

The 360° Global Mobility Leader - Skills For Success And Survival In A Dynamic And Disrupted Mobility Environment

Summer 2023 has arrived in the Northern Hemisphere, and fortunately the season is set to look much different compared to the rather unfortunate summer of 2020, when the world was in the vicelike grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. For global mobility leaders – including those who might not officially be badged as such – the roles we play in our organisations, and management's expectations of us, have significantly evolved over the past three years, as has the general visibility of the sometimes-overlooked, misunderstood – perhaps even feared – part of the people function, whether it is staffed by dedicated mobility resource or not.

The pandemic has inadvertently provided ample opportunities for mobility leaders to demonstrate how they can find opportunities amidst chaos – international remote working and the engagement of workers in third country locations perhaps being the two en vogue phenomena which most of us will have had to confront, willingly or otherwise. Working moves have evolved significantly in recent times and in the wake of the pandemic, they will continue to do so. The perception that quality talent is in short supply, coupled with the diverse needs, wants and expectations of a multi-generational workforce, will inevitably force mobility leaders to reconsider how they need to evolve the mobility proposition to support the organisation in its quest to attract, motivate and retain its people where that involves a cross-border element.

Before setting about that, we ought to indulge ourselves for a moment and consider the skills a mobility professional must develop and nurture in order to successfully lead our organisations through their next phase of mobility transformation. In this

article I offer six perspectives in this regard, and suggest that the skills we require are by no means new; rather we must encourage them out of our back catalogue and exercise them regularly until they become part of our native advisory style.

ONE: Focus On Asking The Right Questions, Worry Less About Knowing All The Answers

When a novel or particularly exotic request comes in, it can be all too easy for mobility to default to solutions mode at once, particularly if the request is laced with a sense of urgency. There are seldom occasions where advice can be appropriately provided on a complex case or project without consulting the requesting party, and this is where the power of listening – and being comfortable to let yourself do that – comes in. Whether a request involves a new jurisdiction or pioneering a new policy approach, an upfront investment in getting to understand the background to a request, the wider business context, and the driving forces behind it, will not only permit mobility to design an appropriate solution, but also afford the team the luxury of ensuring that it does not inadvertently establish an inappropriate precedent or solve only part of the business issue. Armed with the required context, a mobility leader should not have

to know all of the answers personally; indeed they should feel empowered to bring together the required experts – whether internal SMEs or external advisers – in order to cover all of the appropriate bases. Using one's understated authority to command those individuals to come together across functions and providers to solve a multifaceted business issue, is where the mobility leader needs to shine.

TWO: Don't Settle For Indifference. Ever

Policy refresh, operating model review, service catalogue rewrite – delivering any type of mobility transformation initiative requires appropriate consultation with stakeholders across the business to ensure that the resulting products are relevant, tuned-in, and that any required change management is handled appropriately. While the most obvious stakeholders on the list for consultation may be those who have been frequent mobility customers (e.g. business unit leaders with high volumes of mobility activity, current or ex-assignees), it is just as important to actively solicit input from those areas of the organisation which may not have engaged with mobility previously, including those who may have polar opposite views to those which you hold. While everyone might love to listen to Kylie, remember that Dannii is a singer too. The curious mobility leader will want to understand why some stakeholders have not had any interaction with mobility – are they of the view that the current mobility frameworks are not relevant for their business unit?, do they consider that mobility is only a last resort for resourcing their projects?, or frankly, do they have a preconceived negative view of mobility that has prevented them from wanting to explore the benefits? The mobility leader will need to boldly befriend their alleged foes while keeping their allies on side. Silence is not always golden – failing to consult thoroughly on a large-scale transformation and not being clear on the underlying needs of the organisation may well undermine the principal objective of the initiative altogether.

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THREE: Engage Courageously With Risk

Mobility leaders enjoy a naturally privileged position in most organisations. As part of delivering both business-as-usual work and bigger mobility projects, they will often have cross-function interaction, and this allows them to gauge where the organisation sits on the risk tolerance spectrum, which can often vary by function or by region. Some functions may firmly occupy the risk averse camp for very good reason, while others may push for the organisation to be more pioneering due to the particular challenges they are facing. It is impossible to do mobility well without actively engaging with colleagues on the subject of risk, and a mobility leader should look to provide positively challenging stewardship to their functional allies, with a focus on encouraging compromise where appropriate. While tax teams may have a default zero tolerance position in relation to a particular country or engagement model, the HR team may be faced with a real people dilemma if there is no flexibility. For many, the short-term international remote working trend which has become more prevalent in recent times, will no doubt be a case-in-point for what can be achieved when compromise is pursued. We should not be afraid of risk, nor should we permit ourselves to dismiss it recklessly. The biggest risk for any organisation comes when no risks are taken at all; engaging with it objectively and continuously, rather than resting on years-old positions therefore, should become the default for everyone, with mobility as the champion of that.

FOUR: Paint The Picture, Trash The Textbook

Fascinating, dynamic, inspiring – that is how those of us who live mobility day-to-day might describe it. To outsiders, however, many of the subject matters under the mobility umbrella can be cumbersome, overwhelming, and complex. When advising our stakeholders on a particular matter, we do not need to apologise for the fact that mobility is indeed complex, but we must remember that it is our role to make the complex uncomplicated. The power of storytelling in a business setting is huge, and mobility leaders should consider how they might embrace this approach, particularly when having to introduce new concepts or seemingly wild ideas to an audience which might otherwise quickly disengage. That might involve literally painting a picture; the use of visuals should not be underestimated. Mobility people can be devils for detail and there can be a tendency to default to lecture mode when providing advice. Generous paragraphs of information, laced with technical references and a healthy dose of caveats, all to leading to the one

line “yes” or “no” answer which the business is seeking. The mobility leader should take confidence in the fact that they have been engaged by the organisation as the appropriately qualified person for the role, so they ought not to need to demonstrate their technical prowess in every single stakeholder interaction. Perhaps trashing the textbook is too strong a statement – there will no doubt be individuals who want to see the underlying detail, so know your audience; just don’t forget about the likely majority who will make do with a concise, precise executive summary and save you a handsome number of keyboard strokes too.

FIVE: Appreciate That Style Is As Important As Substance

Which do you buy first: the product or the salesperson? Arguably it is the latter. There are often occasions where a mobility leader will have to champion change in the organisation or deliver difficult messages to a group of stakeholders, perhaps making themselves momentarily unpopular in the process. Even if the conclusion reached by mobility in a situation is perfectly rational, adequately argued and ultimately, the right thing to do, that does not mean that it will not be disputed by the business. Focusing on cultivating one’s personal brand in the organisation, exuding a quiet confidence, and establishing a reputation for quality, will support the mobility leader to position themselves as a true authority on mobility issues. Worked on consistently, this should lead to quicker adoption of new processes and more instantaneous acceptance of answers which may not necessarily be welcomed by all. The latter part of the British Broadcasting Corporation’s motto – inform, educate and entertain – is perhaps relevant to mobility leaders too. We need to adopt a style that makes our stakeholders want to listen and engage and where the circumstances are appropriate. We shouldn’t shy away from adding some light-heartedness into our interactions on the duller or more contentious subjects we need to educate on. Not only does it encourage everyone to maintain a sense of perspective, it also supports with personal brand maintenance in an environment where mobility is merely one of many valuable cogs in the corporate engine competing for attention.

SIX: Be Unapologetically Human

People moving across borders is at the heart of practically everything a mobility professional concerns themselves with. While it would be remiss of us to downplay the (generally welcome) impact that technology advances could have on the mobility lifecycle, there will undoubtedly always be a requirement for a human touch. No policy, process or system can be expected to handle every single moving scenario, and this is where the mobility

leader needs to remember to reality check a situation. Mobility teams can often run on very lean headcount, and when volumes are high or external developments create additional work, this can risk introducing an air of resentment between mobility and the individuals they support. Actively reminding ourselves that we are dealing with people rather than commodities is a very simple thing, but it is nevertheless powerful in supporting mobility teams to ensure that they are operating in the overarching spirit of the organisation and its mobility frameworks, even if the computer might have defaulted to ‘no’ initially.

My intention with this article has not been to suggest a suite of new skills which mobility leaders need to develop. Rather, it aims to highlight those existing skills which we have all had to deepen to survive the challenges of the past few years and deliver successful results for the organisations we are a part of. Continuing to nurture these skills more consciously going forward should ensure that our organisations continue to benefit from the quality mobility expertise we strive to provide, and ultimately (or perhaps selfishly) lead to greater professional satisfaction for ourselves and the teams we work with.



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