

LGBT+ Mobility In The Post-Pandemic World

As vaccine efforts are initiated across the world, we can start to consider life beyond COVID-19. Remote working and virtual collaboration will clearly continue to play a critical role in the post-pandemic world. Many predictions have been made about what this evolving ‘world of work’ will look like, but how might it affect often marginalised workforce groups such as the LGBT+ community?

Recently, Deloitte UK Chief Economist, Ian Stewart commented: “if the pandemic leads, as seems likely, to permanently higher levels of homeworking, it should increase job opportunities for under-represented groups and areas of the country”.

Although impossible to wholly predict how the many work-related challenges faced by the LGBT+ community will be impacted post-pandemic, we can draw some insight from the research undertaken by Open For Business, in collaboration with Deloitte and Herbert Smith Freehills, as presented in their report ‘Working Globally: Why LGBT+ inclusion is Key to Competitiveness’⁽¹⁾. The report makes the case that LGBT+ inclusion is an important component of a company’s ability to successfully operate globally. As part of this research a survey of over 400 professionals, with representation across geographies, industry, sexual orientation and gender identity, was undertaken to better understand the experiences of the LGBT+ community.

The challenges and considerations outlined in the report provide an important stimulus for how we can establish a better ‘normal’ for LGBT+ employees working around the world, with particular focus on remote working.

The survey found, unsurprisingly, that LGBT+ laws and culture in the overseas location are the two most important factors influencing whether or not LGBT+ people (or people with family members who are LGBT+) accept an overseas assignment, with countries that have higher levels of social and legal LGBT+ acceptance more likely to attract LGBT+ people.

Additionally, whilst there is widespread willingness to travel, only 45% of LGBT+ people who feel completely comfortable being open about their sexuality in their primary office felt the same way while

working on an international assignment. Of those surveyed, over 90% did not receive information from their employer about LGBT+ laws, networks and culture in the overseas location before being offered the assignment. The findings indicate that more work needs to be done to ensure that LGBT+ considerations are understood by HR/Mobility professionals and appropriate policies are in place.

The Impact Of Remote Working On The LGBT+ Community

Remote Working will vary significantly from organisation to organisation, and some may find a full or partial return to the workplace is their preferred approach. For organisations that pursue the implementation of a formal global remote working strategy, the impact may lead to a number of benefits such as improved talent attraction and retention - thus supporting a broader, more diverse, talent pool - enhanced employee experience through work-life flexibility, as well as potential hard cost savings.

While the rapid expansion of remote working is expected to reduce the frequency of international business travel, the shift towards working in global teams means that international relationships with colleagues, clients and customers are likely to become increasingly important. Regardless of whether these relationships are fostered in person or virtually, embracing inclusivity within them is fundamental to making them work. Among colleagues working in different countries, lack of inclusion is frequently cited as a barrier to team cohesion. The same can be said of relationships with overseas clients and customers, in which establishing commonalities is critical to business success.

The challenges associated with working globally are exacerbated for LGBT+ people and their families, who often feel less comfortable disclosing their gender identity or sexual orientation. While research is limited on the subject, 95% of LGBT+ business travellers have hidden their sexual orientation while travelling, because either they felt it made them safer (57%), because they felt it would be easier to get work done (54%) or because they were concerned about anti-LGBT+ laws in the region they were visiting (46%).

Although on the face of it, it could be argued that remote working might help with these particular causes for discomfort, for such a nuanced issue it will not necessarily be the case. For example, remote work may lessen the benefit of the cultural exchanges that naturally

arise where people physically work together in situ. It may also be the case that inviting people ‘into the home’ virtually, through remote working, might feel a step too far for some. Then there are the typical challenges often associated with remote working – the potential for isolation, and the challenge of forging new relationships and building meaningful connections – both of which may be exacerbated for LGBT+ employees trying to settle into new roles, teams or cultures. Therefore, as is often the case for challenges faced with a global and diverse workforce, one size does not necessarily fit all.

A formal remote working programme, combined with the flexibility to deal with situations on a case-by-case basis, will help in dealing with these issues. For those that choose to work remotely, the programme should encourage inclusivity and support to overcome such barriers and ensure that LGBT+ staff are able to continue to access familiar support networks and LGBT+ allies.

LGBT+ Inclusion And Business Competitiveness

Whilst inclusion is imperative regardless of the business or economic case for change, wider Open For Business research shows that organisations that are not inclusive are likely to be less competitive. LGBT+ inclusion for both virtual and physical globally mobile roles can positively impact the competitiveness of global companies, and the countries in which they are based. It is also an important component of an organisation’s ability to operate effectively globally, today and in the future.

Whilst we cannot yet fully appreciate what the world of work will be like in the post-pandemic era, the challenges and considerations for LGBT+ employees working globally should be a key focus for corporates as part of their diversity & inclusion agenda.

Revisiting strategies in this area regularly to account for circumstantial changes to existing challenges/barriers, or the arrival of new ones, is key to ensuring ongoing effectiveness from an LGBT+ inclusion perspective.

The full Open For Business ‘Working Globally’ report can be found on their website. www.open-for-business.org/working-globally-report

Reference:

(1) McGivan, T., Altincekic, C., & Chatenay, E. (2020), Open For Business, “Working Globally: Why LGBT+ Inclusion is Key to Competitiveness”.

Some steps that organisations can take to support LGBT+ employees include:

ASSURANCE

It is important that employees are assured that their career progression will not be impacted if they do not accept the international opportunity on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity.

PROVISION OF INFORMATION

Ensure employees are provided with sufficient information about the overseas country before deciding to take on an international assignment. A number of online resources are available, but companies may wish to consider creating their own resources to ensure the information is specific to the audience concerned. In addition, understand whether the role can be performed in full or in part on a remote basis if this would be preferable for the individual concerned.

FAMILY

It is important to check in advance if an employee will be travelling with a partner (or LGBT+ family member) and if all policies/practices are inclusive. Is there an opportunity for the individual to work remotely from home if the legal position for LGBT+ partners in the overseas location is different from the position at home?

EMERGENCY SUPPORT

Check to see if emergency support providers offer evacuation and emergency support to LGBT+ assignees and make employees aware of this.



CONFIDENTIAL CONTACTS

Nominate business contacts in the home and host countries with whom the employee can speak if in need of guidance, support or reassurance. Ensure that appropriate communication channels are in place in the remote working world given that impromptu catch ups are less likely.

NETWORK SUPPORT

Providing an internal social network or mentor system can be a valuable source of information, especially in a world where in person connections will be less frequent.

FLEXIBILITY AND EMPATHY

During a secondment, businesses may provide additional support in the event that the employee is unhappy or isolated. Such support can include voluntary reassignment or the offer to return home early.

ASK FOR FEEDBACK

Asking employees who have just returned from secondment for feedback can help shape future policy and process improvement.



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