Operational Excellence In Global Mobility: Moving From Risk Management To Quality Assurance

As global mobility speeds up, can quality keep pace?

Global mobility is no longer a compliance function simply following business decisions. Rather, it is a risk function that must inform them, and a strategic enabler to support decisions being acted upon in the most effective way possible for an organisation's people and business operations. This shift reflects a trend forged in recent years through the convergence of, i) regulatory volatility; ii) increased internal audit scrutiny, and iii) heightened employee expectations moving the goalposts decisively.

This means that global mobility functions can no longer remain fundamentally reactive - built around responding to tax return deadlines, immigration renewals, and service escalations.

For many, embedding robust risk management and quality assurance (R&QA) frameworks within global mobility is now a business imperative, with an increased focus on how to help the business to 'look around corners'?

Why Operational Excellence In Global Mobility Matters

The focus on operational excellence and why it matters can be distilled into four interconnected categories of risk.

These risk areas are significant to the success of a global mobility programme, given it is particularly susceptible to risk given the high volume of critical touchpoints across the lifecycle of an assignment. Organisations and individuals alike find themselves consistently facing new and more frequent challenges during what are commonly perceived to be 'standardised' or simple processes. It is this misconception that can potentially lead to the under-resourcing and under-funding of global mobility programmes.

To shift this mindset, global mobility functions are increasingly pivoting towards a more proactive risk mitigation approach across the following areas:

The Four Risk Areas

Operational Risk: Inefficient processes and lack of standardisation, leading to process failure points, including matters of data security and privacy, vendor management failures, and delays in relocation, onboarding, or repatriation.

Compliance Risk: Traditional compliance risk areas, including evolving immigration legislation and potential violations for existing internationally mobile employees (visa overstays, work permit issues), tax non-compliance including payroll withholding and personal tax requirements, as well as social security certification. Increasingly, global mobility is influenced by the intricate web of international and local laws, as well as the complexities of legislative and regulatory compliance.

> These risk areas have influenced global mobility consistently over an extended period; however, they are driving the imperative to act now more than ever before

Financial Risk: Uncontrolled costs, unexpected tax liabilities, shadow payroll errors, duplicate vendor billing, foreign exchange exposure, and the cost of early repatriation can severely erode the return on investment of international assignments.

Experience Risk: The increased expectation of consumer-grade user experience has swept global mobility, whilst issues persist across core programme areas, such as vendor performance issues, outdated technology and the limited transparency of communications. These and the lack of upfront career planning prior to an assignment can all impact the employee experience.

These risk areas have influenced global mobility consistently over an extended period; however, they are driving the imperative to act now more than ever before.

Why Now? The Accelerating Pace Of Change

The current global business environment is defined by ongoing volatility. Whilst many factors are beyond the control of businesses themselves, they demonstrate the criticality of operational excellence in global mobility more than ever before. Several converging factors contribute to this heightened urgency.

Geopolitical Uncertainty

Global events - ranging from political instability and economic shifts to armed conflict and health crises - can swiftly alter the viability and risk profile of international assignments. Recent country upheaval illustrates how quickly a global workforce may require emergency relocation support, with associated immigration action, and dynamic risk reassessment. Geopolitical uncertainty necessitates exceptional agility, robust contingency planning, and a global mobility function that is genuinely capable of responding at pace - not one that is discovering its exposure at the point of crisis. For example, the proactive set-up and increased use of parking programmes (specialised immigration-led relocation programmes) to overcome changes in immigration legislation and enable the temporary facilitation of displaced assignees is evidence of the expectation on Global Mobility to respond in-step with business requirements.

Regulatory And Legislative Volatility

Governments across the world often update legislation related to key global mobility focus areas (tax, immigration,

social security agreements etc.). The proliferation of remote and hybrid work has introduced novel complexities around permanent establishment, tax residence, and social security obligations across jurisdictions. Revenue authorities are increasingly expecting employers to be more sophisticated in how they track, assess, and report on their mobile and business-travelling populations. The Business Risk Review framework is a live and specific example of this heightened regulatory expectation - organisations that cannot demonstrate structured oversight of their business travel population are now materially exposed. Navigating these rapid and frequent changes demands constant vigilance and adaptive compliance strategies.

Targeting Organisational Risk

Internal audit functions and senior leadership are placing an intensified focus on identifying and mitigating risks across all business units. Global mobility, with its inherent complexities in immigration, tax and compliance, represents a significant area of potential exposure. Greater visibility of global mobility programmes - driven by improved data, increased press coverage of relevant topics such as remote work and the taxation of internationally mobile employees, and the accessibility of information to senior leaders - means that the global mobility function is increasingly in scope for internal scrutiny. This mandates that global mobility programmes are not just compliant, but demonstrably "internal audit ready".

Increased Scrutiny Of Vendor Performance

As cost pressures have driven leaner global mobility teams, organisations have become increasingly reliant on a complex ecosystem of third-party vendors for critical mobility services, including relocation, immigration support, and tax advisory. The heightened scrutiny of vendor performance is a direct response to the understanding that sub-optimal vendor services can directly compromise employee experience, jeopardise compliance, and inflate operational costs. Leaner teams need greater vendor performance, not less oversight of it. However, it is also critical that the structure of vendor operations is a complimentary extension of the core team.

The Expectation Of A Consumer-Grade Experience

Today's mobile workforce, accustomed to seamless digital interactions in their personal lives, expects an equally intuitive, supportive, and efficient experience from their employers. Travel has never been easier; the expectation of frictionless international movement extends naturally to the assignment process itself. A cumbersome, inefficient, or unsupportive mobility process can lead to significant dissatisfaction, impacting talent retention, productivity, and the organisation's employer brand. It is therefore critical that the services discharged to global mobility vendors meet these expectations and feel naturally tailored for the organisation's culture and the service levels that employees have come to expect. Such evolving expectations have impacted most mobility services, but highly manual services (e.g., relocation services) and potentially sensitive processes (e.g., immigration) can be particularly exposed to pain points, process failures, and diminished employee experience.

> Today's mobile workforce, accustomed to seamless digital interactions in their personal lives, expects an equally intuitive, supportive, and efficient experience from their employers

Demonstrating Global Mobility Programme ROI

Very few organisations have escaped the impact of inflationary headwinds and financial pressures and with substantial investments channelled into global mobility, organisations are under increasing pressure to articulate and demonstrate a clear return on investment. This requires sophisticated data analytics, transparent reporting, and highly efficient operations to justify costs and prove the strategic value of mobility initiatives. The persistent misconception that global mobility is a straightforward administrative function - rather than a complex, compliance-based strategic lever for organisations to use to their advantage - continues to often undermine the function's ability to secure the resource and investment it requires.

This complex web of geopolitical, compliance-related challenges, and the broader demands on global mobility programmes, means organisations are having to continually react and respond. Whilst many of these challenges are not new, the volume, the level of change, and sheer complexity has ramped up since the dawn of the Covid-19 pandemic, and it does not appear to be slowing down.

How Can Organisations Keep Pace?

Achieving operational excellence in global mobility may require your function to evolve from reactive administrative drivers of process to proactive strategic partners, integrated earlier into critical business decision-making processes. This shift is one that typically takes place over time, with global mobility increasingly integrated with talent and reward functions. That said, there are several other deliberate actions global mobility functions can take to move things forward.

Proactive Market Scans: The first step in supporting the business to 'look around corners' is to complete legislative market scans and Tax and Immigration Risk Assessments, including Mock Audits, to anticipate regulatory changes and potential compliance gaps before they crystallise into findings or penalties.

A critical aspect of this shift is reviewing existing processes and policies to ensure they have evolved in tandem with policy maturity and perceived current risks. International Remote Worker policies are a prime example, whereby many organisations established frameworks during the initial wave of remote working guidance that have not been revisited since, despite material changes in the regulatory environment.

Internal Audit Readiness: A critical step is to understand to what extent global mobility has been included on the programme of work for the internal audit function. The wide-reaching impact of global mobility, with it spanning across matters such as international payroll, equity and incentives, as well as employment law, means there is a suite of areas that may be subject to review. Progressive global mobility leaders are proactively requesting that internal audit includes global mobility in their annual audit cycle, using this as an opportunity to surface gaps and secure investment for

remediation. Those who wait to be audited are consistently more exposed than those who proactively seek to review and enhance processes or take mitigative or remedial steps before issues are identified during an audit.

Focus On Process Efficacy: The future will be shaped by understanding what processes and associated tasks may potentially be subjected to digitisation and AI 'agentification' and therefore ensure they are operationally proficient enough to be adapted. Whilst this is a natural next step of seeking automation and embedding technology, it does point to the increased need for processes and associated tasks to stand up to scrutiny, especially where there is ambition to automate. This means, more than ever before, organisations need to ensure that processes and process steps, work both in isolation and end-to-end. Employing methodologies such as Failure Mode and Effects Analysis (FMEA), Kaizen, and Six Sigma facilitates detailed process reviews, identifying risks and pitfalls and enabling the design of more efficient, robust, and scalable processes.

Vendor Diagnostics: Organisations with mature global mobility programmes implement structured vendor scorecards, measuring SLA adherence, case resolution times, escalation rates, and assignee satisfaction scores. No doubt these are commonplace across programmes of all shapes and sizes; however, they now form a key part of annual vendor reviews. Long-term vendor relationships and the proliferation of new or additional services that begin to take shape across the duration of a contract, mean it's increasingly important to recognise that a leaner internal team requires higher-performing, better-governed external partners, not simply more of them. Beyond this, when cost pressures are so significant, organisations also need to ensure that they are maintaining 'value for money' on the services provided.

Data: Many organisations are often overwhelmed by the volume of data available for their programme, made available by a range of systems and solutions that often deliver in isolation, and which may fall short of meeting the reporting requirements needed for programme leads and sponsors. This ongoing and long-standing challenge is often due to data not being tangible or connected to consistent points of measurement within a process. Therefore, whilst many organisations have the data they need, they struggle to use it to drive results and outcomes. In the future, with the emergence of AI technologies, organisations will be expected to derive meaningful insights and enhancement opportunities with that data.

Technology: Technology solutions are most effective when embedded into the programme's foundational design. Tools for immigration management, business travel assessment, compliance dashboards, and obligations trackers are key examples of efficient compliance controls. The key challenge for organisations moving forward is determining how much can be done by technology, whether that is increased integration with HRIS platforms, data scrutiny, or the deployment of AI across the programme. The starting point for many of these changes will be efficiency, but what ultimately determines their success is whether they meet the expectations to deliver good governance for programme leads and their sponsors. Beyond this, organisations should also seek to build upon technologies deployed across the business (not just global mobility technology) and assess what they can offer the function to deliver improved processes, robust controls, and an optimised user experience.

Formal Risk & Quality Assurance Framework: Underpinning all of these is the increased focus on embedding Risk & Quality Assurance frameworks, to provide robust measures to maintain best practice. It is true to say that much of this is an extension of increased scrutiny on vendors. However, market practice articulates a broader set of circumstances. Key examples arise across the four risk areas defined previously, with immigration compliance and supporting processes, as well as user experience as a component of the employee value proposition, all proving to be drivers for extensive work in this space.

Inherently good design principles do not always guarantee a good outcome as there are too many variables in play. However, a lack of clear strategy and focus on proactively managing all manners of risk almost certainly reduces the likelihood of good outcomes.

We started by asking the question, 'as global mobility speeds up, can quality keep pace?', and this article has aimed to answer why and how this is the critical question for global mobility professionals in 2026. Moving forward, 'keeping pace' will not mean maintaining the status quo and only reactively responding to issues. Rather, it will require building controls, culture, and capability to deliver consistently for the business, its people, and to meet the ever-changing external forces we face.

The question is therefore not whether your programme is 'fast-paced' enough. It is whether it is ready for new era of change. Are you ready?

LUKE SKIRROW
Associate Director, Deloitte LLP
Global Employer Services
T: +44 121 696 8684
E: laskirrow@deloitte.co.uk

JORDAN TAYLOR
Associate Director, Deloitte LLP
Global Employer Services
T: +44 121 696 8865
E: jordtaylor@deloitte.co.uk

Deloitte's Global Employer Services practice is a multi-disciplinary group of tax, immigration, talent, HR and digital professionals who support clients as they navigate complex global workforce challenges, developing focused strategies and delivering practical enablement. www.deloitte.co.uk/globalworkforce

This communication contains general information only, and none of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited (DTTL), its global network of member firms or their related entities (collectively, the "Deloitte organization") is, by means of this communication, rendering professional advice or services. Before making any decision or taking any action that may affect your finances or your business, you should consult a qualified professional adviser. No representations, warranties or undertakings (express or implied) are given as to the accuracy or completeness of the information in this communication, and none of DTTL, its member firms, related entities, employees or agents shall be liable or responsible for any loss or damage whatsoever arising directly or indirectly in connection with any person relying on this communication. DTTL and each of its member firms, and their related entities, are legally separate and independent entities. ©2026. For information, contact Deloitte Global.