

# The Five Career Challenges of the Global Mobility Manager - Dead End or Highway?

**Do you know how it feels when you drive and the handbrake is still on? This is how I sometimes felt in Global Mobility. Despite the long-standing optimistic outlook on where the profession is heading by consultants and researchers in the field of International Human Resources, I have not seen a clear career path for Global Mobility Professionals. Some of my colleagues currently proclaim that in high labour cost countries such as Switzerland, Global Mobility is an administrative payroll-based function without any chance of ever getting out of the dust.**

Some feel their career is soon to be dead. The job was outsourced or offshored, their expertise no longer needed. Late 40's and unemployed. Ridiculous.

Global Mobility is not yet a "profession". We start to recognise it as being involved in the process of expatriation, international business travel and qualified migration.

Global Mobility is still in the realm of Human Resources, sometimes it's a Centre of Expertise in Compensation, sometimes in Talent, sometimes in Shared Services. Global Mobility seems to be everywhere and nowhere. It is forgotten in restructuring or not touched because it is "too complex".

In 2018, we still see a lack of clarity on how the career of global mobility professionals develop: what are fundamental skills to develop, what is trending in the industry, and what are the long-term plans? There is little exchange between global mobility and other areas - it is unusual to see lateral moves from other subject matter areas in HR.

Many colleagues across the world are rather negative right now about their future in Global Mobility. Still, I would like to encourage you to get into this field or upgrade your skill set if you are an experienced or unemployed Global Mobility Manager.

Through different conversations with several professionals in the industry and my long-standing experience in coaching and teaching in the field, these five challenges seem to emerge:

1) There is a line of control preventing professionals from moving from the

service provider side to the corporate side

2) There is no clear development plan that allows professionals to develop different sets of skills

3) We have not managed to have a unified approach to education in Global Mobility which waters down the requirements for role profiles and makes role profiles too diverse

4) Lack of international assignments for GM Managers: Oddly enough, while global mobility seems to be the work of an international workforce, very little is done in order to encourage employees to have international careers or secondments

5) The Global Mobility brand is not understood in the same way throughout companies.

Since 1999, I have worked in the Global Mobility and International HR arena. Every day I learn something new! There is really not a lot of good advice out there for International HR professionals, and if you say you work in "Global Mobility" a lot of people think you are doing relocation only, or they do not understand what it is at all. And still on LinkedIn I see many different labels for the professionals. Some even changed from Global Mobility back to "Global or International Assignment Managers". I think this is limiting your scope my friends.

When talking to other HR Professionals and senior managers they often underestimate the complexity of Global Mobility, and one of the remarks that still makes me angry is when Global Mobility Professionals are called "admin or payroll", because what we do requires an enormous knowledge and skill set. Which does not mean that we cannot instruct and oversee payroll, but heck this is too challenging to do in over 100 countries. So you always need local support for payroll.

If you are one of my colleagues you probably share my view that Global Mobility Professional have to be:

- Analytical, as you are a compensation, cost-of-living, fix-rate and cost expert
- Knowledgeable, as you need to understand tax, social security, immigration and international employment law
- Reflective and experiential, as you have to have moved 200 expats to know your job
- Sensitive, as you work with talents and their families through phases of high stress

- Interculturally competent, as you speak at least four languages and deal with numerous cultures.

For the Global Mobility Workbook, I developed a global competency model that I found very helpful for Global Mobility Professionals. I use it to coach my internationally mobile clients too. Here is my take on how we can tackle the five challenges together.

## **Challenge 1: Let's break down the artificial Line of Control between Providers and "Inhouse" GM staff**

Please stop drawing artificial lines between us. We are not working in a hierarchical relationship with each other anymore. We need a seamless process that feels to the expat and spouse as if we are one team.

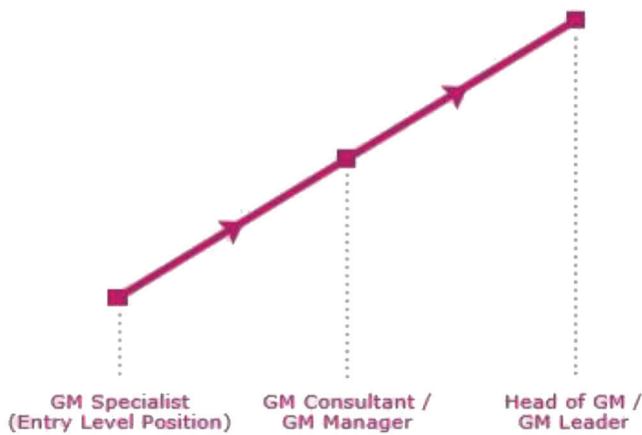
Vendors work as GM Specialists and a lot of the processes that used to be "in-house" tasks are now performed by large relocation companies and other subject matter experts in the field. We should see any work experience in Global Mobility as relevant and valid, and embrace fluid moves from one end to the other of our staff. We should support each other in getting better at what we do.

Expats and spouses need to trust their employers again. You can only achieve this trust in a team effort of all the players in the process.

## **Challenge 2: Develop a general understanding of a Global Mobility Career Plan in your Company**

Life could be simple in Global Mobility, but we tend to make it complex by changing the terminology all the time. If we could all agree that there are approximately three levels of development from Specialist via Manager to Leader, we would have a simple yet concise model for developing our careers. And yes, it all depends on company size, internationalisation stage, and expat population, and maybe your titles are not comparable, but they hardly are in any industry. Have you ever noticed that a Vice President is the same across companies or a Director? In our case I use the three stages to show experience level and expertise, but this does not say anything about quality.

**Typical GM career path**



I know many GM Managers who know and understand a lot more about Global Mobility than their GM Leader. The GM Leader is sometimes chosen because of other skills such as the ability to speak to senior management or to represent the team.

**Challenge 3: Take a Certification Programme for Global Mobility Professionals**

In my view, we need to build up our own professional standard and education, while we need to learn to work in line with the businesses we serve.

There are hardly any standard educational programmes for beginners in Global Mobility. Most seminars are very technical and focus on very specific tax, social security or immigration issues. Providers of these seminars sell their services at the same time so they often pick out exceptions rather than standards. Due to the nature of GM, the cases are often complex and different, and depend on the corporate structure and level of internationalisation of the company.

GM Professionals need to understand

patterns and principles without assuming that their policy, processes and handling of cases fit to other companies as well.

**Challenge 4: Take every chance for an international assignment experience you can get, even if it is just a business trip**

You also need to go through the experience yourself once in a while. You will feel some of your clients' stress already when you undertake a business trip once in a while, because the little things that make a difference can pull down your productivity.

It's very rewarding to go on an international assignment or transfer to another location for yourself and your family. If you cannot move because of dual career concerns or schooling issues, you might be able to relate better to your expats. Speak to your partner about the option and give it a shot.

**Challenge 5: Let's build the Global Mobility brand together**

You cannot talk strategy if you do not have your house in order. Before we build

the brand we need to have our basics in order. Then we can run and expand our scope (include International Business Travellers, international permanent hires and other in-company migration). I think we need to get out of HR and into an area that is aligned with International Business Development if we really would like to make a strategic contribution to the businesses we serve. We probably also need to develop a common understanding of what differentiates "Global Mobility" from "International Assignment Management". We could write a manifesto together and see if we can find a common ground for all Global Mobility Professionals across the world. I also think that we need a guild house for our profession, and a place where we feel at home. This, in my view, cannot be a commercial undertaking.



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