



World Mobility Perspectives

Global Mobility Trends

From AI to assignee apathy, discover what is shaping the sector in 2024

How the world works better

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Foreword

2023 was another extremely significant year in the world of global mobility and relocation, which prompted the familiar need for adaptation.

With the conflict in Ukraine showing no signs of ending, global turbulence was heightened with the devastating events in the Middle East. These terrible conflicts have far-reaching consequences, on supply chains, economies and perhaps most concerning of all, on cultural tolerance - as evidenced by the polarization caused by the war in Gaza. This all requires global mobility teams to be agile and respond, to ensure their assignees have the skills and tools they need to be safe, well and productive, while able to manage increasing costs.

But it's not just conflict and geopolitical tensions that force change in the world. While the pandemic's restrictions and the worst of its impact on our health are in the past, society changed forever during that period. Organizations continue to grapple with how, where and when we work - an issue forced into focus by Covid restrictions - while wellbeing has surged to the top of HR priority lists, having been spotlighted during the pandemic years.

Both of these issues feature in our latest trends report, as the mobility industry continues to find the best way of marrying hybrid work and wellbeing, with international relocation.

But as research we commissioned last year shows, relocation is a critical employee engagement tool, and despite global challenges, the appetite for international assignments are not diminishing. We touch on this, too.

And then there's technological innovation, which is another key driver for change. At the moment, everyone's talking about artificial intelligence - the prominence of which is being fuelled by ChatGPT and other large-language models. How does this fit with global mobility? Here, we report on just some of the ways the industry is beginning to use it to enhance the employee experience.

But what sits at the heart of all the trends we touch on in this report? Well, people, of course. Now more than ever, the employee - the person - is driving the agenda and becoming more central to decisions being made about corporate relocation. And organizations are doing what they do best: adapting.

I am grateful to Caitlin Pyett, who leads our Consulting practice at Crown World Mobility for coordinating this year's trends and sharing her perspective on each. And I am also grateful to Kim Woodlock at Smith & Nephew, Tracy Searl at Standard Chartered Bank, and our partners and colleagues for sharing their wisdom.

Enjoy our latest trends guide.



Jurgen Zyderveld

Group Vice President,
Crown World Mobility

Introducing Caitlin Pyett, Consulting Lead, Crown World Mobility

Our first trend is by Caitlin Pyett who leads Crown World Mobility's consulting practice. Caitlin oversees the development of Crown's thought leadership program, producing articles and research documents, while leading client-driven consulting engagements. She has been published and mentioned in Forbes Magazine, the HR Director, Unleash and the Daily Telegraph, and was featured as one of Relocate Magazine's Global Women in 2023. Caitlin has more than 25 years' experience in the industry, both in-house and with Crown. Her areas of specialization include sustainable mobility, remote work and employee experience.



Caitlin has authored this article and provided her perspective on each trend, supplementing the input of our external and internal authors.

Contact Caitlin at cpyett@crownew.com

Should I stay or should I go now? Assignment apathy versus nomad mentality

One of the most impactful outcomes of the pandemic was the shift in our working norms. Office-based work has given way to a more relaxed approach to location. Most companies offer home working, and some (usually newer) companies offer the ability to work from anywhere. At Crown World Mobility, we've noticed something very strange happening to attitudes as a result of this.

Yes, there are many – mainly young, hip, and carefree – people now looking to hop on a plane and take advantage of that 'work from anywhere' culture (give them a Wi-Fi connection and a beach, and they're good to go). On the other hand, we are increasingly hearing our clients report that some of their employees are more apathetic about the whole concept of international work. It's almost as if their attitude is: 'Well, if I can do my work perfectly well from my kitchen table, why would I bother relocating to the other side of the world?' And that's a very valid question.

So what is going on? Is this a generational thing, with Boomers and Gen X less motivated to get out there and uproot their lives for the chance to work overseas, while Gen Z are just itching to get on a plane? Or is it a passing phase? Are we all so used to the globalisation of our work and our world that assignments just don't hold the intrigue they once did? In this article, I explore this through the experience of a Head of Global Mobility at a media organisation.

Relocation apathy

The life of the journalist is, by its very nature, one which involves moving around. They have to be wherever the story is – with notepad, voice recorder and pen in hand – before they file their copy as quickly as they can. Although the world is undoubtedly becoming smaller and technology makes it easier to do a lot of jobs from home, reporting for a broadsheet newspaper with a cast-iron reputation for getting to the heart of stories is not one of them.

I recently spoke with the Head of Global Mobility at a media organization. She told me that even if they were working from home in the location to which they had been relocated, there would still be the expectation for their journalists to be across a story as it breaks, interviewing people and forging relationships that would be vital for the thorough reporting for which the organisation is renowned.

However, she also told me that they are aware of an apathy creeping into the wider world of work and mobility, in which employees are of the mindset that if they can work remotely then there is little point to going through all the upheavals associated with a relocation to a different country and that the desire to work abroad is decreasing.

Getting to the root of 'why'

Her employer understood that relocations improve retention and the speeds of progression, but the root cause of why they are seeing fewer people demonstrating an appetite for international assignments is something they want to try and understand. They are looking at whether it is something they can address through assignment packages and whether it is about understanding the opportunity, or if people are concerned about potentially being separated from family members following the pandemic.

“We currently have international postings for which we would expect to receive multiple internal applications,” she explained.

“These have not been forthcoming, and we are having to go externally and find local hires, so we want to understand why this is no longer an appealing proposition to some people within our company,” she adds.

“An internal survey is currently under construction, from which we hope to find out more about why our more experienced staff are not applying for international assignments. We want to learn about their perspectives on the value of them and what their potential blockers might be. Are they financial? Do they have caring responsibilities? Are they concerned about being separated from friends and family? Or their partner facing difficulties in getting a job in the host country?” she continues.

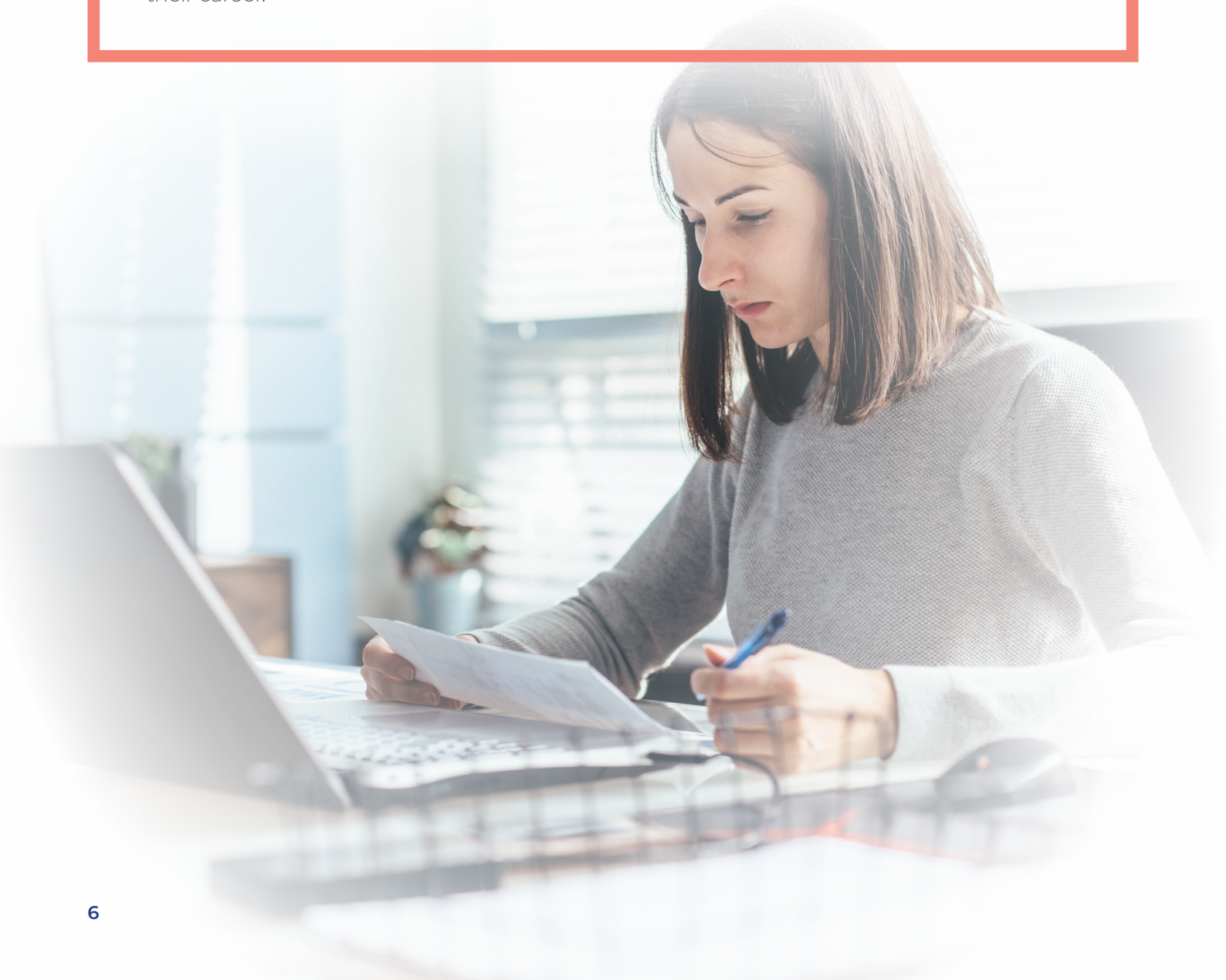


Setting out the benefits of international relocation

Off the back of their survey, the organization expects to find concrete reasons why some members of its staff do not wish to relocate. They can then use these reasons to articulate the potential benefits of the process and its value of that assignment to the business. There is only so much that the global mobility team can do; consequently, much of this articulation will need to come from senior leaders who will already have been on an overseas assignment at an earlier point in their career.

Leaders need to be engaged on the career aspect of relocation. Rather than simply seeing it as filling a role, they need to look at the process holistically as they consider what happens when the assignee returns to their home country maybe three years down the line.

When the organization has pulled the data together on this, they can demonstrate the value of assignments by highlighting that so many of the company's leaders have that international experience and that it has been good for them. The leadership team can be genuine advocates for relocation.



Unleash the power of the bot: Using AI in global mobility



by *Hanneke Noort*, Account Management Director, EMEA, Crown World Mobility

Artificial Intelligence was everywhere over the course of the last 12 months. After the initial concerns that ultra-intelligent robots would take over the planet subsided, we found way upon way of harnessing AI to help us do the heavy lifting in all kinds of different areas of our jobs, as a standard tool for process enhancement. It has the potential to streamline a lot of tasks, such as immigration and tax processes. One of our global mobility clients found that AI can be there for colleagues, whenever the colleague needs it. Here is how that company integrated an AI tool into its mobility processes.

What's your query?

The company implemented a chatbot in 2023, which employees could use to ask questions and receive answers about their relocations at a time that suited them. We've surely all been in the position upon leaving a meeting that, some hours later, we remember a question we meant to ask but forgot to. The chatbot is a solution that is there 24/7/365 to answer any queries that an employee might have about their relocation, from language support for their spouse, to the public holidays in their host location and everything in between.

This shift to a self-serve model, in line with recent organisational development, does not require human assistance nor involve a caller being passed between different departments in email chains or phone conversations. Simply put a query to the bot and it gives the user an answer.



The chatbot on its own does not contain the knowledge to draw upon and find an answer to the employee's query. This is held by a wiki, similar to Wikipedia, which is an ecosystem that gives scalability and contains the policy documents which hold the answers to employee questions, in whichever way they might be asked. The bot is the AI solution which navigates the wiki and finds the answer to the question. It streamlines the information contained within the wiki by leveraging ChatGPT models and the company's own data system to provide quick and relevant answers to all queries about life within the company, not just those about mobility, using a platform which can be integrated anywhere.

A mobility programme is of course based on policies. The chatbot looks through the wiki to find the relevant policies and provide answers using the large language modelling of the database. When a policy is changed, the new and up-to-date policy is stored in the wiki so that the bot can always provide up-to-the-minute answers.

The wiki is constantly updated and evolving to reflect the different ways employees ask their questions. The company uses AI to quality-check and ensure an answer is not discoverable only by using technical jargon; it should be findable based on the language that an employee would use, so there is occasionally a need to rewrite commands to the bot.

Continuous improvement of chatbots is vital to ensure they remain the number one choice for employee requests. This is why, once this chatbot has given an answer, it gives the user a simple choice of giving a thumbs-up or thumbs-down response as to whether the answer satisfactorily resolved their query. This feedback then informs whether the bot needs to be fine-tuned and redefined to find what it is looking for in the wiki.

How can AI be used in global mobility?

01

Answering queries

02

Assessing assignee suitability

03

Providing a platform for virtual home searches



Caitlin's view

AI: showing how theory is being enacted

We've been hearing a lot about Artificial Intelligence throughout 2023, with every conference I attended last year talking about what the implications of AI might be for the mobility industry, and points for mobility professionals to consider when looking at integrating AI. What we don't hear so much of are the success stories; real life examples of how mobility teams have taken on the challenge of AI and incorporated it into their operations and processes. A lot of theory, not much action!

As AI continues to be a trend for 2024, we wanted to bring you an example of how it has been successfully implemented into a mobility programme – in other words, we wanted to bring you an example of action, not theory. We hope to inspire you and demonstrate that it is possible to integrate artificial intelligence into the world of mobility without eliminating existing roles or compromising the company's intellectual property. This is a great example of all the upsides of AI – using it to support operations while freeing the mobility team to take on more strategic tasks, while providing employees with lightning quick, accurate responses. I'm inspired – I hope you will be too!

Caitlin Pyett

Consulting Lead,
Crown World Mobility

AI is not just about answering queries

Chatbot and AI technology is still very much in its infancy. As the technology becomes more sophisticated, its use on the vendor side could increase to encompass virtual home searches and orientation processes, though it does of course remain to be seen whether the true look and feel of a place can be communicated effectively by using virtual technology. Choosing a home is not a task to be taken lightly and this may need to be done in person by older assignees uncomfortable with making a commitment from a distance. Younger, more digitally-savvy assignees may be the first generation to put their trust in the technology and settle on somewhere to live based on virtuality alone.

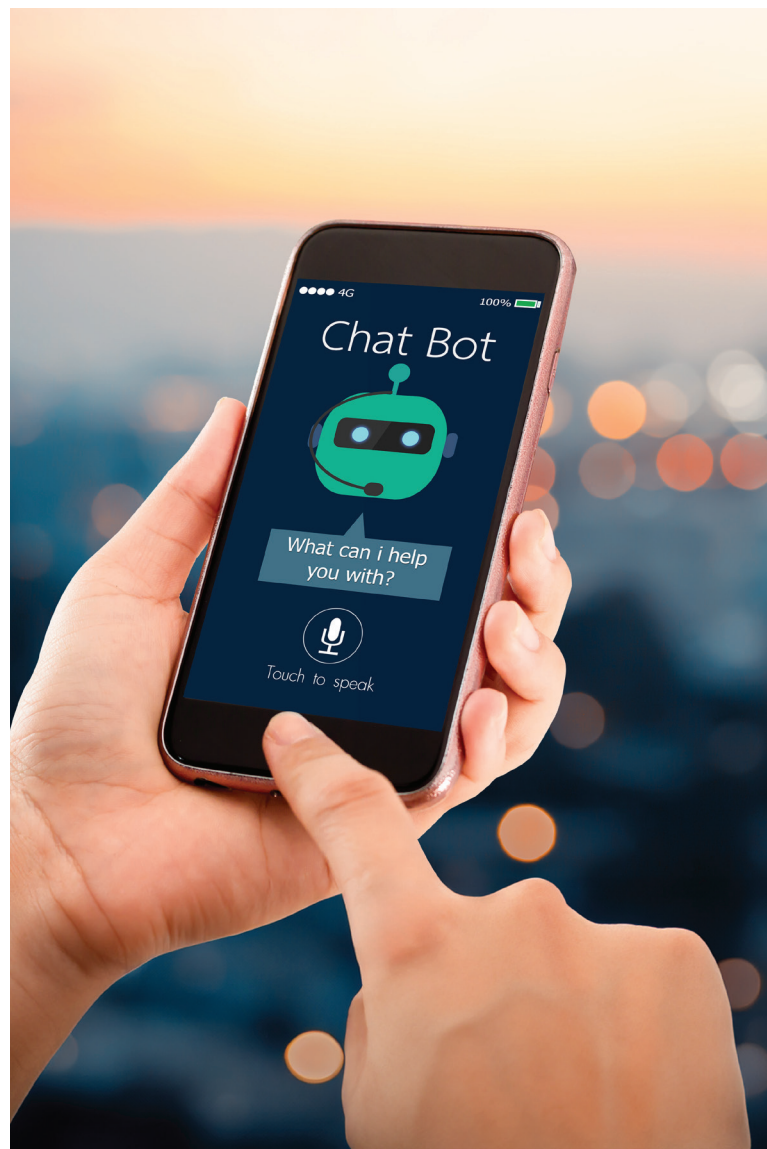
Talent mobility also has the potential to make use of AI solutions. Aligning talent with mobility is a discussion that has been underway for some time now, with many companies finding it hard to offer meaningful ways of joining the two departments together.

AI solutions can also be used to develop tools which assess a potential assignee's suitability for assignment. It can take into account their intercultural intelligence, their adaptability and the core skills that are needed for the overseas role. AI can be used for workforce planning, as it can look where vacancies are arising around the world and then align these openings with an employee's availability and their willingness to relocate.

Back to chat

The future has the potential to be very interesting, but back in the present, the chatbot is the start of the journey. It is a vital component within the company as it seeks to automate processes which can be. With its 'always-on' position, it places the global mobility assignee at the centre of the relocation process because it is the bot that answers their questions, not a colleague who might miss their query because of their long to-do list. It places the power to find answers to their concerns in their own hands.

While the machines haven't taken over, they have certainly made global mobility a much less daunting proposition for colleagues at this particular company. AI may well continue being a trend for years to come as it evolves and its uptake continues.



That's me in the middle: Human-centricity in global mobility



by *Tracy Searl*, Regional Lead International Mobility UK, Europe and America, Standard Chartered Bank

The world in which we live is no longer 'one size fits all'. Everywhere we look, highly-tuned algorithms offer us content which is tailored and aligned to our existing interests. Streaming services decide what we might like to watch next, Twitter/X and Instagram show us what we might want to see as we scroll through our social media accounts and online retailers recommend purchases based on what we've already bought. This sense of personalisation is all around us.

Global mobility should be treated in the same way. Crown World Mobility's recent '**Mobility Matters**' report highlighted that:

Considering such a concerning statistic, it's vital that the policies and processes are designed with minimum standards and with enough flex to accommodate the diverse needs of different assignees, and the wellbeing of them and their family at their core. A human-centric approach is no longer a 'nice to have' but a necessity.



50%



of the HR leaders surveyed had seen an increase in mental health issues in employees working on overseas assignments.

Moving is a major life event and there is rarely a clearly defined path from A to Z with all phases that a family will experience in between. Employees are demanding more personalisation and I anticipate human-centricity being one of the primary focuses for 2024, not just in the global mobility industry for an individual and their family as they relocate, but also across the business world as a whole. Standard Chartered has recognised and been working towards this for some time now and increasingly other organisations are doing the same.

Caitlin's view



Wellbeing: how best practice is shifting

Wellbeing has become something of a mobility buzzword in recent years, with the concept rocketing up the priority ladder, and mobility teams spending time and effort to consider how their programs can be adapted to address the issues of mental health on assignment, emotional safety and wellness in general. With over 50% of respondents in our 2023 survey reporting an increase in mental health issues for employees on assignment, this level of attention is certainly merited.

Many of us will remember the days of very little care and attention being paid to these concepts. You're being sent on assignment? Great, lucky you! Here's an assignment letter detailing your entitlements – which will be exactly as per policy and not in any way aligned with your personal needs - now get on a plane and get on with it! Thankfully, things have changed. Best practice for employers now is to put the human element – the assignee – front and center. In this article, we take a look at how Standard Chartered Bank is addressing this shift.

Caitlin Pyett

Consulting Lead,
Crown World Mobility

Balancing the cost

There may be, however, considerations surrounding its implementation which can be hard to balance. Principally, this involves the cost of the relocation and its associated factors.

It is often the receiving business which must pick up the tab for assignments or permanent international moves. A cost estimate is given to the business which includes assistance with human elements such as cultural coaching or training. While this is not always required for cross-border moves within a region, it becomes increasingly important for those with language barriers, cultural differences, or for those from underrepresented communities. There is a risk that when the business reviews the cost estimate, these elements can be seen as a 'nice to have' that can be activated locally by the business as and when required.

While it can indeed be delivered this way, it is often hard to ensure a consistent quality of coaching. It's therefore vital for companies to understand that this and all other elements of the relocation program have been implemented with this candidate in mind.

Taking a short-term view of cost is counterproductive over the long term if the wellbeing of the individual and their family suffers because they do not understand the culture in which they are now living.





A fresh approach to policy design – start with the employee

At Standard Chartered, transparency has always been at the forefront of our programs, policies, briefing procedures, and documentation. This emphasises the importance of a holistic approach and its associated wellness support programmes, which is formed around recognising mental health and resilience issues, cultural coaching – in terms of the business and social culture the individual is moving to, and the impact of a relocation as a life event.

We also have networks and employee resource groups (ERGs) such as those for women or LGBTQ+ employees which employees have access to before and after the relocation to support their move.

Our wellness resource also signposts colleagues to volunteering opportunities in their new destination and we also look to bridge others' experience through our ERGs, we look to connect individuals with other colleagues in the organisation who may have had a similar experience and can share their advice. Partner support offers appropriate cultural coaching to spouses and children to help them adapt to and thrive in their new surroundings, along with expat groups helping them network and find suitable roles.

The performance goals for the employee while they are on assignment or relocate permanently are set at the outset of the cost estimate stage so that all parties are clear on them from the start. At the end of the assignment, or after an agreed period these performance goals are used to inform the business of the return on the investment made.

The employee is the priority

The employee experience is therefore not just about the services that are provided to them, but how they react to them. While the mental health benefits of a human-centric approach are strong, it's worth noting that the impact of the approach is as tangible as any other benefits which relocation may bring with it.

With the person – or people, when there is a family – as the priority of our relocation programmes, we can continue giving them experiences which offer significant advantages to our business while at the same time enriching their lives. Everyone wins.

The trend that was hiding in plain sight: Mobility as a tool for retention



by *Kim Woodlock*, Director of International Mobility, Smith + Nephew

Crown World Mobility's recent **'Mobility Matters'** survey uncovered many interesting viewpoints about the state of global mobility in 2023. Chief among them was that mobility is wanted and indeed expected in career paths, particularly by younger employees, but that employers are not capitalising on this. Instead, mobility is frequently used as a tool to retain employees who are threatening to leave companies; it is like a rabbit pulled out of a hat at the last moment, because mobility and talent departments within companies are not aligned.

Global mobility has been evolving over several years and is seen as a service that is detached from talent, to call upon when it is needed. Even today in many organisations, Global Mobility reports into Global Reward or another part of the business when ideally it would be a better fit with the talent development team, as is starting to happen at some companies, including Smith + Nephew.

We are in an era when Global Mobility and Talent Development need to start working together as a strategic part of a business's decision-making processes. We're not quite there yet, but Mobility are striving to be at the front end of succession planning and development. It's still a journey of educating HR and the business with Mobility working with Talent Development.



The trend of flexible working

At Smith + Nephew, we recognise flexible working, domestically and on occasions globally.

There is, however, the question of how this international flexibility can be met without extortionate costs and a huge burden of administration to ensure compliance with corporate tax requirements. This is evaluated from HR and legal perspectives before research into whether a permanent transition can be made to a local contract.

The right to work is vital. Even if the employee only wishes to work elsewhere temporarily,

if they do not have the right to work in the location they choose then it is a hard 'no' from the start. Equally, if there is no employing entity then that would also be a hard no.

Smith + Nephew is exploring how they might use an Employer of Record where there is no current employing entity – but this is very much in its exploratory/infancy stage. An Employer of Record would open up the possibility of employing people in different countries without necessarily having an entity – a registered employing office that handles administration such as payroll – in that territory. Again, this would need to form a wider education piece to HR, Talent and Reward leaders as well as business heads.

Caitlin's view



When we conducted our 2023 survey, we wanted to consider the question of whether mobility is used as a tool for retention. We weren't expecting the results to be quite so convincing. 82% of responders said that they had seen instances where mobility had been used as a retention tool where an employee was considering resigning. And we realized we'd stumbled across a trend that had been there all along.

When I think back across my 27 year career in mobility, I can think of multiple times I've seen this happen – yet I never thought of it as a “trend”. It was simply a *modus operandi*. Something that was habitually done yet never identified or quantified. If we are consistently using mobility as a tool for retention, surely that says something about its inherent value? Even now, post Covid, the emotional pull of an international assignment remains potent. And if that's the case, why is mobility not fully integrated into every career path, why still the agonizing over cost, ROI and value? Here, we take a look at how Smith + Nephew approaches this issue.

Caitlin Pyett

Consulting Lead,
Crown World Mobility

Measuring an assignee's productivity

Crown World Mobility's survey **also found** that:

More than

80%



of respondents say their employees are more productive when they are on assignment than when they work in their home country.

This suggests very much a 'win-win' situation for the employee – who gets their desired move – and the company, which gets a more productive worker.

It is helpful to have a preview of how employees were performing before they departed on their international assignment which can then inform progress while they are on assignment.

This is currently a manual process for many companies because mobility is not yet integrated with talent nor has the ability to draw down reports on the international population from their HRIS system.

This is where you can unlock data, which shows performance, potential, diversity, and so on, to provide evidence of the benefits of global mobility programmes and help Talent and HR make more informed decisions.

In Smith + Nephew, we are looking at adding tags to employment records of employees who have been on assignment, repatriated or relocated more permanently to another country. This will enable us to pull reports on this population, as mentioned above, so we can see the full picture of development and return on investment, over time. We are also recording why an employee is relocated. We have a formal approval process which requires a justification for the move before approval, but we can now look at the number of people who moved for personal development reasons or for skills-based reasons, and should be able to evaluate how they are performing as they progress through their assignment and future in the business.



Many thanks to our contributors for their time.

If you have any views on some of the biggest trends and challenges this year, please share with us.

Crown World Mobility provides strategic assignment management, immigration and relocation services for multinationals and international organizations.

We work with all stakeholders to find the right solution, making it simpler to move individuals, accompanying partners, teams and entire businesses anywhere in the world, so they can get on with what they do best – take opportunities and grow.

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For more insight on the trends challenges and opportunities facing the global mobility industry, follow us on:



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