

## Global Mobility in a Virtual World



As global companies begin to recover from COVID-19, the idea of “Virtual Assignments” seems to be catching on. Initially, many companies were surprised by the success of their employees working remotely. For most global organizations, virtual assignments could be a temporary solution while some borders remain closed, and until there is a global vaccine available for COVID-19. If successful, perhaps virtual assignments will become another type of mobility in the arsenal for global mobility managers and business lines. Nonetheless, virtual assignments are not expected to replace traditional expatriate assignments.

Before moving too quickly to adopt virtual assignments, organizations have much to consider, both from a logistical, practical standpoint, as well as a talent viewpoint. If not evaluated prudently, what at first looks like a way to contain or decrease costs could eventually cost the organization more than anticipated.

Here are some initial considerations and questions you will want to answer as you move forward:

### LOGISTICS PERSPECTIVE

#### Technology

When determining what technology is needed for a virtual assignment, an overview of the assignee’s job goals, where he or she will be located (home, a local office, or a third country), the availability of robust systems, etc., will need to be evaluated by management, Human Resources, and IT.

#### Assignment Goals

Can the assignee’s goals and performance objectives be met if the employee is in a different country from the one for which these goals are intended? Will the home country manager continue to manage the assignee, or will the assignee be managed by a supervisor in the country for which they are now responsible? Is the assignee experienced in managing a virtual team? In this case, cultural training for both the assignee and the virtual team must be encouraged for a successful outcome. (This is discussed further below.)

#### Working Remotely

Will working from a remote location be appropriate for the purposes of the assignment? For a strategic leader trying to open an emerging location for a business, does that person need to be in-country regularly? Can this leader still build strong relationships with suppliers and team members? What will be lost if the leader does the work remotely? Evaluating each job description may make sense to discover which jobs can and cannot be done virtually. Can part of the assignment be shared with someone local? Time zone overlap needs to be considered. If a leader is not available, will a local employee be empowered to step in to make real-time decisions? From a practical standpoint, who will be responsible for costs incurred, whether the assignee is in home, host, or a third country?

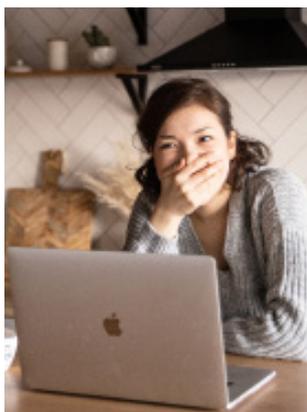
#### Business Travel

While these may be virtual assignments, it is important to consider how frequently the assignee will need to cross borders and visit the country or region for which he or she is responsible. Who will oversee that this business travel is compliant from a tax and employment law perspective? Will the assignee be offered a tool to manage days-in-country expenses, for each country being visited? The number of trips the assignee needs to take may become shorter but more frequent, so tracking becomes a necessity.

Evaluating each job description may make sense to discover which jobs can and cannot be done virtually.

While it is true that most expatriates have been able to manage remote work very effectively during the recent pandemic, contingency plans need to be laid if remote work extends to a full-time situation.

Relationships and trust are paramount to getting business done in much of the world.



### Tax and Immigration Compliance

Many of these considerations lead to tax and immigration implications, making it critical that both the employee and the corporation are compliant. Each organization is encouraged to outline their plan for virtual assignments, apply consistency for each assignment, and work closely with their tax, employment law and immigration partners to ensure the company is not inadvertently creating a Permanent Establishment or other taxable situations.

### Duty of Care

While it is true that most expatriates have been able to manage remote work effectively during the recent pandemic, contingency plans need to be prepared if remote work extends to a full-time situation. If this is the case, companies need to understand what each assignee needs in order to be successful working remotely over an extended period of time. When travel resumes, will each employee willingly board a plane and travel through a couple of countries to reach their destination? If traveling without the family, will that be difficult for the assignee? What about family members who are concerned for the safety of their loved ones? The company has a responsibility to ensure not only the well-being of its employees, but also the well-being of their families as these new processes are implemented.

## TALENT PERSPECTIVE

### Physical and Emotional Behavioral Aspects

Some of the obvious considerations are around tax and immigration compliance. The less obvious considerations are around the physical and mental behavioral aspects of working virtually permanently, or for an indefinite amount of time.

Relationships and trust are paramount to getting business done in much of the world. Assignees need to think about how this usually happens in the host country and how they will build relationships with less in-person contact.

Differing cultural communication styles are amplified in an online environment. More direct and task-oriented cultures may have an advantage as words and "to do's" can make their way around the world relatively easily in either written or spoken form. It's what *isn't* said that often gets lost—cultures where "yes" means "no," and where body language or silence hold great importance. Assignees will need to be coached on how to manage these differences as they will spend less time immersed in the local environment, which is where many of these cues are learned. The setting of communication will need to be considered for consensus cultures where decisions and opinions are not shared in formal settings. Who is invited can be as important as what is discussed.

### Language and Communication

The default business language cannot be ignored. Assignees who are using a second language will be challenged more than they would be in an in-person situation. Relatively fluent speakers are often more challenged to write correctly and with nuance and influence, challenging the confidence of top performers. Who will substitute for the person in the room who might step in to debrief or interpret messages in a meeting for an assignee? Those who speak English as their first language tend to dominate virtual meetings held in English, which can shut down valuable input from "English as a second language" speakers.

The result of these obstacles, even for in-person/live assignments is often a delay in accomplishing assignment objectives. Experienced assignees will have a better chance of anticipating these hidden obstacles and planning accordingly, whereas new assignees will only learn through failure—thinking they are on the right track only to discover at a later date that the on-site team is not on board or not following.

Not to be overlooked is the lost opportunity for assignees to more significantly evolve their mindset through a transformative, immersive experience living in another culture. Only when their core values have been questioned as a minority in a new environment do assignees start to really broaden their perspective.

Virtual assignments may have a place in business today. It is incumbent on Global Mobility teams and the business to develop a thoroughly detailed policy that takes into consideration the impact of this type of an assignment on the employee and organization, who is eligible, and how to overcome challenges and obstacles proactively.

[www.cartus.com](http://www.cartus.com)

© 2020 Cartus Corporation.

All rights reserved.

Cartus and the Cartus logo are registered trademarks of Cartus Corporation.

connect with cartus

