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# PRACTICAL MOBILITY MANAGEMENT: WHAT COULD GO WRONG?



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We know that international assignments can fail due to family issues, poor assignee selection, cost concerns, or policy competitiveness considerations, but behind these problems, what are the true issues and misconceptions that could lead a mobility program on the wrong path? Managers might have the impression that they are doing the right things and have comprehensive policies in place, but the results are not there. What's going wrong?

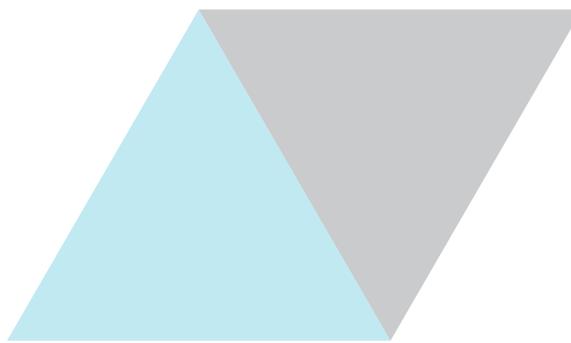
Focusing on best practices is useful but exploring bad practices and common errors is also a good exercise. Based on discussions with mobility managers and real case studies, here is a non-exhaustive list of common mobility misconceptions and issues that can cause problems down the line or make the life of mobility managers more difficult.

## MOBILITY PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND THE ILLUSION OF LINEAR PROGRESSION

We tend to view the evolution of mobility programs over the years as a steady progression from basic policies to fully developed consistent policies linked to strategic objectives. It's true that companies go through different stages on their globalization journey and ultimately aim to have comprehensive mobility policies meeting their strategic business needs. This doesn't mean, however, that this long-term evolution is a smooth ride.

Many events such as mergers and acquisitions, downsizing, business contraction, cost cutting exercises, change of management, or business strategy can derail this tidy evolution model and send mobility programs on a roller coaster ride.

From a practical perspective, this means that companies might have to take a step back and simplify some of their practices. Over the past 15 years, companies have moved away from one-size-fits-all policies to embrace segmentation. Some of them are now considering limiting the number of assignment categories and simplifying their segmentation approach – they are not discarding the segmentation concept itself but are trying to make it more integrated and easier to manage. Similarly, we see a resurgence of lump sums – an approach that was once vilipended as inefficient and unsophisticated – to replace complex allowance packages. In addition to these trends, we regularly see companies scaling down temporarily their programs to address cost issues or business changes.



Casting away the extreme views of abstract management models, predicting a steady progression towards perfection, and depressing visions of a mobility manager turned into a modern Sisyphus, we need a balanced view of the evolution of mobility programs – a cyclical evolution – and to understand where each company fits in its own evolution cycle.

There are times when it might be wise to step back and opt for a simpler approach, return to solutions explored in the past that might become relevant again, and bring back in-house tasks that were once outsourced. At other times, the march in the direction of a fully integrated and strategic mobility program can be resumed.

## THE GHOST OF ERRORS PAST

An experienced mobility manager who had been managing the mobility function in four different companies used to tell me: “The first thing I do when I join a new company is look for skeletons in the cupboard.” What he meant was that his predecessors had probably tried various mobility approaches and policies. Some of them were successful, others were not. Although these managers were long gone, the perception of mobility within the company still reflected their policy experiments.

Understanding the specific history of mobility within the company is a pre-condition for making progress. It doesn't mean that new policies should not be implemented. But errors from the past influence how a new policy needs to be introduced, explained, and implemented.

The danger is to succumb to the temptation of trying too quickly to make your mark and change policies and practices that have not been fully implemented yet or adopt solutions that have already failed in the past.

## BEWARE THE SEAGULL MANAGER

The expression “seagull manager” became popular through a joke from Ken Blanchard in the book “Leadership and the One Minute Manager.” It vividly describes a common business situation: seagull managers fly in, make a lot of noise, dump on everyone, and fly out. In other words, managers who have little understanding of specific business issues get involved out of the blue when they believe there is a problem. They make hasty uninformed decisions leading to increased confusion and new problems that more qualified employees subsequently have to handle.

Applied to global mobility, common scenarios that mobility managers have to deal with include: management asking for brutal changes (“we need to cut the cost / the number of assignees by 50%”), unrealistic demands (“we need to make this assignment happen within the next couple of weeks”) or blunt critics about the very concept of mobility (“why do we need these expensive people anyway?”). Finely honed policies and processes can see their consistency destroyed by misguided actions from top management.

Yet, instead of just complaining about the injustice of erratic management, mobility teams should be exploring the root cause of the problem. The intervention of seagull managers could result from the lack of alignment with business objectives, a lack of communication and clarity about the role of mobility, and a lack of reporting about mobility business facts.

These issues, in turn, could be the result of the isolation or lack of perceived relevance of the mobility function.



## THE LONELY MOBILITY PROFESSIONAL

Being siloed into administrative tasks is always a risk for the mobility function if it is perceived as a niche within HR rather a key component of the business strategy.

Linking with finance is essential for mobility teams. Some managers may balk at the difficulty of trying to measure ROI but setting metrics is a precondition for internal credibility. The cliché about not being able to manage what you cannot measure still holds true. The assumption that top management realizes all the implications of global mobility in terms of cost and opportunities is illusory as long as mobility practices within the organization have not been analyzed and reported through a mix of detailed factual and subjective (opinion surveys) assessment.

Mobility is an important component of talent management: an assignment can be part of an employee's career strategy and future leadership development. Similarly, assignees play an important role in fostering or hindering management diversity. If women and minority are under-represented in the assignee population, their chances of making it to the top are reduced. Diversity and mobility teams need to work hand in hand.

Compliance is a priority for companies but while they have teams in place to manage the different aspects of compliances, their approach can remain fragmented. That's another area where the mobility team can make a contribution by anticipating possible issues and coordinating processes.

Mobility professionals need to leverage their expertise and reach out to other departments to become an adviser of choice for international talent issues within the company.

## BROKEN PROMISES

It is not common to find policies that are totally disconnected from market practices in terms of allowances, benefits, and assignment conditions. It is much more common to see a disconnection between the official message in the policy and the reality of mobility for employees.

Mobility might be presented as a boost for an employee's career while in reality it brings no tangible benefit. Worse still, former expatriates could be passed over for promotion due to their lack of visibility and absence of network internally. They might stagnate in their current roles and not use their newly acquired skills.

Policy introduction reveals much about a company culture and the role of mobility within the organization. Who wrote this introduction (top management, CEO, or a lower level manager)? What promise has been made in terms of career, remuneration, and lifestyle? Is there a discrepancy between this message and actual practices?

There is no right or wrong answers about the role of mobility within an organization. While mobility should be viewed as essential for some organizations, it's perfectly acceptable for others to indicate that mobility is not at the heart of their employee strategy. There are companies in some sectors that offer mobility as just a one-time experience with a pay premium. Speed and business flexibility is the priority of these companies and not long-term employee retention.

If a company is offering a clear career path and is valuing the international experience of expatriates, this could help introduce lower packages (both the company and the employee benefit from the assignment). If on the contrary, the assignment doesn't lead to an obvious career acceleration, a more comprehensive package for the assignee and the family would be needed to ensure that they are not losing out. Finally, when there is no career incentive and a degree of risk, compensation (cash incentives) would be the main factor for employees to decide to move.

The wording of the message itself is important: did the company promise the same lifestyle or an international lifestyle to assignees? Reflect on what images these promises will conjure in the minds of assignees: the same lifestyle as in their home country could mean a big house and two cars for an American assignee (going to central Tokyo) or extensive domestic help for an India one (going to Europe).

Words matter. Make sure you control your message.



## THE TEMPTATION OF LETTING IT GO

The complexities of mobility tasks might prompt companies to outsource their worries away. There is no perfect answer to the in-sourcing versus outsourcing dilemma. The question is more about what to outsource and what constitutes the core of the mobility function.

A common (and valid) split is to outsource relocation, tax, and basic administrative tasks while retaining more complex ones. Another way to look at it is to look at what tasks and processes are at the heart of the storytelling and communication of the mobility strategy. The mobility team should be telling the story and need to control the communication channels with the assignees. No outsourcing providers and no chatbot can explain how the policies are related to the bigger business picture.

HR teams should not give away the heart of their mobility program so easily. They need to pick their battles and focus on what is essential for the employee experience on the core components of the program, and its inherent logic. The rest can potentially be outsourced or automatized.

## GOING TO EXTREMES: PATERNALISM AND LAISSEZ FAIRE

An unrestricted laissez faire approach is a no go. It could lead to problems in terms of compliance and duty of care. We need to remind ourselves that failure from employees to comply with tax and immigration can engage the companies' liability. When combined with hardship locations, this could lead to dangerous situations if employees willingly or unconsciously put themselves in harm's way. An illustration of this would be assignees trying to save money on housing and deciding to live in a dangerous part of town. Similarly, lump sums could be viewed as an easy option but they can work well only if a balance is found between giving flexibility to employees and providing guidelines about how these lump sums should be used.

On the other hand, rigid policies don't reflect the reality of current mobility practices. The multiplication of assignment types and assignees categories can push mobility policies to a breaking point. Successful implementation of new approaches like local plus requires policies to include both general principles (minimum level of support that must be provided to all assignees and the general logic) and a degree of adaptability based on local conditions (e.g. what to include in the "plus" given local barriers to mobility). When trying to anticipate all possible scenarios in a policy and forcing complex mobility patterns into a rigid policy mold, companies run the risk of multiplying exceptions and breaking the consistency of their policies.

As Voltaire would have said "the perfect is the enemy of the good" – a policy that is just good enough to meet current business requirements could be better than an over-engineered complex one.

## LOSING SIGHT OF THE ESSENTIAL

It is tempting to see correlation between unrelated events and assume that a change in an assignment package could lead to increased assignee retention or on the contrary could limit mobility. Increasing a specific allowance might increase satisfaction in the short-term but would not necessarily help employees resolve their more fundamental family issues, retirement concerns, or career worries. Employee motivation is not all about pay and policies. It is even more the case for expatriates who have to cope with huge changes in their lives and deal with a host of personal and family challenges.

Money is part of the equation when trying to incentivize employees to accept assignments but it cannot remove all barriers to mobility. In worst case scenarios and when dealing with hardship locations it could lead to a wrong decision: employees saying yes to an assignment because of a very attractive offer and ending up putting their families and careers at risk. Finding assignees for a hardship location is often more about having a rigorous candidate selection process than trying to convince reluctant employees to go – there is only so much you can achieve with hardship allowances and bonuses.





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