Mobility professionals have a great part to play in the development of their organisation’s globally minded and resilient future leaders, in feeding their company’s leadership pipeline. Leadership development professionals have a key role to play in attracting and retaining a diverse community of international assignees by equipping mobile individuals to be the best they can be in their international assignments.

**MOBILITY AS A VITAL ELEMENT OF A GLOBAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY**

Developing leaders for sustainable success is a, if not the, strategic imperative of all significant entities. International assignments, implicitly if not explicitly, are a critical plank of the leadership development strategy of all global and international enterprises.

Considering the critical components of a global leadership strategy and recognising that people learn 70% of their roles “on the job,” we see in the following graphic that mobility (in the form of international and rotational assignments) is a vehicle for two of eight key elements that contribute to the development of individual leaders. The leadership challenge is to orchestrate the right tension between opposing values and to create an appreciation for opposing values to deliver the organisation’s ambition.
So, why not simply point international assignees at appropriate assignments and leave them to it?

Perhaps this works for “experts,” especially seasoned assignees. However, it is one thing to know what to do as an expert. It is quite another to know how to fulfil a given task in a manner that engages others, whether you do so as a team member, a manager, or a leader.

The challenge of the international assignee as a “lone expert” is exacerbated the higher that international assignee rises in an organisation. Success in a role for senior players is less a consequence of high technical ability and more the result of an individual’s capacity to relate to others positively.

Multinationals tell us that they cannot place leaders in senior positions if those individuals do not have personal and significant understanding of the different faces of their organisation across its operational and geographic activities. Senior leaders must understand their organisations not only across their different divisional propositions but also as these materialise in their diverse geographic locations.

Leaders cannot lead others effectively without an appreciation of the challenges that those “others” face. Senior leaders need to viscerally understand the differences fuelled by cultural diversity and by the characteristics of the different nation-states in which their organisations operate, if they are to attract and retain fellow workers and satisfy customers and stakeholders in every location where their organisation is present.
Some might think it enough to travel. After all, over 1 billion people each year go on holiday to a different country. People are much more accustomed to moving around, meeting new people, and hearing and speaking different languages. Yet being “able to travel to” and being “able to work in” different parts of the world are simply not comparable. It cannot be assumed that one is able to work effectively and efficiently with people from different cultures, from different nation-states.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AS VITAL PREPARATION FOR EFFECTIVE MOBILITY ASSIGNMENTS

Consider the following reconfigured map of the world: As people from different nation-states, we differ on where we place greatest value for success at work. For example, people from Anglo-Saxon nations (UK, US, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada) are likely to be more concerned for their own personal achievement and to prefer to work as individuals within a context of little or no hierarchy, happily engaging with changing circumstances. By contrast, Arabic, Latin, and ex-Communist states (for example, Guatemala, Vietnam, Thailand, Chile, India, and Brazil) are more likely to act in the best interests of society and prefer to work in groups within clear hierarchical lines of authority and in ordered, structured environments. Neither is right, neither is wrong; they are simply culturally different.
Unequivocally, even in an increasingly globalised world, national cultural diversity plays a subtle and important part in how people behave at work. Leaders operating in a global context need to be appropriate in their host location at the same time as they remain authentic. How to do this is not necessarily intuitive. International assignees deserve and need, before going on assignment, the kind of development opportunities that enable them to:

- Understand their natural preferences for how to behave at work.
- Know how those personal preferences would mix with the behavioural preferences of the culture of the host nation.
- Learn what it looks like to be situationally appropriate in that different cultural context.

Without explicitly addressing these needs, an individual assignee’s ability to influence colleagues to achieve good collective performance, inspire the right behaviours in others, and deliver consistent and strong performance will be hit or miss.

THE PURPOSE OF MOBILITY AS A PRACTICE

Mobility professionals have a great part to play in developing their organisation’s future leaders. Equally, leadership development professionals have a key role in equipping mobility populations to be the best they can be in their international assignments.

So why do organisations need a mobile population? Why don’t they simply recruit the right calibre and number of local people to operate in their different locations?

First, a 2012 Mercer study of German companies shows that the number of mobility assignments is expected to continue to increase across the globe — in particular, but by no means exclusively, assignments to developing nations.

Figure 3
Individual and Team Culture in a Global Cultural Context

Second, we know from multiple studies\textsuperscript{1} that:

- Globalisation has changed the game. Emerging markets need globally astute leaders and talent in key roles who can drive both domestic and global growth agendas concurrently.

- Emerging markets are experiencing a talent shortage. Organisations have not yet developed robust talent pipelines in most emerging markets.

- Investment in assessment and development of leaders has not kept pace with demand, particularly in emerging markets. Leadership development is catching up with new generational and geographical forces, but the volume of need overwhelms the provision of effective training and development.

Third, multinational organisations need mobility populations now for the following reasons:

- Filling “technical” short-term gaps:
  - To fill a technical need for a skill missing in the host country.
  - To transfer know-how.
  - To facilitate cross-country projects.
  - To cover emergencies.

- Taking advantage of “strategic” long-term opportunities:
  - To establish a new country organisation.
  - To acquire a new company.
  - To become part of a joint venture.
  - To fill a top-level position (missing skill in host country).

- Developing key individuals into “culture carriers” for organisation sustainability:
  - To internationalise; to create globally minded managers and leaders.
  - To increase international cooperation.
  - To develop individuals for top roles.

With perhaps the exception of satisfying a technical need, all of the purposes listed above strongly hint at the requirement of strong interpersonal skills. Leadership development that enhances self-awareness raises the quality and practice of interpersonal skills.

**THE CHALLENGE OF ATTRACTING AND RETAINING THE RIGHT MOBILITY TALENT**

Successful international assignments rely on a mobile population whose members are able to work effectively, whatever the location to which they are sent. Unless they are

operating in isolation, international assignees do not just fulfil a technical role. International assignees also carry the culture of their home operations to the host country. When repatriated, they carry a version of the host country’s culture back with them. Mobile employees, like pollinating bees, become culture carriers of their organisation.

For this reason, and for the reasons outlined earlier in this article, alignment of leadership development with mobility practices is important beyond the success of international assignments. We know that:

- Multiple research studies suggest that current and foreseeable availability of qualified and experienced talent in emerging countries is insufficient to fulfil the requirements of multinationals (MNCs) trying to localise their operations in those regions of the world with the greatest potential for commercial growth.

- For the most globalised organisations, the need to attract and retain talent that is representative of the nation-states in which these organisations operate is important for maintaining effective and efficient operations. Organisations need workforces, not just across their global operations but also in their headquarters, that represent the diversity of their consumer populations, that truly understand the needs and wants of the buying public — and through that, inform and promote successful multimarket penetration.

- Increasing international diversity of “home” operations requires a new global mindset on the part of all — managers, leaders, and team members. The challenge is to foster creative and well-functioning teamwork among individuals whose national diversity makes them even more likely to think differently.

- Leadership development is not just about what happens in structured face-to-face interventions, however well-blended these are. Up to 70% of what adults learn comes from their own experiences and their own initiative, from “the ether”. Mobility assignments provide great “ether” opportunities for people to learn about themselves, co-workers, customers, and societal needs.

In fact, leadership development and mobility are symbiotic practices within successful MNCs. However, many repatriating international assignees (up to 41% according to one 2012 Mercer survey\(^2\)) leave their organisation shortly after returning to their home operation.

We believe that this “leadership drain” can be reduced through clear leadership development and career management practices. MNCs can build their leadership pipelines even as they fill operational gaps in remote locations by:

- Explicitly presenting mobility assignments as integral to the career management of “talent” and people with potential.

- Overtly preparing international assignees in advance of assignment through action-learning leadership interventions.

- Effectively supporting international assignees on assignment through coaching and mentoring in both the home and the host country.

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A MERCER SURVEY: ATTRACTION AND RETENTION

At the April 2013 Mercer EMEA Mobility Conference, attended by more than 120 senior mobility professionals from some of the largest global organisations, we asked and received replies to the following questions:

• What are the three things international assignees say they appreciated most during their international assignment (how to increasingly attract international assignees)? Answers revolved around enabling international assignees to better acclimatise to their new culture through family support, relocation support, networking with other international assignees, and ongoing communication with the home company base.

• What do international assignees who stay in the organisation say are the three greatest advantages they’ve gained from an international assignment (how to increasingly retain international assignees)? Answers focused on career development in the form of personal growth, professional growth, wider professional opportunities, and new mindsets.

• What are the top three activities that, if done in advance of an assignment, would most help international assignees prepare (how to increasingly attract and retain international assignees)? Answers covered matters like “hygiene” factors and cultural issues: well-communicated terms and conditions, well-planned preassignment trip, orientation programme, and insight into host countries’ habits and customs.

• What are the three reasons for departure most often given by international assignees who leave the company following repatriation (how to increasingly retain international assignees)? Answers related to lack of career advancement: jobs do not meet expectations, a better offer is made by another organisation, remuneration is below expectations, and an overseas experience is not valued by the home company.

• What are the top three issues of dissatisfaction raised by international assignees while they are out in a host location (how to increasingly retain international assignees)? Answers point to cultural issues and a lost sense of purpose: poor support for adjusting to the host location, insufficient link with the home organisation, intercultural issues, and poor family support in the host country.

One underlying theme of the responses above was the issue of communication and the management of expectations. Having the right policies around compensation (given different pay levels across the worldwide platform) and family arrangements, especially in the growing context of dual-career households, can go some way towards improving the host-country experience and smoothing repatriation. These policies need to be clearly and consistently communicated.

A second theme revolves around the need for familiarisation with the culture to which the assignees are going — principally for the individual assignee but also for their families. Assignees need to know what awaits them — the likely behaviours of those operating in the host country. They also need to know what the host country expects of them, including how management in the host country is likely to view them given the assignees’ natural preferences and ensuing behaviour.

Even if international assignees are simply “experts,” sent to fulfil a technical role that the host nation cannot fill, those experts can accelerate and amplify their effectiveness and their ability to transfer knowledge if they approach their assignment with greater
awareness of themselves — how they naturally behave at work and the effect that is likely to have on others in the host nation — and the working culture in that host nation.

BUILDING GLOBALLY RELEVANT EXPERTS AND LEADERS

Let us illustrate the points made so far using an example based on work done by Mercer in 2012 with several intact teams. The team profile represents a real business unit board whose members came from diverse world regions. The international assignees is an individual from another intact senior team.

The predominant culture of the host-country team, shown by Figures 4b and c below, can be described as relationship-centric, collegial, considerate of the views of others, consensus seeking, and conservative. This host-country team grows its enterprise by leveraging historic strengths, building on what it has already established, and cohering the views of its stakeholders to position itself for future success.

The personal values and cultural preferences of the international assignee (shown in Figure 4a) align with that of the host country in several ways: showing a preference for building relationships above attainment of personal achievement, and networking above strict monitoring of self and others to complete a task. Rather than throw caution to the wind by pioneering, his or her preference is to maintain the organisation’s modus operandi and to use that as a launching pad for future success. Because the host-country team’s preference for analysis over innovation is only marginal, the international assignee preference for innovation over analysis may be barely noticeable.

These four preferences of the international assignee correlate to some extent with those of the host-country team. On these values, the host team and the international assignee share common ground.

Where the assignee differs from the host country is on the wider approach to relationships. He or she has a more Anglo-Saxon style, not based on consensus and consideration for others but on using his or her individual status to drive for results and on persuading others to adopt his or her personal point of view. These are not wrong or right cultural values. They are simply different — and could cause misunderstanding.

In the host country, the assignee is likely to be seen as self-centred and bombastic. To the assignee, the host-country team is likely to seem indecisive and soft on people. Both parties would benefit from developing an appreciation for each other’s perspective. Both would benefit from being able to flex their natural cultural biases in order to better connect on the values that unite them and better leverage the development opportunities that their diversity offers.
Figure 4a
Individual and Team Culture in a Global Cultural Context

Figure 4b
A MERCER SOLUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF MOBILE GLOBAL LEADERS

Mercer Leadership Development can enhance the effectiveness of mobility practices in a variety of ways:

- **Action-learning** development programmes tailored for mobile populations can help mobile individuals:
  
  — Know where they personally place value for success at work, and that everyone does not have the same profile.
  
  — Raise their self-awareness, helping them understand how their values drive their behaviours and how their intuitive behaviour may be misunderstood in different cultural contexts.
  
  — Recognise where people from different nationalities may place value in order to better work with and relate to people from other nation-states.
  
  — Embrace opportunities to flex their personal approach to how they complete tasks and develop relationships at work — before going on the assignment.
— Recognise the challenges they will face and the misunderstandings that may arise when dealing with specific nationalities.

• Coaching ideally accompanies such an action-learning development programme, to deepen self-awareness and enable individuals to be mindful of their behaviours and to build new habits. Coaching can also be separately arranged and can continue beyond structured programmes.

• Assessment can give both individuals and the sending organisation clarity about the challenges that an assignee is likely to face on a given international assignment. It can highlight the issues that are likely to arise if you send a given individual to a specific host country. It can identify areas in which an international assignee must begin to flex his or her behaviour for the assignment to succeed.

• Annual review of an international assignee can serve two purposes:
  — To review an international assignee’s ability to flex his or her style to that of the host team, and his or her ambitions and aspirations for repatriation and broader career advancement.
  — To establish the organisation’s diaspora of international assignees, identifying which are “experts” and which are “talent”, in order to map that population against the expert, talent, and leadership requirements of the organisation as a whole.
Customisable to the needs of each specific corporate client, an intervention of this nature could look as follows:

**Figure 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparation</th>
<th>A customisable leadership development intervention — collaborative learning engagements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timeline: months</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-assessments</strong></td>
<td>Face-to-face session: 1.5 day immersion; cohort of 20-30 IAs Global cultural differences; testimonial: an IA’s experience; tailored case studies; “what if?” scenarios; professional role plays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selected reading:</strong> HBR articles, seminal book</td>
<td>Webinar “60 Minutes in the Life of an IA”: Initial experiences In-host situational reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Matching of IAs to host and home coach and mentor</strong></td>
<td>Webinar “60 Minutes in the Life of an IA”: Staying connected experiences Flexible belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Portal:</strong> captures stories; “An IA’s Journal”; presenting highlights during home visits; buddying new IAs in host-country locations</td>
<td>Global “IA Alumni Network”: IAs past and present; annual “regional reunions”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contracting, scheduling, roll-out, refreshing: coaching and mentoring, home and host country, engagements</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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