**The changing role of the global mobility function**

**The past two years have seen significant change in the work load and work content of global mobility professionals. Dr Sue Shortland explains how the role of global mobility professionals has changed.**

The pandemic has resulted in a higher workload for the global mobility function as it has taken on responsibility for managing compliance issues linked to working from home/anywhere as a result of the trend towards increased virtual assignments and third country working due to restrictions on mobility. Its wider remit has also encompassed domestic mobility involving working from home or alternative locations, expanding beyond virtual assignments linked to international operations. There has also been significant change in terms of talent shortages and this has resulted in global mobility becoming involved to a far greater extent in resourcing positions both internationally and domestically.

**Advisory input**

A further trend has been towards the development of an increasing range of policy types involving global mobility in policy design and implementation. It is also notable that greater flexibility has become the norm and this means that policies are no longer used as straitjackets to determine what individuals and their families can/cannot have with the exception management required; instead policy is being used as a facilitator of employee experience and meeting business needs. As a result, global mobility professionals find themselves involved to a far greater extent in advising the business and in tailoring packages to meet specific employee and family requirements. The advisory role of the mobility function has also expanded beyond traditional compliance expertise to encompass business advice and employee support.

This increased remit has resulted in greater pressure on global mobility professionals to meet a far wider set of demands for compliance, operational and strategic understanding. This has raised the profile of global mobility such that it has attracted the attention of senior executives. Global mobility has long wished for a seat at the top table and the changes that have taken place during and post-pandemic have highlighted the added value that the function can bring to the business in terms of both practical and advisory input.

The core function of global mobility remains in the compliance area but the reality is that the role that the mobility function fulfils has expanded out into advising and planning business operations. Talent and workforce planning has been an aspiration for many years and there is no doubt that today talent shortages are driving forward global mobility's role in assisting with the identification of appropriate personnel and advising on their deployment in different locations, be these domestic or international.

**The talent agenda**

As talent shortages increase, the role of global mobility in improving the employee experience has become even more important than ever before. Employees today, particularly millennials on the move, expect tailoring of support to their individual needs. Without flexibility in choice of benefits, attention being paid to the relocation of the family as well as the employee, and effective communication, the employee experience may suffer. As a result, global mobility professionals are spending an increasing proportion of their time on enhancing the employee experience. This, of course, has an operational underpinning as ensuring that immigration and tax issues are dealt with effectively are important to ensuring the employee experience is good. In addition, aspects concerning payroll and reporting and using technology and data solutions to facilitate family moves are now expected to be both efficient and effective thereby supporting employee and family mobility.

Talent shortages have resulted in global mobility professionals participating in planning strategies, involving both international staffing and domestic resourcing. Resourcing is no longer a one-off exercise as employers are focusing to a greater extent on longer-term talent planning as this ensures business continuity. Talent planning also forms part of the employee experience because employees expect to have an idea of what their future career prospects might be within their employing organisation. As a result, the global mobility function has increased its advisory stake in the business as it must ensure that the need for mobility is both identified early on and that proactive steps are taken to ensure that cross-border moves are facilitated effectively. These rely upon effective communication and excellent technology and data solutions.

**Adding value**

For the global mobility professionals today, it is crucial that they know where they can add value. It is here that the function can display its skills to best advantage. In order to do this, it is important that global mobility professionals are clear as to who their customers are, that they communicate with them clearly, efficiently and effectively and that they listen to any changes that are evolving. As part of this process, policy design requires a dynamic and flexible approach such that policies are customised and tailored as appropriate to support both the business need and the employee experience.

Flexibility requires leveraging technology and data solutions and this means that the global mobility professional requires understanding of data analytics. Indeed, the data analytics field is one of the fastest-growing areas within the global mobility function. Global mobility professionals must ensure that they do not drown in data but use it selectively and wisely to identify courses of action and support their recommendations.

In order to continue to add value, global mobility professionals need different skills today than they may have relied upon in the past. Firstly, an understanding of technology and data analytics is crucial if they are to identify trends, changes, and the necessary actions that flow from these. In addition, in order to play a more strategic role, global mobility professionals need to understand the mobility goals of the business and also those of the employees and families on the move. This requires a strong customer focus – with customers being both business managers and relocating employees and families.

Excellent communication skills are required and these include emotional intelligence, active listening, and clear presentation. In addition, global mobility professionals require relationship building skills including empathy and openness. Such communication capabilities underpin all aspects of the global mobility professionals’ role – be that operational, advisory or strategic. In addition, their role now requires creative thinking. Policy design is no longer rigid and static but requires a creative approach to best meet business needs and support the employee experience.

**Skill sets to achieve success**

In order to ensure success in their role, global mobility professionals must meet the basic operational standards required and so must hold detailed knowledge of – or be able to outsource as appropriate – compliance aspects. Compliance is the bedrock upon which success rests and mistakes cannot be entertained here. The ability to devise and implement appropriate policies to support employee mobility also forms part of meeting basic operational standards. These underpin the employee experience and, if handled well, will ensure employee satisfaction.

Employees and their families expect flexible and tailored solutions and these will require a skill set that includes communication ability. The advisory role for the business also requires a skill set that provides a consultative as well as an advisory approach such that the business can make appropriate decisions and take a flexible approach as necessary. Again, if global mobility professionals can do this well, it will result in business success. Turning to talent management, the skill sets required by global mobility professionals also include consultation and communication and here building employee engagement is the desired outcome.

Employee engagement flows from both employee and business success and, as such, the operational, employee experience and business advisory aspects all contribute to engagement in the round. All of these rely upon excellent use of available technologies and so the skill set of the global mobility function must include an understanding of the capabilities of the technologies that are available and the selection of the most appropriate to meet both employee experience and business needs. A sound understanding of the metrics that are produced will contribute to current business activities and future strategic decisions.

Differentiation of talent and its contribution to the business will drive forward approaches taken to supporting employees and meeting business goals via mobility. This also requires the global mobility function to pay attention to issues such as equality, diversity and inclusion, and to integrate these within the talent attraction and retention strategy. An agile approach is needed to keep pace with current trends and to be proactive in ensuring that business goals stay ahead by adapting to changing conditions over time. This is a demanding task when considered in the global context. As such, the global mobility profession needs to ensure that its approaches to devising support for global mobility promote career growth, talent attraction, and also focus on value in the long term.

There is no doubt that the brief to which the global mobility function will operate in future is both exciting and demanding – no longer will global mobility be a business Cinderella. Rather, its future is bright and very exciting.