

GLOBAL TALENT MOBILITY:

CHALLENGES OF DIVERSITY IN NON-DIVERSE LOCATIONS

By Olivier Meier, Mercer, [Contact the author: Olivier Meier](#)

UNDERSTANDING THE DILEMMA

Fostering diversity within the workforce is not just a moral imperative, it also makes economic sense: it allows companies to tap into new talent pools and provide a significant advantage in the global talent war.

For instance, Mercer's research demonstrates how greater participation among women in the workforce is driving growth for companies (source: [When Women Thrive, Businesses Thrive](#)).

While companies are making progress on the road to diversity, they face problems when relocating employees to destinations where specific categories of assignees could be discriminated against or even put at risk. From practical questions about sending non-married couples to destinations where non-married couples are not tolerated, to more serious concerns linked to the ethnicity, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation of the assignees, the risks and potential barriers to mobility are numerous.

Employees might sometimes be willing to take a chance, but companies have a duty of care and cannot put assignees in harm's way. Good communication, cultural training, and careful planning can sometimes alleviate some concerns but not always solve all problems in all locations. Companies need to anticipate and openly discuss diversity issues within the context of global mobility.

Ultimately, the objective is to balance the need to foster diversity among the assignee population with risk management. Companies need to strike the balance between subjective issues that can be addressed (if the risk of discrimination is low, it should not be used as an excuse to prevent an employee from going on assignment) and objective problems that represent a risk (companies should not put employees in a difficult situation.)

ASSIGNEE DIVERSITY CHECKLIST

There are many causes for discrimination. Keep the following ones in mind when planning how to meet this challenge.

- Age
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Ethnicity
- Nationality
- Religion
- Disability
- Social class/caste
- Marital status
- Indirectly: family members discriminated

ASSESSING DIVERSITY ISSUES

- A **broad definition of diversity is needed** in the context of international t specific groups might not be sufficient. A wider definition should include gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disabilities, sexual orientation, age, and social status.
- The presence of “**invisible minorities**” means that companies might not be aware of potential diversity issues linked to the assignment. Furthermore, non-minorities can find themselves discriminated because of their marital status (unmarried couples) or specific situations (single parents.)
- **Families of assignees** can also be the target of discrimination even if the assignees themselves don't belong to discriminated groups. This issue could be easily overlooked by the company unless it is flagged by the assignees themselves.
- **Cultural differences** should not be underestimated when dealing with diversity matters. The cultural challenge is the greatest when the diversity policy is directly at odds with local customs and beliefs. Even if management and employees in different parts of the world support diversity, they might disagree on how to make it happen. The US approach of proactively promoting specific groups might be at odds with continental European approaches that are focusing on equality and giving individuals the right not to be labelled

as someone belonging to a specific group (for example, by forbidding collection of data on ethnicity.) Management in some Asian countries might prefer to tackle the issue indirectly by focusing on group harmony rather than discussing diversity as such. This can be the source of misunderstandings and resistance to diversity policies. Poorly managed diversity policies could lead to accusations of cultural insensitivity or give some employees the impression that they are left out because of what they perceive as reverse discrimination.

- One of the main difficulties when dealing with a very diverse assignee workforce in multiple countries is to determine **when to trigger the alert**. The degree and frequency of discrimination problems can vary widely by country and by assignee groups. Possible issues for assignees range from credibility problems (e.g. being too young or too old; being a woman) to more serious issues such as criminal charges, recurring harassment, and active discrimination.
- The **pressure to accept an assignment** or the **temptation to take a risk** should not be underestimated. Employees might be concerned that turning an assignment down might impact their career. Assignees and line managers might not be able to evaluate accurately the degree of risk. The supervisor of the employee might be under pressure to have the business performing and might be tempted to give a green light to the assignee.

LOCATION RISK ASSESSMENT

RISK LEVEL

ISSUES

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

5: Extreme

Severe legal restrictions/risk of criminal charges (imprisonment/death) or widespread problems leading to violence.

No go.

Engage with career management team to find alternative.

4: Very High

Legal restrictions including visa issues and risk of fines or common issues with serious consequences when dealing with locals.

Avoid in the absence of practical solutions to address issues.

Involve compliance and risk management teams.

Exploring alternative assignment setup (commuting, single assignment) if family is the issue.

Engage with career management team to find alternative.

3: Moderate

Common issues due to customs/cultural issues with moderate impact on assignee's daily life.

Awareness and intercultural training.

Proactive facilitation to address common questions.

Mentoring.

Consider alternative assignment setup.

2: Low

Occasional issues with low impact on assignee's daily life.

Awareness and intercultural trainings for assignees, HR and management.

Mentoring.

1: None or Very Low

There are rarely problems.

Communication on the importance of diversity.

RESOLVING THE DILEMMA

- **An accurate assessment of the degree of discrimination in each location is needed.** A distinction should be made between objective barriers (legal or widespread problems) and subjective perception or prejudices that can be addressed through training and communication. Whenever possible, prejudices should be fought, but it is important to recognize objective difficulties. The assessment of objective hardship levels is important to differentiate real barriers to mobility from simple preference or matters of convenience. Compliance and legal teams should be involved in the process for the most problematic locations.

- **Issues should be discussed when assessing the available assignee talent pool rather than later in the process when a candidate has already been selected.** The objective is not to exclude employee categories from the selection process but on the contrary to start discussing possible solutions as soon as possible to facilitate global mobility for all employees.
- **Encourage open communication.** Provide communication channels to allow employees to speak up about possible issues but without intruding into their personal lives. Involve the family in the discussion whenever possible. The role of the receiving country is important: local HR, line management and coworkers should be involved in the discussions.
- **Share success stories** and ask former assignees who have overcome or avoided discrimination issues to act a role model/mentor for potential assignees.
- **Explore alternative forms of assignments or assignment setup**, especially if the spouse of the children of the assignee can be the target of discrimination or if the marital status of the assignee is problematic.
- **Allow employees to turn down assignments without facing consequence for their career.** Give them the possibility to discuss concerns with someone who is not their direct manager. Similarly, the HR or mobility teams should be in a position to say no to management and employees if the level of risk is not acceptable or if the discrimination stems from legal or governmental policies.
- Not everybody in the organizations might agree on how to foster diversity, but **seek common ground** around the fact that the absence of diversity is not acceptable and could damage the business.

CONCLUSION:

DIVERSITY IN THE CONTEXT OF MOBILITY – A BALANCING ACT

The diversity of the globally mobile workforce is bound to increase as the number of women on assignment increases, the number of assignees from non-HQ countries rises, and more generally new and more diverse generations start to go on assignment. Diversity is fast becoming a key topic for mobility management, and it cannot be solely addressed from the perspective of diversity policies designed mainly for local employees.

A first objective of diversity policy for assignees is to fight the unconscious bias that specific groups cannot go on assignment. Companies need, however, to go one step further and proactively address the barriers to mobility for specific groups.

It is very much a balancing act as some discrimination issues can be overcome with proper planning and support, while the most difficult hardship destinations are bound to remain too risky for specific employee profiles.

In any case, the question of diversity and barriers to mobility resulting moves to non-diverse locations need to be openly discussed within companies.

[Contact the author: Olivier Meier](#)

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