as "should we be doing things differently in emerging markets?" with "yes – I have looked into that and have some good ideas for you" rather than "I will get right on that."

We need to balance our administrative and consultancy roles. On one hand, a lot of mobility work is technical – compliance, contracts, pensions, etc. On the other hand, consultancy role to help managers make mobility decisions, best support employees programmatically.

- Pharmaceutical company

Partner with the partners. If outsourced service providers are considered as vendors, think about changing that mindset to a more partnership orientation. Outsourced service providers have a lot to offer beyond the services they are contracted for. They are specialists in their field and they work with many other companies around the world. They have access to information, experiences and ideas that might benefit the strategy development process. Enlist their help, leverage their expertise.

Outsourcing has been a big change. We changed our expatriate compensation approach at the same time the company's globalization took off. While we reduced staffing on the day-to-day activities, we also gained an external partner who could help us with what we needed to succeed in our internal roles, which had suddenly changed a lot.

- Pharmaceutical company

Vision the future for employee mobility in the organization. Put a stake in the ground regarding how international employee mobility needs to look in five years or ten years. Work outside the organization for this – form a work group with other mobility leaders to discuss ideas, challenges, solutions and strategies. Come up with a set of long term objectives for the organization, as well as a process for how to get there.

Metrics matter. It takes insight, research and resources to develop effective metrics. Strategy is both theoretical and practical. Define is fine, but measurement matters. Think broadly about how international employee mobility supports its customers and identify the measurable moments. Yes, it matters how many phone calls are answered and how quickly, but it also matters how needs were met – and even anticipated. It matters how managers as well as employees feel supported by the mobility staff and processes. The way to develop great metrics is by working together with business partners.

Getting a handle on metrics is one of our upcoming top priorities. It is hard to figure out helpful metrics

- Information technology company

Revisit the alignment within the organization. There is more to international employee mobility than relocation. In addition to moving someone from point A to point B and ensuring they are reimbursed and paid, international employee mobility is becoming more about employee development in a global business environment. To do this effectively, the function should be part of the practice that addresses these factors in the organization. Where specifically that is organizationally, is not the same for all companies, but the important aspect is to proactively determine where that is and go there.

Get the most out of the policy. The international employee mobility policy can be one of the most practical aspects of our work. It states what the company does, what the employee does, what others do and what employees get. But it can be a lot more than that. It is typically the first written evidence of the mobility program that an employee sees. Therefore, it has a key role in setting expectations. So why not go beyond describing processes and costs covered and design policy to share vision and set expectations?

During the next policy review process, consider a more far-reaching analysis, one that extends beyond tweaking and refining. Does the policy reflect the company's business strategy? Is it effective in new markets where the company is expanding? Does it simplify or complicate processes? Take a broader look at how policy represents mobility's objectives and if it reads more like a 'to do list' rather than an implementation plan, consider a broad review to ensure it aligns with the strategic vision.

This is another opportunity to get input from the business partners. How do they use the policy documents and where do they feel supported as well as unsupported? Does the policy support the communication of assignment purpose and policy philosophy? Does the policy enable those new to international employee mobility to understand how and why assignment compensation and tax work the way they do?

Because of its visibility, policy resonates beyond its acknowledged purpose of what, where, how and how much to why, who and when. The most effective international employee mobility policy represents all of these factors, and does so in a way that seamlessly merges best practices with an organization's culture.

Get to the table sooner. The entry point of international employee mobility practice varies from company to company, but there is no doubt that those who enter into the process sooner add a more strategic value to the organization. Who knows more about the importance of aligning assignees with talent management initiatives? Or the importance of effective assignment selection and preparation on assignment success? Or when to begin repatriation planning to ensure long term business and personal goals are met? Since all of these are initiatives that must begin well in advance of the assignment relocation process, it is critical that the international employee mobility practice be part of the planning process.

In conclusion, having and exercising a well-developed strategy is a key role for international employee mobility. It is a pivotal opportunity to utilize what we know about the differences in employee expectations in different areas of the world, about different regulatory environments, workplace norms and family dynamics to inform and advise leadership in order to build the most effective global organization possible. In order to do this, international employee mobility must have a seat at the strategy table, must be a participative, respected partner, and must have new ideas to share and the ability to see beyond today to help the organization reach its goals. No small task indeed!

“This is not a new challenge, but it may become a more compelling challenge.”

-Director of International Assignments,
Pharmaceutical Company



About the Authors

Gill Aldred

Gill Aldred is the Sr. Director, Consulting Services, based in the Brookfield GRS London office. Gill has more than 20 years experience in international HR management and assignment administration in both corporate and consulting environments. Gill's experience includes implementation project management; policy development; compensation and benefits management; recruitment and cross-cultural training.

She has lived and worked in the United States, the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates and spent over four years living in Nigeria. In addition, Gill has been involved in implementing and managing international HR projects in North and South America; South East Asia; Africa; Australia and the Middle East.

Jacqueline Hauser

A recognized expert in global employee mobility policy and program design, Jacqui has worked with hundreds of multinational organizations over her 26 years in the field. Prior to her position as Principal, Global HR Strategies Group, she held the position of Vice President, Consulting Services and leader of the consulting practice at two global mobility management services companies.

In addition to her work with organizations on issues ranging from mobility program design to talent management integration to group moves, Jacqui's work has been widely published and she is a frequent speaker at international and national conferences. She has received several awards for her work, as well as designations including GPHR from the Society for Human Resources Management, CCP from WorldatWork, and CRP from Employee Relocation Council.

About Brookfield GRS Consulting Services

The Consulting Services Group at Brookfield GRS draws its expertise from serving a diverse cross-section of global companies as well as individual practical industry experience. Our seasoned Consulting Services Group works with clients to identify improvement opportunities within their policies and programs and constantly seeks creative ways to help our clients provide cost-effective international employee mobility programs that achieve high levels of employee satisfaction and retention.

The Group is able to address a wide variety of issues in a practical and proactive manner, bringing an impressive combination of outsourced management and corporate experience to bear on each project.

Relocation and Assignment Management Program Consultancy

Analysis of a company's mobility activity, program structure, process and service feedback from transferring employees and assignees, benchmark studies and data from industry resources are utilized to provide contemporary program review and recommendations.

Global Policy Consultancy

Utilizing the latest industry survey and trends data, as well as engaging the Brookfield GRS client base, benchmark studies and policy analyses provide valuable information ranging from individual policy components to entire global mobility policy structures.

Group Move Program Consultancy

Every group move is complex but the additional dimensions involved in any group move, including cross-border group moves, require careful assessment and management. The Consulting Services Group is able to draw on direct experience and resources to provide focused and business aligned support in the project planning, policy development and execution of any group move.

Thought Leadership

The Consulting Services Group is dedicated to bringing the latest mobility industry information to the forefront. Whether through articles, white papers and survey reports, facilitating webinars or roundtable sessions, Consulting Services works directly at the source to bring latest insights and tips to the international employee mobility leaders.

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