

Who's in control? Employee choice vs. managed moves

A frequent flier was recently checking in at the ultra-chic, high-tech Terminal 4 at Singapore's Changi airport. Automated check-in, facial scanning to speed the immigration process, computerized bag drops – impressive even for the most experienced traveler.

Dropping off her bag, the scale showed that it was just over the maximum weight limit and the automated bag tag would not print. Next to the computerized kiosk was a uniformed representative, ready to support the exceptions and the occasional glitches. “The computer can't override the rule,” he said, “but I can!” The tag was quickly generated and the bag was on its way down the conveyor belt – and the business traveler was on her way to board the plane.

Today, whether it is checking in at the airport, checking out at the grocery store, depositing a check or paying a bill, do-it-yourself (DIY) solutions are becoming increasingly available – and people across generations and cultures are getting used to this norm.

So, when given the choice, do you select the self-service option or the counter with the person sitting behind it? The reality is that for most people “it depends.” Sometimes you need human support and sometimes you don't. And if you are in the middle of a move, having the option of human support is more important than ever.

The growing DIY norm, innovative technology, and the inclusion of flexibility and choice in policy is leading many global companies to question what services are offered to relocating employees and how they are provided. In fact, for early-career employees, policies that are low cost with flexible allowances or lump sum cash options (and DIY) are already fairly common.

Services vs. cash? Human support vs. technology solutions? This article looks at some of the most popular options being used in today's mobility programs and provides five considerations for global mobility professionals.

1. The flexible cash allowance



The motto continues to be “freedom within a framework.” The focus is packaging the employee’s lifestyle choices and needs into the use of an assignment allowance. Whether it is a cafeteria-style approach, a menu of services with similar values or a points-based system, the idea is to offer choices within a managed budget. In some programs, employees have the flexibility to divide the allowance based on personal preferences. For example, spending less on housing and more on home leave, host transportation or miscellaneous expenses like a gym membership.

Online tools are growing in popularity to manage the increasingly common lump sums and cash allowances being used, especially for younger Gen Y and emerging Gen Z employees. Most companies recognize that just handing a cash sum to an employee for a self-move, especially those with no move experience, is not going to be the most productive way to go.

Lump sum approaches can be very challenging to manage. Employees are left to research services and spend time looking for ways to save money – as opposed to focusing on their new job. Offering managed lump sums, providing Move Consultants in an as-needed advisory role, or implementing the use of lump sum technology can help to guide good choices and ensure that the company’s duty of care obligation, on-the-job productivity and employee’s overall experience are addressed.

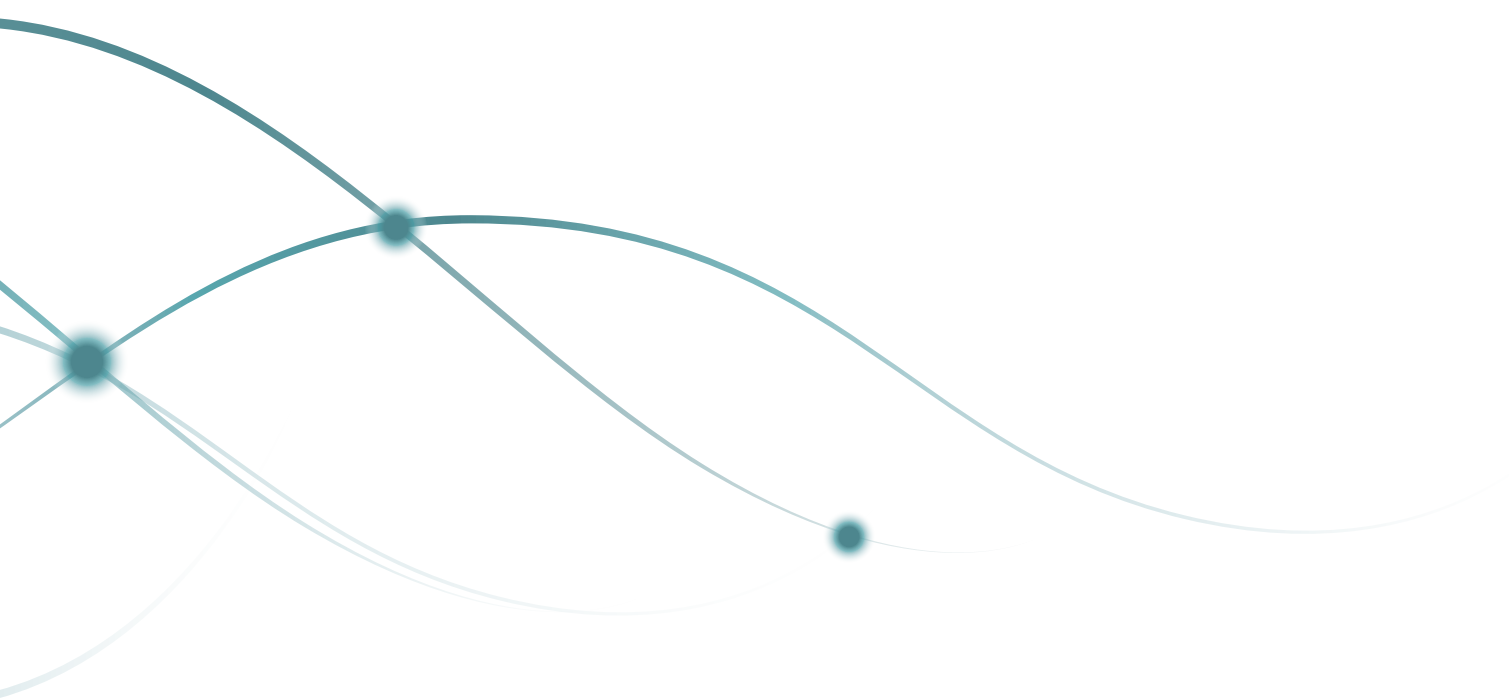
2. The employee experience



Another emerging trend is the focus on the employee experience. Everything from employee and family well-being, to ensuring that employees feel valued by the company and supporting the ability to get up-and-running quickly in the new role take priority. This is an employee-centric focus where, even when given flexibility, employees are given the right amount of help at their fingertips and the sense that the employer is taking care of them.

Relocation Management Companies (RMCs) have seen early technology-only solutions quickly adjusting business models to include human expertise and hands-on guidance for this very reason. The employee requires a positive and supported experience. Global mobility programs that emphasize the employee experience reflect their company’s corporate culture and the need to stay one step ahead of the current war for the best and brightest talent.

We see this trend reflected in the “employee well-being” labeling of policy benefits in global mobility programs and being highlighted on companies’ Intranets. Settling-in services, pre-departure medical exams, partner support, intercultural and language training, flexible allowances to support lifestyle choices such as gyms and pet relocation, would all fall under this category. Additionally, using technology for guidance around the move process, like explainer videos, chatbots and links to additional support, are a growing part of this trend.



3. DIY, online purchasing and Duty of Care



In most global mobility programs, companies continue to resist changing their policy to allow employees to use non-vetted relocation service providers. Unregulated options, like Airbnb and other online market alternatives for temporary living and different types of support have two primary drawbacks:

- (i) The lack of oversight for quality, safety and legality.
- (ii) The inability to track employee whereabouts in order to meet Duty of Care standards, which are the company's obligation to provide a standard of reasonable care.

And yet, a growing number of companies, especially those with predominately millennial and younger employee populations, say that they have no choice. Their employees will use these options anyway, so they might as well support them.

Trends we're seeing

- Companies updating policy to explicitly state their DIY policy and highlight employee liability issues around using non-vetted suppliers and online market options.
- Companies like Airbnb working hard to create and improve a business traveler line of options and services that will meet the corporate market's requirements.
- The emergence of innovative office spaces, such as WeWork, Regus, Grind, and co-living spaces, like WeLive and Common, are gaining traction as acceptable options for collaboration, gig employees and flexible work environments. In particular, high cost-of-living locations, like San Francisco, London and Hong Kong, see the co-living spaces springing up at a rapid pace – becoming a viable option for new hires and relocating employees who are willing to sacrifice space for location.
- In the face of online market competitors, traditional relocation services are adding technology and apps that allow for a similar purchasing experience – lifestyle and location options, online reservations, etc. And it isn't just the way you book or purchase the service – the look and feel of the options have been updated, too.
- RMCs are willing to reimburse for services still not qualified to be part of their supplier network, because their clients are willing to allow employees to use them.
- Fast-paced technology enhancements are being implemented for employee emergency/safety information and support through traditional organizations, like International SOS, and corporate security functions.

4. Information at your fingertips (supporting mobility with a tech-driven experience)



A man was recently overheard speaking loudly into his phone while standing outside a restaurant in the rain: "Is there any way I can get all this information faster, like an app or is there something available online?" The reality is that rapid technology growth is an extremely positive disruption to global mobility and the employee experience. And it will only get better. Self-service and low-cost, low-touch moves already benefit from apps and online tools to guide the employee through their choices and timelines.

Though technology and self-service support are often assumed to be limited to the early-career employee, all employees are benefiting from virtual services, including chatbots, vlogs, VR tours, submitting expenses and online destination information, just to name a few.

The traditional global mobility policy in a Word or PDF format is no longer enough. Employees want the option to click on a topic and see more detail when they need it. They want smart systems that take in their needs and information upfront, and don't require them to provide the same details over and over again. When you don't have much time, have previous experience, and want to target the information you receive, technology-driven support is just right.

Global mobility teams also benefit from technology enhancements. New approaches to reporting, capturing data and integrating with suppliers and internal business partners, provide a faster, better, fuller picture of the global mobility program.

5. The value of human support



There is no doubt that technology is changing how we provide and get information, enhancing the global mobility industry – from the employee experience and mobility team effectiveness, to relocation management services. And so we ask, how much human support is still needed?

This is one of the central questions for technology-driven customer service shifts in any industry. So far, the answer seems to be that people still expect to have both. Often, the more that automated technology becomes the norm for customer service, the more customized and humanized services emerge on the market as an antidote to the trend.

But let's consider the value of human support in the global mobility process. For some companies, the assumption is that their senior executives will always require a human-supported service. However, the reality is that even this population wants some aspects of the move to be technology-driven. Often the VIP or senior-level employee is very comfortable with the latest gadgets and has the least amount of patience for human exchanges in lieu of a technology-driven services approach.

There are a few interesting discussions emerging around this question. First, as mentioned earlier, technology-driven relocation companies have had to adjust their business models to include experts and human-support options. The rigidity of the “technology-only” approach did not allow for the employee to opt out and get help when needed. Meanwhile, companies that have waited to incorporate technology solutions into their high-touch, low-tech programs are scrambling to catch up to meet the reality of a digitized approach.

So how much human support is enough? From the relocating employee's perspective, will they want a personal “Move Consultant” with whom they forge a relationship with? Or is having an expert (it doesn't matter who it is) available when you need them enough?

Some companies are offering a video introduction instead of an email as a way of welcoming the employee and their family into the global mobility process. Other companies provide the options of face-to-face or virtual home surveys as part of the household goods packing process. There are a growing number of examples. Ultimately, a company's industry, location, their employee demographic and corporate culture will influence “how much is enough.”

What does this mean for global mobility?

If you have worked in the industry for more than a decade, you'll remember the one-size-fits-all approach and the reality of “one-size-fits-none.” Today we have options and we want to give our employees choices. But having more choices doesn't always simplify things – whether we are talking about the employee's experience or the global mobility role.

Companies are trying to decide which innovations and options to include in their global mobility programs and what level of flexibility will be a good fit for their corporate culture, program goals, tolerance for risk, employee demographic and budget.

A positive result is the reality that more choice, whether it is a core-flex policy, a self-service relocation package or a segmented population, is driving the global mobility function into an advisory role. The global mobility team is advising whomever is driving the flexibility, to help them understand the options, the rationale behind the options and weighing the consequences. As a result, the global mobility function is becoming more strategic.



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