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November 2019

Everyone Can Benefit From an
ASSIGNMENT

— Six Ways to Make Sure

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Work **Make It**

Six ways to ensure everyone benefits when an employee is relocated or sent on an assignment

By Stuart Jackson

It's always a challenge to get the right person in the right role at the right place. But that's what being a global mobility (GM) professional is all about—helping to move talented employees to the best places for them and their organizations.

What can you do to make this work for everyone involved? Here are six ways to help you and your organization get it all done efficiently and effectively the first time.

1. Have the right corporate infrastructure and processes in place.

One of the first principles of getting the right employee into the right role: Make sure the best processes are in place to identify those employees with the skills, potential, and aptitude for the position. This is especially critical when it comes to relocating an employee, because then it's not just a job change but a life change. Industry evidence suggests that few organizations have a defined role in the company to select talent for relocations, much less a methodical approach for identifying the employees best suited for assignments.

The question an organization needs to ask is whether it currently has the right people in the right places. Managers may be tempted to move problems rather than talent. When looking at the performance management process across your organization, you should consider its effectiveness in identifying high-performing individuals. Is it perfunctory and open to subjectivity, or does it take on a more holistic multistakeholder approach with continuous assessment, feedback loops, and skills assessment? As technology progresses, some organizations have developed ways to use artificial intelligence to provide continuous performance assessment and feedback, identify employees at risk of leaving the organization, and also to nudge employees toward skills development. While this may seem futuristic to some, it demonstrates that there are technology-driven pathways to identifying the right employee for an international assignment.

If your organization sees offering international opportunities to employees as a way to identify and retain talent, you will need to develop a suitable approach to managing self-initiated moves.

Returning to more analog procedures, an organization should consider reviewing the assignment approval process. Are assignment costs projected

from the start? Has a business case been made for the assignment? Who needs to sign off on it? Does the justification consider current performance levels as well as other, softer skills, such as the ability to adapt readily to new situations? These are all critical to success as well.

2. Understand exactly why international assignments are happening.

Simultaneously understanding the strategic objectives of your organization and what's driving a mobile workforce can help you to determine what sort of global mobility framework you need in terms of both policy and processes. One technique that can help: Create an assignment segmentation matrix that groups existing assignments by their strategic value to the business and their value to employee development. That can help you determine why international assignments are taking place and what types of mobile employees you need in the future. For an organization aggressively expanding into new markets, for example, there may be a greater requirement for strategic business leaders to fill critical roles in the organization—and this may drive a need for long-term, home-based assignments. But for an organization with a strategic aim of diversification—placing new products or services into new markets—there might be a greater need to acquire talent from outside the organization to fill a gap in the target market or move existing talent into a market over an extended period.

It's important for senior executives to understand their organization's talent pipeline and whether robust succession planning is in place for key roles. If developmental assignments emerge as a requirement to grow the talent pipeline, your GM department will need to develop policies that fulfill this requirement while being cost-effective for the company. Equally, if your organization identifies a need to retain talent and sees offering international opportunities to employees as a way to meet that goal, you will need to develop a suitable approach to managing self-initiated moves.

The desire of younger generations in the workforce for travel and new experiences has been well documented, and a conundrum has increasingly emerged as to how GM teams support the business with compliance issues created by cross-border working. For example, complex immigration and tax-filing scenarios for the organization as well as the employee likely



will result in the need to put processes into place to correctly track workdays in different tax jurisdictions.

A set of policies that meets your organization's needs for a mobile workforce will help ensure that the employee best equipped for the job is supported in the right way—enabling success for everyone involved. These policies need to be flexible not only to meet the idiosyncratic regional needs of your organization but also take into account changes in strategic direction. Monitoring of “why assignments are happening” thus needs to be an ongoing process.

3. Consider the individual needs of the employee.

If an organization sees an international assignment as important to an employee's progression, then it is equally important to understand the individual's preferences in terms of timing and allow them the flexibility to plan an assignment based on their family's circumstances and their own. This is even more important with the growth of dual-career families as well as the trend of more couples having similar outlooks, levels of education, and ambition—so-called assortative mating. Today, in almost half of the two-parent households in the U.S., both parents work full time, compared with 31% in 1970.

While most dual-career couples understand that they'll likely need to make multiple moves across functions and geographies if they want to ascend to senior roles, the timing of an immediately needed move imposed on the employee by the organization can prove detrimental to the spouse's or partner's

stage of career development, and ultimately to the employee's retention. In addition, fewer and fewer employees are prepared to sacrifice their own career in favor of their partner's. As a result, organizations often lose employees not because they are not mobile, but because the organization can't match mobility options to the employee's needs. Successional, rotational assignments as part of a developmental or future leader program can be especially off-putting to dual-career couples and families. Following on such an assignment is likely to cause difficulties for the partner, as it may not mesh at all with their own organization and their career.

Thus, any organization considering the rotational approach needs to ask 1) “Is each of these assignments essential in order for the employee to gain the experience necessary to meet our organization's needs?” and 2) “Are there alternatives, such as short-term assignments or a commuter role, that would fulfill the same requirement but would be more sensitive to the individual circumstances of the employee?”

The extent to which an organization is understanding of the challenges presented to dual-career couples forms part of a wider trend in global mobility around the employee experience. Flexibility in the type of assignment offered to the employee can be matched by flexibility in the way policy benefits are constructed. Core-flex policies are much talked about, yet many organizations remain wary of them. A key question is whether the organization is trying to achieve an improved employee experience or simply attempting to bring down cost. One novel

introduction is the concept of a “lifestyle allowance” designed to address perceived increases in the cost of items such as after-school care, yoga classes, or even care for elderly parents. In other cases, organizations have simply been providing a cash lump sum to the employee—something that again has been well received. Whatever the approach, a degree of flexibility that helps the employee to feel in control of the move helps to ensure that mobility is an attractive and employee-focused part of talent management.

4. Assess all skill sets to get the right fit.

While it is important to ensure that the right employee is filling a role from a developmental and talent perspective, a more considered approach will take into account a wider group of skill sets. Most GM professionals have a war story about a failed assignment due to a poor cultural fit. Yet organizations routinely forgo any kind of assessment that takes into account skills required for managing internationally from the home location or those required for managing abroad. Some skills in the latter category are relatively simple to quantify through 360-degree feedback—qualities such as interpersonal skills and a sense of humor. As obvious as these may sound, organizations still send abroad employees who struggle to form interpersonal relationships. Other skills for managing abroad may require more formal assessment to get any kind of meaningful feedback—skills such as tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, and a sense of ego strength (the ability to be both self-critical and open to feedback without taking things too personally).

It is always helpful if a potential assignee has some experience managing internationally and is actively demonstrating some of these skill sets, such as understanding interdependencies, being willing to share power, and demonstrating cognitive complexity (thinking along multiple dimensions and simultaneously identifying how they are interrelated). An organization should be formally and informally identifying and assessing these skills in employees before, during, and after assignments. That creates a pathway not only for selecting the right employee from the outset but for ongoing skills development at every level within the organization.

One additional note here is to be sure to provide assessment tools for self-initiated moves. Employees identifying themselves for a role in another country are often provided with little support from the organization and may have an overconfidence bias with regard to their ability to cope with working in a different environment. We’re increasingly hearing stories of failed self-initiated moves from the corporations with which we work. Even a simple self-assessment tool on the GM intranet pages may help alleviate future pain for some.

5. Put a greater emphasis on performance reviews while on assignment.

Measuring performance throughout the duration of the assignment and planning for repatriation are equally as important as getting the right person to go in the first place, since many talented individuals and future leaders will be asked to move on multiple occasions. A poor experience the first time around may impact an employee’s willingness to go through the experience again. Moreover, an employee who experiences a well-managed assignment from start to finish is likely to act as an advocate for the program. This can be especially advantageous for rotational and developmental programs in which employees with good experiences can informally answer questions and highlight what they gained from an assignment.

Ensuring that the home-country manager is responsible for the assignee even when they are out on assignment is a good way to safeguard against the all-too-common experience of “out of sight, out of mind,” and it keeps thoughts of the employee’s next role at the fore. To this extent, actively maintaining ownership should be a critical element in assessing the home-country manager’s own performance. One recommendation is to introduce multiple assessment points throughout the year as opposed to the standard annual or biennial appraisal. This helps to ensure that the home location manager owns the reintegration process when the assignment comes to an end, and it creates a culture within the organization for active repatriation planning. This supplements the standard practice of global mobility teams reaching out to the HR business partner six months before the planned assignment end date.

6. Effectively plan and manage repatriation.

Repatriation planning, of course, involves looking ahead to the role that an assignee will return to. Only a small minority of the organizations we speak to guarantee that the role the assignee left will be available upon return. The majority of organizations commit only to making every effort to find a similar role, but this does not negate the importance on the part of both the employee and the responsible manager to actively plan. Finally, it's important to emphasize good repatriation planning for employees who go out on developmental assignments. If these assignments are intended to build future managers and leaders, it is essential that the organization look after the important investment it's making.

After all, a positive mobility experience is critical to companies developing and keeping talented employees in today's global market. *M*

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