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With the growth of expatriate talent set to rise, Colin Cottell looks behind the latest research on the state of play within global mobility

The number of internationally mobile employees in large international companies is set to grow by 50% by 2020, according to PwC's Talent Mobility 2020 report. Global organisations are already hosting assignees in more countries than ever before, says PwC, and this is set to rise still higher to an average of 33 countries in 2020.

Such an unprecedented explosion in global mobility of talent heightens the need for companies to constantly improve the way they design, implement and manage their internationally mobile talent and global mobility (GM) programmes and strategies. So a report by the RES Forum, a community of senior in-house HR professionals from more than 35 countries, is timely.

The report, 'Strategic Global Mobility & the Talent Management Conundrum', is published in the forum's annual report 2015. Based on a survey of the forum's members, it reviews the current state of play within global mobility. While it finds evidence of good practice, it also finds considerable room for improvement, leading to a number of important conclusions and recommendations.

The report, authored by Michael F Dickman, professor of international human resource management at Cranfield University School of Management, finds that by far the most important driver for expatriation of talent is to address an immediate business need, with 84% of respondents saying this is very important or important. The next most significant drivers are providing country/business leaders and developing senior future leaders.

The survey emphasises how important it is for multinational companies (MNCs) that their talent is internationally mobile, with 71% saying this is vital for them to assess their key talent.

Despite the clear benefits to MNCs of having talent that is globally mobile, the report reveals that up to 31% of organisations have less than 40% of the assignees they need. This is despite 80% of MNCs stating that an overseas assignment is important for the career progression of their executive and senior managers. The report notes that only a quarter of companies assess whether employees are likely to be internationally mobile when they are first recruited into the organisation.

In light of this, the report suggests MNCs do more to market the career and personal development benefits of international assignments to their employees. That might be easier said than done, because although a third of companies say international assignments benefit assignees' careers, a further third are unsure whether this is the case, admitting this is not something they monitor.

Although the absence of this data casts some doubt on whether being globally mobile benefits an employee's career, the report finds there are other positive effects, including higher levels of employee engagement. However, this is not uniform across the workforce, with engagement at 88% being highest among 25-34-year-olds, and only 20% for those aged between 55 and 64.

One of the key measures of success in GM is what happens after an assignee returns home. Research has shown there is a heightened risk of repatriates leaving the organisation within a year of returning. A key factor influencing whether a repatriate leaves or is retained is whether they gain a position that builds on the new skills they have developed abroad, and whether the employee sees their new role as career progression. According to the report, the evidence is mixed on how seriously companies take this issue.

While 55% of MNCs guarantee employment on return, only 31% actually have a person assigned as a 'repatriation champion' within their organisation, who is responsible for placing repatriates. Companies with higher ranking 'repatriation champions' are seen as more effective in securing the right type of position for returning employees than more lowly managers.

Another issue referred to in the report exposes a lack of long-term career planning, with only 43% of MNCs considering the expatriate's future role at the point of assignee selection.

However, the report also notes areas of good practice, such as how MNCs are making efforts to take into account the views and experiences of assignees, and using this to inform and refine their GM and international talent programmes and strategies.

Almost a quarter of firms use an annual assignee satisfaction survey, while others use post-arrival assignment surveys to assignees.

MNCs are also focusing a lot of attention on measuring the return on investment (ROI) of their GM programmes and talent strategy, says the report. As well as considering the employee's effectiveness in the role, and whether the business objectives have been achieved, 31% of firms surveyed indicate that post-assignment employee retention is an important factor in assessing whether an international assignment is a good ROI. More than one in three (35%) say that development of local talent is a key factor.

All in all, while GM and HR professionals are doing some things well, they must up their game if the voracious appetite for internationally mobile talent is going to be met.

POWER POINTS

1. When selecting individuals for an international assignment, choose those who are open-minded, behaviourally flexible, resilient, and have the ability to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity.
2. Choose a job for the candidate that is a stretch assignment, but not too much of a stretch. Remember: adjusting to a new team and environment abroad is already a big challenge.
3. Before the assignee goes abroad, have a detailed discussion with them about the assignment and how it fits in with their career plans and objectives. Equally, ask yourself whether the move and the assignee's future career plans are consistent with the longer-term strategic talent needs of the organisation.
4. Provide cultural training and language classes aimed at helping the individual integrate into the new environment. And don't forget to provide help and support for the expatriate's family.
5. Allocate the assignee a host country/mentor or 'buddy' to whom they can go for support and advice.
6. After an assignee returns to their home country, help them to reintegrate back into the environment and into their new role. Assign the repatriate a 'repatriation champion', who is responsible for placing them into a new role.

• *MICHAEL F DICKMAN is author of the report 'Strategic Global Mobility & the Talent Management Conundrum', and is professor of international HR management at Cranfield University School of Management*

- See more at: <http://www.recruiter.co.uk/news/2015/10/the-conundrum-of-mobilising-global-talent/#sthash.wLerch8l.dpuf>