

Exploring The Value Proposition Of The Global Mobility Function

Over the past two decades there has been increasing focus on the need for HR transformation within organisations that is reflected in a shift from a traditional transactional orientation to playing an increasingly strategic role. The aspiration to become strategically focused and value adding in organisational terms arose in the 1990's with authors such as Ulrich and Brockbank becoming some of the more well known and influential, arguing that HR professionals "need a mental model of the value you create, and should constantly be assessing yourself against that model both formally and informally."

However, the evidence suggests this aspiration has not been realised in the vast majority of organisations and HR remains a cost proposition in many of these organisations. The same holds true for corporate Global Mobility functions, which are predominantly seen as overheads rather than as creators of value. This can, and we argue should change. However, to ensure that organisations understand and tap into the full potential of their Global Mobility team, global mobility must actively engage in the process of (re) defining the function in value terms. For any Global Mobility function to contribute to business success, it needs to consider, for example, the following questions:

- How does global mobility contribute to strategic objectives of the organisation?
- How does global mobility fit in terms of organisational value creation?
- What strategic objectives are your Global Mobility function trying to achieve?
- In what way does GM practices support employee engagement and performance?
- What can you measure to evidence the value you create (or could create) in managing the global mobility process?

At a time when global talent mobility is emerging as a matter of strategic focus for more and more business leaders, it is imperative that Global Mobility professionals bring their expertise to the table. With the complexities associated with selecting, deploying and managing international assignees, who else is as well qualified to help organisations realise

competitive advantage in this area? If Global Mobility professionals do not get engaged in strategic discussions around global talent mobility and demonstrate the potential strategic value to offer the business, then they will be in danger of being sidelined and as with all costs, managed down wherever possible. Alternatively, they can step up to make a real difference.

While one of the challenges that Global Mobility professionals face is demonstrating the value it offers to the business, there is little hard evidence to support the claim that the Global Mobility function contributes to business success. This is reflected in the challenges that most organisations face in articulating the return on investment of global mobility. Arguably, armed with the right type of evidence the voice of the Global Mobility function will be harder to ignore for business leaders.

One of the key pieces of evidence available to HR functions is a survey of employee attitudes (e.g. Google has publicly stated that it uses evidence and data in all its HR decision making and that its employee survey is the most important dataset it has). However, most employee surveys are ill thought out and are unable to provide the nature and breadth of strategic insights they should. Additionally, employee surveys do not explicitly accommodate international assignees. They are unable to shed much light on some of the key issues affecting employees who move internationally. For example:

- What type of assignment or assignee yields the best performance?
- How does adjustment to a host location impact wellbeing and employee engagement?
- How do perceptions of career support relate to organisational commitment and intentions to remain with the employer?
- How important is family support to commitment, engagement and performance?
- To what extent do assignees "go native" and is this important?

- How does international experience add to perceptions of an assignee's own capability and marketability?

In an effort to supply quality evidence and insights around these kinds of questions, AIRINC and King's College London (KCL) have launched a unique and rigorous survey measuring the attitudes of international assignees. The International Assignee Attitude Survey aims to provide insight into the impact of an international assignment on key employee measures such as employee engagement and performance. The intent of the survey is to help participating organisations to track ROI and improve retention, align mobility to talent management, and achieve mobility improvements that can add significant value to organisations' Global Mobility programmes.

The first pilot phase of the survey will run until April 2013 after which the survey will be ongoing for participant organisations. Already, the first datasets are starting to reveal some fascinating insights, which should be of real value for organisations and global mobility teams.

For more information regarding the International Assignee Attitude Survey, please contact:

Stuart Woollard, King's College London,
stuart.woollard@kcl.ac.uk

i The HR Value Proposition (2005), Harvard Business Press

Helena Wennberg is a Research Associate with the joint AIRINC and King's College London International Assignee Attitude Survey project. Since 2007 she has held in-house Global Mobility specialist roles within Statoil, Sandvik Tooling and Maersk Oil.

Stuart Woollard is Director of King's College London's Management Learning Board; is Director of the King's & Cornell University's International HRM Academy and is a council member at the Institute of HR Maturity

David Collings is Professor of HRM at Dublin City University and Visiting Professor of HRM at King's College London