



World Mobility Perspectives

5 standout talent mobility trends for 2021

How Covid-19 is hitting the reset button

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This article was authored by Lisa Johnson of Crown World Mobility's Consulting Group. If you have any questions regarding this article or would like to find out more about other services, please contact:



Lisa Johnson

Global Practice Leader,
Consulting Services at
ljohnson@crownww.com



Joanne Danehl

Global Director, Global
Skills at
jdanehl@crownww.com



Andrea Fascetti

Global Director,
Immigration Services at
afascetti@crownww.com





“The pandemic represents a rare but narrow window of opportunity to reflect, reimagine and reset our world.”

Klaus Schwab

Founder and Executive Chairman, World Economic Forum

Introduction

It is difficult not to be reminded that only 12 months ago the new year kicked off without an inkling of what was going to happen. Now, having lived through a year of crisis, we are perhaps more comfortable with ambiguity and much more realistic when it comes to accepting the things we cannot control. While we reflect on the unfathomable tragedies of 2020, we can and must look at the many opportunities that have opened up to reimagine and reset our world. The pandemic isn't over, but as we forge ahead with caution and the promise of vaccine distribution, we also begin to look to a future beyond it.

Across global, economic, political and business perspectives, this year requires a stronger push for collaboration as a means to get through the pandemic and into recovery. The universal experience of Covid-19 enhances the possibility of collaboration: it calls for innovation, flexibility and the need to find creative solutions. In this regard, the corporate world has distinct advantages over government when it comes to change and decision-making – it is more agile and can move faster as companies pilot new ideas and adapt when they prove successful.

For Global Talent Mobility, priorities are similar – collaboration, innovation, flexibility and creative solutions will strengthen our recovery. But there are two angles to focus on. First, we must tap into the many strengths that our industry has developed responding to the fast-paced disruption of the past decade. This includes experiences that were transformed by technology enhancements, generational shifts and corporate priorities that saw strengthening commitments to community, diversity & inclusion, sustainability and the importance of enhancing the employee experience. These shifts continue to be the base upon which we will move forward this year. The second angle falls under the umbrella of a reset: the window of opportunity for change, improvement and innovative ideas that we will embrace in 2021 and beyond.

This year's annual list of Mobility trends is influenced by this reset that Covid-19 is offering us. Rather than see barriers, our industry, companies and Crown must embrace the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Underlying themes we'll be discussing:

1

Remote Work / Work from Anywhere policies

2

Virtual Assignments

3

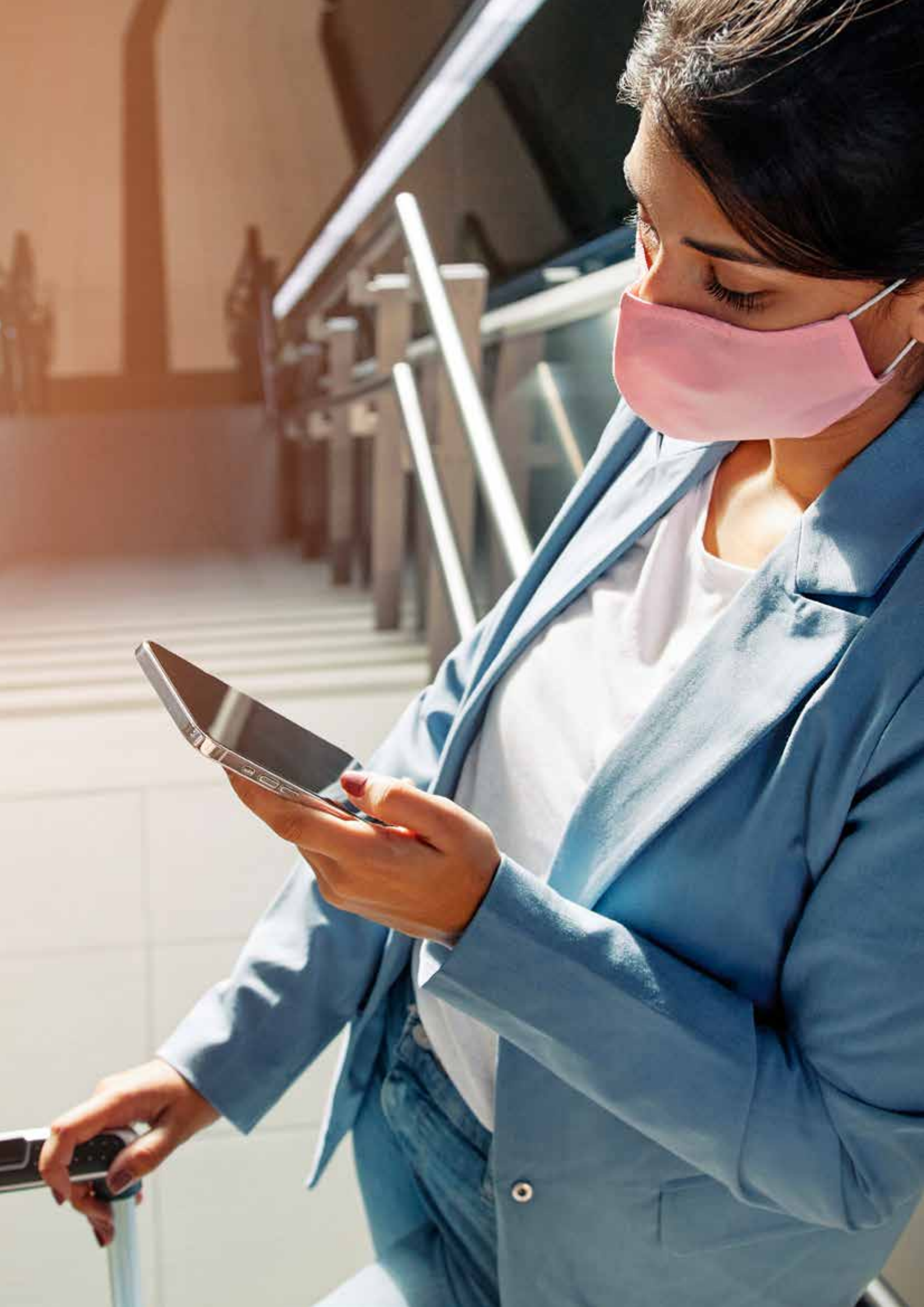
Getting back to work – offices, business travel and vaccinations

4

Relocating employee support during the pandemic – new and ad hoc approaches

5

Recovery and beyond



1 Remote Work / Work from Anywhere policies

When offices closed due to government mandates, lockdowns and other health and safety measures, remote work became the only alternative for business continuity (for jobs not dependent on in-person work sites). The term “remote work” for the initial Covid-19 era was mostly used to describe “work from home,” however, HR and Mobility teams quickly realized that remote work also included employees “working from anywhere.”

Some of this remote displacement was due to factors such as Chinese New Year holidays, when local employees and expatriates were on vacation and not in their home/host location at the time of lockdowns and border closures. In other instances, employees quickly chose to temporarily relocate, domestically or internationally, to locations where they had more space, better weather or family nearby.

Over the past 12 months, different terminology and multiple versions of remote work have emerged: work from home, work from anywhere, flexible work, virtual employee, hybrid working and more. There remains a lack of consistency among the use of these terms and their definitions, which makes the conversation more difficult. Mercer has published a helpful primer on [remote work categories and definitions](#)¹.

What we can all anticipate is that, while some responses to the pandemic will be temporary, many will become institutionalized and permanent – and options for where we work will become part of that. When companies relook at the workplace and the role of the office in the coming year, they will have to consider the benefits that “being in the office” brings. The 2021 reset requires organizations to identify the benefits that best meet their needs and their employees’ preferences now.

Boston Consulting Group’s 2020 study, [Workplace of the Future](#)², states that companies expect that approximately 40% of employees will use some form of a remote working model in the future. The same study says that 37% of companies expect more than 25% of employees to work in hybrid models that combine remote and onsite work.

¹<https://mobilityexchange.mercer.com/insights/article/international-remote-working-a-question-of-definitions>

²<https://www.bcg.com/publications/2020/remote-work-works-so-where-do-we-go-from-here>



So where do we see this conversation heading in the Mobility industry this year? While we wait for typical assumptions and practices to gel, one big trend that Global Mobility practitioners should engage with is policy development for the types of remote work being addressed in their organization. For some companies, the concept of policy is evolving into a more flexible form of guidelines, guardrails and bright lines, but no matter the approach, parameters are required.

There are two that we highlight here:

1. **Company requested remote work** – primarily defined as working from home in the location where the employee is contracted or is based on an assignment; this request is still driven by health and safety requirements, can be a temporary status as needed, and allows for some form of return-to-work-site option when that becomes possible.
2. **Employee requested remote work** – this is the policy that will be used to support the company's philosophy about remote work today and moving into a post-crisis era. Employee-requested moves are not new, and the accompanying policies are often low cost, putting more of the responsibilities in the employees' hands. The reality is, even if the employee bears much of the responsibility, companies are exposed to tax, immigration, duty of care and other compliance risks by having employees work from anywhere. For most companies, developing a policy specific to Remote Work / Work from Anywhere will require initial studies to determine the company's philosophy around eligibility, risk tolerance and other factors. It is already clear that an upfront decision tree will be the critical tool to support this approach.

What else should we be addressing?

[Global Tax Network](#)³ has put together an excellent checklist that asks a number of questions as part of developing the policy strategy. Some of the initial questions include:

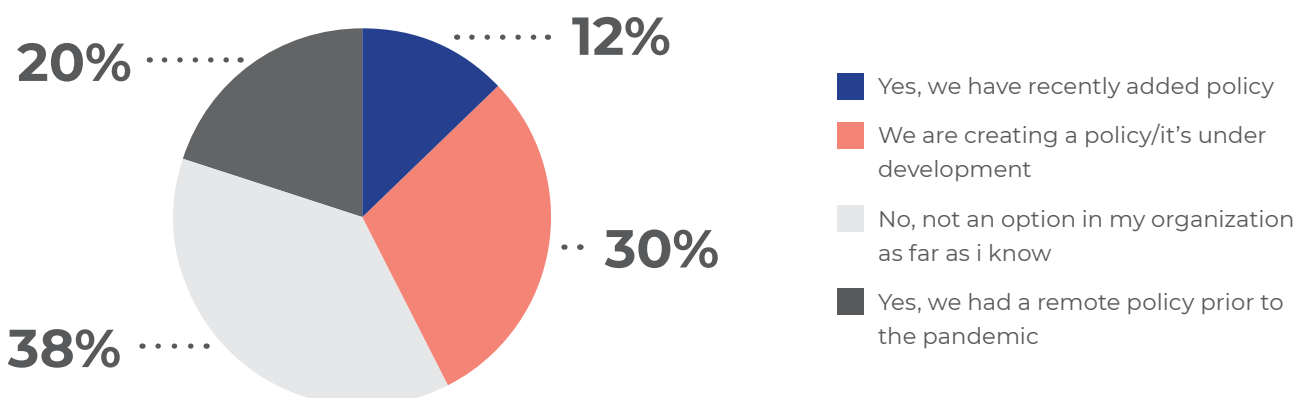
- What department (or combination) owns this program?
- Is this a temporary or permanent arrangement?
- How will you track which employee is working from where?
- Will this be an international or domestic program, or both?
- Will you support obtaining work authorizations for international remote work or will remote employees need to document their work authorizations?

There are numerous additional considerations for a Remote Work / Work from Anywhere policy: tax, immigration, healthcare, payroll, insurance, business travel expenses, compensation, performance, pension plans, collaboration, technology, duty of care, security, work-related equipment, roles and responsibilities, family needs, housing, dependent education and much more.

In a Crown webinar poll taken in December 2020, out of 112 Global Mobility professionals, the largest number of respondents (42%) have either recently added a new Remote Work / Work from Anywhere policy or were in the process of developing one. That said, almost as many (38%) said that this was not an option that their organization was considering. It is clear that the numerous definitions and complexities highlighted above leave the corporate world and our industry with a variety of paths that will continue to emerge throughout 2021.

Existing policy for international Remote Work / Work from Anywhere scenarios

A webinar poll of 112 Global Mobility professionals



³<https://info.gtn.com/work-anywhere-checklist-for-your-mobility-program>

2 Virtual Assignments

The breakout topic for Mobility in 2020 was the Virtual Assignment. Similar to Remote Work / Work from Anywhere, the concept of Virtual Assignments took several months for the industry to agree on a consistent definition. Today we can confidently say that a consensus has emerged: most frequently, the Virtual Assignment describes a temporary assignment to fill a goal or job in another location, without the employee leaving the home location.

Two other approaches are associated with the term:

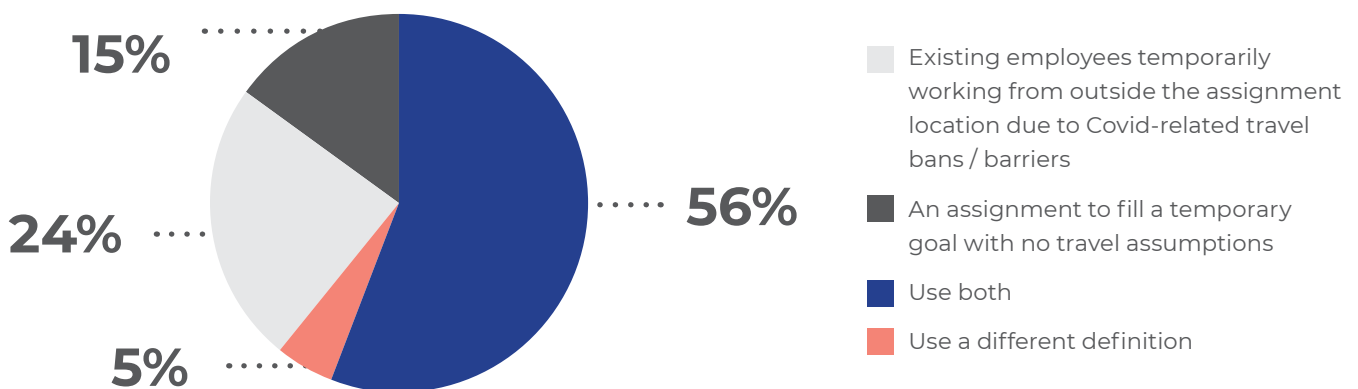
1. The Hybrid Virtual Assignment – whereby an employee is working from their home location filling a temporary assignment role in another location, with the added assumption that, once travel barriers are resolved, the assignment can include a short-term assignment, or an extended business trip, etc.
2. Existing international assignments where the employee and accompanying family are unable to depart for, or return to, the host location due to Covid-related travel barriers. As a result, the assignment is being conducted from the home location or a third-country location. Post-crisis this definition will become obsolete.

In a second Crown webinar poll taken in December 2020 of 41 Global Mobility professionals, most respondents confirmed that they are using both of the above definitions.

In best practice organizations, the Virtual Assignment program will include a tool kit to support the candidate / relocating employee, managers and HR throughout the process.

More than 50% use both common definitions of a Virtual Assignment

A webinar poll of 41 Global Mobility professionals



Questions include:

- Who pays for pre-assignment training, like intercultural training, language training, etc.?
- Who pays for the salary, computer equipment, home office set up if needed, and when does that responsibility start and end?
- What does on-boarding look like for the assignment?
- What happens to the employee's home role while they are on the assignment?
- What happens to the employee at the end of the assignment?
- Where do the developmental goals get captured and added into performance reviews?
- Does the manager need upskilling on managing virtually across cultures, etc.?

The Virtual Assignment is being heralded as a flexible strategy that can be added to a Global Mobility wheelhouse of policies to expand developmental opportunities, open international experiences to employees who might not otherwise be able to travel for personal reasons, and as a means to backfill short-term staffing needs with a low cost and creative approach. This does not look to be a replacement of traditional assignment policy, but an innovative addition to the Global Mobility strategy.



Joanne Danehl
Crown World Mobility's
Global Director of
Global Skills

“The concept of Virtual Assignments is so exciting to me – as a means to get business going again but also as a way to revitalize Global Mobility and look at the industry with fresh eyes. The thought that “health passports” will become commonplace puts a big question mark over extended business travel and short-term assignments. Do Virtual Assignments hold the key to providing just-in-time tactical skill support in place of those move types?”

Also, as companies grapple with creating a more diverse mobility population to better reflect their company and country demographic, Virtual Assignments offer wider access to global skill building opportunities where a physical assignment would be challenging. Maybe because of mental or physical health issues, timing or family planning.

These assignments are not right for everyone, though. It takes a specific set of competencies to be successful in virtual and global settings, let alone both at the same time. Think of curiosity which is key to successful global working – always wondering “why?” Curiosity is driven by sensory stimulation which is in overload during early days in a host country. But in a Virtual Assignment it is lacking. Natural curiosity, or the ability to build it up like you would a bicep, needs to be present or willingly adopted for success.”

3 Getting back to work – offices, business travel and vaccinations

Another area of focus for 2021, getting back to work and back on planes, is driven by an enormous amount of hope and excitement from the release of the Covid-19 vaccine. But the release of the vaccine is not an instant solution. Many industries, like hotels, restaurants, airlines and other customer-facing services, will require a pool of vaccinated employees for reopening. The Global Mobility industry, dependent on an assumption of travel as a way to move people and their belongings from A to B, has a keen interest in the success of vaccinations.

Requiring the vaccine is not going to be possible in most countries or companies, but already we have heard from a few clients planning to require supply partners to be vaccinated if they are going to come in contact with relocating employees. Despite that, universal access to the vaccine will not be possible in the short or middle term, and some people are averse to vaccinations of any kind. Unfortunately, this is going to take time.

[AirInc's January 2021 pulse survey](#)⁴ found that 45% of companies are still unsure what they will do when it comes to vaccinating international assignees. Many in the same study (45%) are counting on insurance companies and local healthcare options to provide them when available. That said, there are a few best practices for organizations to prepare their employees for the moment access to vaccines become available. Our two favorites at this stage of the vaccination journey are:

1. Communication, communication, communication – behind every successful initiative is a strong communication strategy. Reliable information, consistent messages, modeling desired behaviors from the top down, and sharing peer stories are all important.
2. Motivate – we are seeing companies from a wide range of industries talking about incentivizing employee uptake on vaccinations. Some companies are offering paid time off, a vaccination bonus, or have plans to bring the vaccine distribution into their workspace where possible.

⁴<https://airshare.air-inc.com/pulse-survey-results-how-will-your-expatriates-get-vaccinated-against-covid-19>

Outside of the vaccination discussion, decision-making for moving around remains strongly driven by reducing the risk of infection. An example of this is seen clearly in [McKinsey's 2020 Future of Work study](#)⁵. The study found that when people had to choose what method of commuting and business trips to take, the three most important factors in the decision pre-Covid-19 were "time to destination," "convenience," and "price." Today, "risk of infection" is the top reason to choose one mode of transportation over another, followed by "time to destination" and "convenience."

Like the anticipated physical and conceptual changes to the workplace, consumer behaviors and expectations will also recover, with some changes that are here to stay. While we all might be happy to say goodbye to virtual happy hours, birthday parties and coffee breaks, the fact that we now have more creative ways to interact with colleagues, family members and friends who aren't located in the same place will certainly be adopted as part of a post-crisis socializing culture. Contact free check ins at airports and checkouts at stores, along with increasing shifts to digital shopping are not going anywhere. This year we will continue to follow new designs and assumptions around virtual services, workspace modifications, "vaccine passports" and other mobility-related topics.

⁵<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/automotive-and-assembly/our-insights/from-no-mobility-to-future-mobility-where-covid-19-has-accelerated-change>





4 Relocating employee support during the pandemic – new and ad hoc approaches

Despite what feels like a long and drawn out Covid-19 timeframe, thankfully the pandemic is temporary. Most companies have needed to offer extra support during such a stressful time of prolonged uncertainty and in some cases, personal crisis. That said, most companies are not permanently redesigning their international assignment and international transfer policies to address these temporary needs; rather, we see most expanding their flexibility and/or providing ad hoc support to employees and families during this difficult time.

Some examples of new or ad hoc support that are ongoing include:



Requests for larger housing options to accommodate remote work, education and extended periods of time in lockdown



Virtual home surveys (already in place prior to Covid-19)



Additional counselling and support for mental health and well-being needs



Virtual intercultural and language training options (already in place prior to Covid-19)



Language and education tutors for dependent children who are adjusting to online classes while on assignment



Lease cancellation costs and assignment housing transfers to accommodate new demands for spending time in the home during lockdowns



Flexibility for home leave and vacations to allow for quarantine requirements, border closures and an added week of "work from vacation" time



Meal deliveries for families at the start of the assignment



Allowances to cover office furniture deliveries to home offices



Review and strengthening of duty of care, security, business continuity, and business travel policy for international assignment programs



Extended temporary living options (often driven by local restrictions for normal move timelines due to Covid-19)

5 Recovery and beyond

We are not out of the crisis. Second and third waves of Covid-19 are in full force and taking a toll on families, companies, communities and beyond. It is too soon to say that we know what recovery will look like. But we have signs of hope. We know more this year than we did six months ago. Across the Global Mobility industry, we have learned to lean on the strengths that we already had and have developed new ones along the way. Many teams are working with fewer people, due to downsizing and furloughs, but doing more work than ever – not the same work, but more work – and finding that juggling work and life and change takes longer.

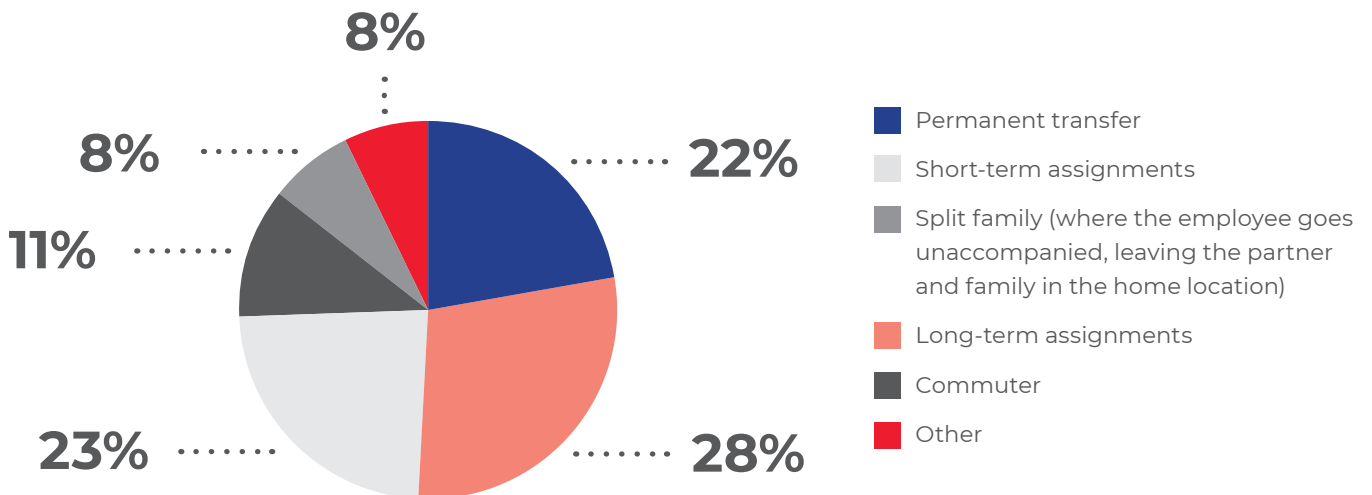
One positive outcome is that the Global Mobility function has been relied upon and recognized in new ways across many organizations. Remote and Virtual Assignments/policies, immigration and tracking, communication, flexibility, empathy, juggling technology with high-touch service – we’ve got this!

As Plato once said, necessity is the mother of invention. While we are still in this pandemic, we need to continue to innovate, improve, rethink how Global Mobility could be in the future and not grow complacent.

In many companies that we talk to, business partners are telling their Global Mobility partners that they have a pent-up demand for international assignments to resume as soon as possible. In another Crown webinar poll taken in December 2020 of 162 Global Mobility professionals, long term international assignments were the move type identified as the most critical to recover, followed by short-term assignments and permanent transfers. The demand is still there and we need to be ready.

Assignments most important to initiate

A webinar poll of 162 Global Mobility professionals



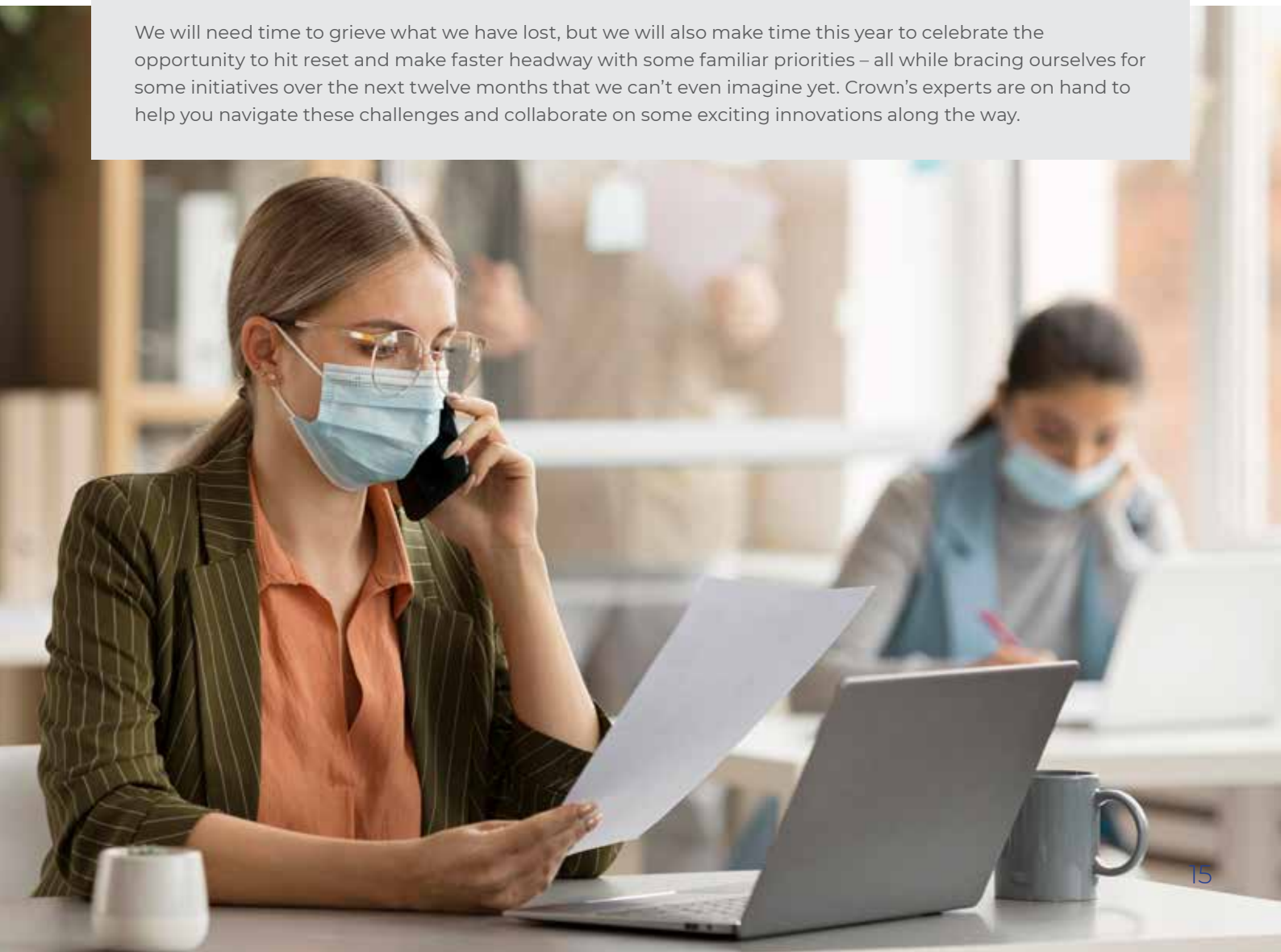
It may take longer to move back into a high demand for short term business travel, but the pent-up demand for travel and adventure is also waiting in the wings. We anticipate that more companies will begin to define “necessary” travel in new ways now that virtual meetings and collaboration have been successful. The customer experience will also be an area where we see new approaches – more options and more personalization. Something exciting we anticipate is that Global Mobility teams will be upskilling and reskilling to meet new demands and new ways of working.

At Crown, one of the most positive outcomes that we forecast lies in the renewed focus from governments and organizations on environmental sustainability and diversity, equality & inclusion. Is Covid-19 giving us a chance to incorporate more of these critical priorities into our innovations and recovery plans? We think so! Our industry, companies, customers and employees are going to require it.

The future of work

While we remain in the midst of the pandemic at the start of 2021, our eyes are open to new directions and exciting opportunities to continue to make fast changes in our industry. Like any change, generational and cultural differences across the organization will either enhance or slow down the acceptance of some of the new ways of working.

We will need time to grieve what we have lost, but we will also make time this year to celebrate the opportunity to hit reset and make faster headway with some familiar priorities – all while bracing ourselves for some initiatives over the next twelve months that we can’t even imagine yet. Crown’s experts are on hand to help you navigate these challenges and collaborate on some exciting innovations along the way.



Crown World Mobility helps corporations manage global talent and talented individuals perform on the global stage.

We work with all stakeholders to find the right solution, implementing a global mobility program that is successful for everyone. Services include research and consulting, assignment management, immigration services, compensation administration and employee and family support.

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