

Learnings From A Global Pandemic

With government authorities around the world having closed borders to safeguard their citizens, we have seen companies responding in a similar manner; adopting travel bans to protect their employees' health and well-being and safeguard business operations against the spread of infection.

As we move into a slow reawakening of international business travel, questions for the International HR community are inescapable; what did we learn from a global pandemic and how will it change our function moving forward?

The answer to this may lie in a change of the ultimate objective for our function, with clearer measurable goals.

Lonza

Within Lonza, the global pandemic created both great opportunities and great challenges for the Talent Mobility team, the wider HR community and the business as a whole.

Lonza is a fast-growing Life Sciences company with over 15,500 employees, operating in 120 sites and offices across more than 35 different countries (1). The business operates under two segments of Lonza Pharma, Biotech and Nutrition and Lonza Speciality Ingredients. The requirement to continue operations was magnified; assist in the search for a vaccine and effective therapies; produce additional hand-sanitiser and disinfectant in the respective segments, as well as continue business as usual.

With the requirement to continue and expand operations for the development of such important global health initiatives, the reliance on the Workforce Planning Strategy through the HR community and the Talent Mobility team became paramount to the company's success.

Redefinition Of Workforce Planning Strategy?

The phrase 'Having the Right People, in the Right Place, at the Right Time' is a Workforce Planning tagline the globe over and often used as the strategic objective of an International HR or Talent Mobility team.

The global COVID-19 pandemic brought the interpretation of this objective into question. Arguably, we have been inadvertently gifted a new measurable set of goals to guide us.

The strategic objective of a Talent Mobility team now appears to rely on successful achievement, and ongoing nurturing,

of "Having the Right Data, the Right Responsibilities and the Right Relationships".

The use of these key criteria has allowed the HR team at Lonza to adjust our approach to Talent Mobility to largely meet the key objective of maintaining full operation throughout a difficult period by adopting global HR policies, breaking down regional silos, allowing for the Talent Mobility team to take a more strategic seat within the organisation and acknowledging the need for transparent data.

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Having The Right Data

When the early signs of the challenges of COVID-19 arose in early 2020, the requirement to have the right data became HR's first hurdle; do we know where our people are, do we know what their travel plans are and do we know that they are safe and protected?

The requirement to bring together data from the HR system, travel systems and relocation provider required partnering from far cornerstones of the organisation. Any previous tendency for 'knowledge is power' behaviour quickly became a thought of the past.

Going forward, the need for oversight across all types of travel, all regions and all areas of the business becomes the measure of success. However, an open question still remains for constant discussion; which system prevails as the source of truth and how can this information be gathered on a modular basis if there is no single source? The reality for most organisations will be that the existing platforms in place will need to be explored and expanded to match the new need.

Having The Right Responsibilities

From studies from as early as the 2000s, the rise of non-traditional mobility, cross-border working, business travellers and flexible work arrangements have been placed firmly on the agenda of those in the International HR community; a dilemma of balance between the employer's duty of care, compliance and the increasing flexibility in the work environment required to attract and maintain talent.

This raises the question as to whether the scope of existing, traditional, mobility work, performed by Talent Mobility teams, covers the right population under the 'new normal'; permanent relocations, business travel, cross-border working, virtual assignments and other forms of non-traditional mobility inadvertently become an additional concern. These new forms of mobility still require the Talent Mobility team to achieve the same critical objective that exists for traditional international assignments.

The rise of these newer forms of mobility have seen a significant spike during COVID-19 and are set to remain ever-present in some way as part of the more flexible workforce moving forwards, and the scoping of International HR and Talent Mobility teams needs to be revisited as a priority. The ultimate objective of having the right people, in the right place at the right time as a principle can only be achieved if this is applicable to the entire workforce. However, in order to do this, the scope of responsibility for policy, sign-off and jurisdiction needs to include International HR specialists.

This is set to be one of the biggest challenges in the area of Talent Mobility; do we have the correct resourcing design,

the knowledge, and the influencing powers to breakdown existing regional or country silos within the organisation? This can only be answered with a critical review per organisation and a move to globalised policies and approaches.

Having The Right Relationships

Given the complexity of the function and number of touchpoints required for any form of mobility, the changes identified under COVID-19 also brings the requirement for a Talent Mobility team to have the right relationships in place, to gather and understand a myriad of technical information, and execute it effectively and efficiently. This relies on the support of the right external parties where required, and influence with the right internal stakeholders.

The marketplace is awash with offers from providers offering best in class solutions as specialists in a number of topics. The question as to who you need when things get difficult is often one which is hard to determine at the outset, but abundantly clear in times of change or challenge.

The technical knowledge and support offered allow for a Talent Mobility team to keep their finger on the pulse for ongoing changes such as border restrictions, immigration office closures, logistics challenges and tax / social security waivers. This allows for the team to become a vital single knowledge source, gaining credibility from the Business Unit leaders and offering a path to the highly desired 'seat at the table'.

In addition, the relationships with internal stakeholders such as HR Operations, Payroll, Tax and Legal, allow for a smooth and agile approach to new challenges and flexible set-ups; developing an operational process for execution moving forward as the non-traditional cases become the majority.

These relationships do not materialise without ongoing effort. A key learning is to ensure that relationships are nurtured to create a safe and transparent eco-system internally to ensure that even when issues that sit outside of usual processes are identified, a taskforce is already in place with a common goal and way of working to address issues, even if these sit outside of usual processes.

Lonza And Talent Mobility During COVID-19

Our journey began with gathering the knowledge of how many relocations, assignments and repatriations were pending and the locations involved. With this global overview obtained, we were able to assign risk categories where physical mobility could not be realised, with remote onboarding becoming a fast second priority. Having the total projected figures for a period of six months also allowed us to plan in advance,

staggering the delayed moves over a number of months to better manage logistics when restrictions were lifted (i.e. limited temporary living options in certain locations).

Having the right information gives us credibility with senior leaders, allowing the mobilisation of talent to become top of the agenda and allow us to communicate clearly and effectively to our global community.

The staggered approach allowed us to give reasonable certainty of a future relocation date to individuals. New hires to the company, internal transfers and pending assignments were able to organise their personal affairs to a pre-set date, with managed expectations and without additional stress.

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The knowledge of the delayed moves allowed us to use our vendor relationships more effectively; using live information on border restrictions, immigration office closures, logistics challenges and tax / social security waivers. It also allowed us to ensure a targeted plan with our global relocation management company to ease an influx of new cases upon easing of restrictions.

New hires to the company were onboarded remotely with support from stakeholders across the different functions (including Payroll, HR Operations, Legal and Tax). This allowed new hires to start their employment on their agreed dates, with no gap in employment, while managing relocations and compliance set-ups. International Assignments commenced on a 'virtual assignment' basis and International Transfers commenced their new roles remotely, compliance review permitting.

The approach of having the Right Data, the Right Responsibilities and the Right

Relationships has allowed successful realisation of all planned new relocations, international transfers and assignments across the global population. The Talent Mobility team at Lonza has achieved its key objective as a function of having the right people, in the right place (virtually) at the right time.

The Future

Aside from a fresh and critical look on the main objective of Talent Mobility, we have used the experience of the global pandemic to understand how we review our achievement of this in a "SMART" manner; by "Having the Right Data, the Right Responsibilities and the Right Relationships".

These areas are interdependent on one another and no single one can ensure the achievement of success of the ultimate aim.

However, a clear focus does allow for a structured and transparent approach to how International HR and Talent Mobility play an important role in reshaping the future of work in any organisation. Investing time and effort into each of these key areas stands the function in good stead for ultimate success.

References:

(1) www.lonza.com/company-overview



CLAIRE RUTHERFORD

Claire has over 10 years of experience in the talent mobility field and manages the Talent Mobility team at Lonza from Basel, Switzerland, dealing with end-to-end mobility moves across the globe. The team is responsible for traditional international assignments, non-traditional mobility, permanent relocations and US domestic mobility. She is also passionate about the education of mobility professionals, sitting on the Swiss board of the Expatise Academy.