When Mobility Professionals Place Lower Emphasis On Cost Control, What's Really Going On?

In a somewhat surprising development, Sterling Lexicon's recent Global Mobility Blueprint survey revealed that cost-saving measures dropped from the second-highest priority last year to fifth place in 2026. It raises some important questions, like "Have we finally 'cracked the code' on managing expenses without sacrificing the employee experience?" Or "Does this shift signal something more nuanced about how organisations are viewing mobility's strategic value, seeing it less as a cost center and more as an investment?".

To find the answers, we first need to look at the broader picture. As in previous years, respondents were asked to rank a list of 18 global mobility-related priorities as high, medium and low. Many of the top priorities were the same, but a new one appeared on the list, and the order has shifted. As it was last year, improving the employee experience remains priority number one, but what's new is that it is essentially tied with using mobility as a strategic lever for talent attraction and retention, cited by 62% when rounded. Meanwhile, implementing cost-saving measures fell to fifth place at 46%, down from its second-place ranking in 2025.

Other high-ranking priorities included:

- Achieving better integration between global mobility, HR, and other business areas (52%)
- Improving data collection, analysis, and reporting (50%)
- Implementing cost-saving measures (46%)
- Aligning global mobility with talent management (42%).

The results suggest that organisations are moving beyond viewing global mobility purely through a cost-management lens. This doesn't mean expenses no longer matter, nearly half of respondents still rank cost-saving as a high priority, after all. But it might suggest that businesses recognise the limitations of a cost-first approach when competing for top talent, especially given that attraction and retention vied so closely for the highest priority.

These Blueprint findings align with broader industry studies, too. McLean & Company's HR Trends 2026 report shows similar patterns, with controlling labour costs dropping from the second-highest priority to sixth place. Instead, organisations are prioritising leadership development, fostering a culture of innovation, and delivering exceptional employee experiences.

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Why The Shift?

The movement of cost-containment lower on the priority list deserves a closer look. It's worth considering a few different scenarios that could explain it:

1. We've Optimised Cost Management

One interpretation could be that mobility teams have not only become more efficient at managing expenses while maintaining quality, but have also improved educating stakeholders about what costs are realistic. Over the past several years, teams could have been focused on:

- Exploring and refining policies to eliminate unnecessary spending
- Negotiating better rates with service providers
- Implementing technology solutions to reduce administrative overhead
- Developing clear guidelines that balance mobility support with fiscal responsibility.

If that's what's happening, then it stands to reason that the focus would shift toward maximising the value delivered within established budgets rather than continuously seeking new areas to cut.

2. Previous Cost Cuts Compromised Experience

The fact that elevating the employee experience remains a top priority could indicate that organisations are addressing problems created by cost-reduction strategies that proved too aggressive. Signs of that might include:

- Increased turnover among relocated employees
- Negative feedback in post-assignment surveys
- Declining acceptance rates
- Growing concerns about competitiveness in tight talent markets.

If your organisation implemented significant budget reductions in recent years, it's worth examining whether those changes negatively impacted the relocating employee experience, and whether current priorities could signal a need for some course correction.

3. Mobility Has Cemented Its Strategic Value

Another explanation could be that global mobility has successfully established itself as a strategic business contributor. In this scenario, stakeholders now understand that:

- Mobility investments directly support talent acquisition and retention goals
- International experience develops future leaders with crucial change management skills
- Cross-border assignments enable knowledge transfer and innovation
- Strategic deployment of talent drives business growth in key markets.

When mobility demonstrates clear ROI and truly aligns with broader talent management and business goals, discussions centre less

on asking "How much does this cost?" and more on "What value does this create for our business?".

What The Data Tells Us About Current Priorities

The near perfect alignment between improving employee experience (62.07%) and supporting talent attraction and retention (61.82%) as top priorities for this year suggests these aren't separate goals, but interconnected parts of a more comprehensive strategy.

It's worth noting that three of the six highest priorities centre on strategic alignment and data-driven decision-making, further suggesting that mobility has proven its position as a strategic business enabler rather than merely a logistical facilitator.

Applying The Relevant Scenario To Your Own Business Needs

Regardless of which scenario you feel your organisation most closely aligns with, you can take specific steps to strengthen mobility's strategic value and improve outcomes. Focus on prioritising things like:

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Measuring What Matters Most

You've probably heard some version of this before, but it bears repeating: what doesn't get measured doesn't get done. To genuinely improve employee experience, you need objective data that captures:

- Sentiment at multiple points throughout the assignment journey
- Acceptance and completion rates for different assignment types
- Post-assignment retention compared to non-mobile employees
- Career progression for assignees versus non-assignees.

This data can help you identify what's working well and where improvements are needed. It also provides the evidence required to make strategic recommendations to leadership.

Demonstrating ROI Beyond Cost Savings

To help shift the conversation from measuring spend to assessing value, consider building business cases that highlight things like how mobility supports strategic talent deployment in growth markets, the value of developing leaders with cross-cultural competencies, the knowledge transfer international assignments can facilitate, or what competitive advantages your recruiting team can bring to the table when candidates are comparing offers.

When you can quantify mobility's contribution to talent retention, leadership development, and market expansion, budget discussions centre far more closely on strategic outcomes.

The Real Story Behind The Numbers

So, what does all this really tell us? Most likely, the drop in cost-saving measures on the priority list reflects all three scenarios to varying degrees. Organisations have likely become more efficient at managing mobility expenses, learning from years of refinement and optimisation. Some may very well be addressing experience gaps created by previous cost-cutting measures, recognising that the savings achieved were at the expense of employee satisfaction and ultimately result in driving up costs. And hopefully, mobility leaders are increasingly successful in positioning their function as a strategic business lever that delivers measurable value.

The key is understanding where your organisation falls within this spectrum and using those insights to guide your strategy. If you've optimised costs, focus on maximising value delivery. If previous cuts compromised experience, make the case for strategic reinvestment. If you're building strategic credibility, continue demonstrating ROI through clear metrics and business alignment.

The organisations that thrive will be those that view mobility not as a cost centre to be minimised but as a strategic investment that drives talent attraction, retention, and development. They'll measure success not just in money saved but in leaders developed, knowledge transferred, and competitive advantages gained. As you build your own mobility blueprint, the goal isn't to ignore costs, but to facilitate discussions that include the broader context of strategic value.

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KRISTIN WHITE
Kristin White is Director, Communications & Thought Leadership with global relocation management company, Sterling Lexicon. She has more than 30 years of experience in the workforce mobility industry, including several as an expatriate.
She can be reached at:
kristin.white@sterlinglexicon.com