MASTERING THE ALIGNMENT OF MOBILITY SERVICES

Successful international assignment planning requires effective alignment of various mobility services with visa and immigration services

By Glenn Faulk, GMS-T, and Katharine Salem, GMS-T
“Tailoring mobility services”
“Strategic planning of talent and mobility”
“Compliance, compliance, compliance!”
“Effectively managing relocation suppliers to meet business strategy needs”

We in the global mobility world have been very familiar with these post-NAFTA mantras for quite some time. As we’ve learned through experience, mobility of human talent at any level involves multiple variables generated by the employee’s and the company’s—sometimes competing—needs. Therefore, international assignment planning (IAP) can be contingent upon the alignment of several overlapping services engaged to meet multiple and specific goals for relocating talent.

In 2014, at the Southeastern Regional Relocation Council (SRRC) Fall Conference in Orlando, Florida, the authors spoke with several mobility suppliers to discuss how our different roles within IAP affect each other’s service, the importance of each supplier’s role within the mobility process, and how the integration of these services should be understood in order to achieve the highest level of overall mobility services to the client. We asked our fellow panelists and presenters for their thoughts on how to achieve a more effective collaboration between visa and immigration (V&I) vendors and relocation service suppliers.

**GLOBAL VISA & IMMIGRATION SERVICES (GV&I)**

Contributor: Luminary Global Immigration, LLC (LGI)

As a firm led by two GMS-TM designees, our perspective is that GV&I is the “touchstone” that ultimately drives the relevance and priority for strategizing delivery of all other international relocation services. We help global mobility teams and HR deliver a “touchstone” service by (1) fully assessing the specific immigration benefit for the assignee; (2) helping the company to determine what relocation services are relevant based on the assignee’s proposed immigration status; and (3) working with the company and relocation provider on how best to integrate delivery of specific relocation services according to the timing of the immigration process, as part of managing all host-country immigration formalities.

We offer that GV&I compliance is the first imperative to facilitate the proper execution of every company’s overseas business strategy involving the transnational movement of its human capital. To illustrate our perspective, we will provide an overview of the GV&I impact and overlap on the traditional, key relocation services offered by many global companies.

**SO WHY IS GLOBAL V&I SO ‘CENTRAL’?**

In our experience, V&I is often an after-the-fact consideration for many companies. This is not to imply that all companies proactively come from a place of noncompliance. Rather, what drives this is a growing field of players participating in the gold-rush expansion of a highly integrated global economy. As different business cultures enter the pool of global opportunity, the mobilization of their human capital being held to Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA)-style V&I compliance is simply a nonissue. Fair or not, at present there is no accepted worldwide standard of what is a noncompliant practice.

In the global arena, parent corporations based in countries that require strict adherence to compliance regulations face the challenge of remaining competitive against corporations based in countries with more lenient standards.

In addition, startup and growing companies in developed and emerging market countries often send their employees into the global market on a shoestring budget. The offering of aligned relocation packages complete with V&I support is weighed against the urge to get executives and staff the fastest, cheapest visa, “so they can just get over there and start working,” and worry later about getting caught and setting up employees properly.

Despite these facts, the essential best practice for U.S. and many European-based companies is that V&I must be the earliest compliance consideration in order to (a) reduce employee risk of violating immigration laws that may have lifelong consequences on their travel privileges, (b) minimize the host company’s reputational risks and/or commercial losses, and (c) better align the order of sometimes ambiguous priorities of relocation services in global mobility programs.

In addition to the advantages of planned delivery of immigration benefits, V&I suppliers are the primary sources with whom all client and relocation provider supplier stakeholders can share a common communication on the timing of visas.

Basically, when considering entering a new market or if expanding talent in an existing market, a
calculated decision by the company’s C-suite not to first consider the available talent pool’s qualifications and the company’s eligibility to apply for entry/work authorization could very well result in a relocation terrain filled with land mines.

THE TRIFECTA OF COMPLIANCE DRIVERS
At the conference, a corporate panelist with a high-volume relocation program offered guidance on how his company’s mobility team works with its primary relocation provider. From a global business standpoint, it was noteworthy that the first considerations for determining feasibility usually involved addressing immigration, labor, and tax compliance elements.

However, for long-term planning of relocation services, it would be advisable first to delegate your GV&I professional to determine the appropriate status for employees—and accompanying family members—and incorporate labor and tax considerations based on the status.

GV&I as the touchstone element for integration of all services, inclusive of labor and employment (L&E) and tax compliance, is evidenced in the following examples:

a. Immigration: Immigration regulations directly impact how any overseas assignment is structured. Specific status categories carry different tax considerations and varying degrees of protection under a host country’s L&E laws.

b. Tax: Increasingly, countries are looking for “painless” ways to close their revenue gaps by introducing more stringent tax liabilities for nonresidents. One enforcement method is for host tax authorities to request from the migration authorities information on the type of visa held and the number of days accrued in the host country. As more governments share immigration status as well as entry and departure records with their tax authorities, advance assessment of the appropriate immigration options is critical to an educated discussion with your international tax adviser.

c. L&E: Immigration laws and requirements regulate the flow of foreign labor to preserve job opportunities for the host country’s resident labor market. Many countries attach strong labor compliance requirements on companies sponsoring foreign workers, particularly in instances where labor contracts are a requirement, which may subordinate an assignee to the host country’s L&E laws. As employment-related litigation is a primary concern for in-house legal departments and global HR, it is essential to understand the host country’s L&E requirements associated with a specific visa category.

Qualified GV&I suppliers, having broad experience in global mobility compliance, understand how to integrate the labor and tax concerns with requesting specific background information about the assignment in order to make a preliminary assessment and spot potential immigration, labor, and tax concerns. Once the correct immigration category has been chosen for the activities to be performed on the assignment or visit, GV&I will be the point of contact to communicate when certain benchmarks have been met and when to include the assistance of labor and tax service providers to perform their due diligence to successfully conclude all compliance formalities in the host country.

IMPACT ON IAP SUCCESS
Over the years, there has been much discussion of how to increase the ROI of international assignments, with a focus on data analysis, increased efficiency, and strategic planning. These concepts and theories are important, but let’s open a new discussion that puts the theory into practice using GV&I as the nexus for successful relocation service delivery models.

As we review some relocation services that comprise a successful international assignment, it
is important to keep in mind that every country reserves the right to approve or deny immigration benefits—e.g., business visas and work and residence permits. LGI counsels its clients and a client’s relocation service providers that there are no guarantees an employee will be granted an immigration benefit and that the immigration process is not complete until all immigration formalities—inclusive of receiving a residence permit—are successfully concluded.

Below are perspectives from traditional relocation services that are typically included when assessing the GV&I strategy for long-term assignments and the feasibility of supporting the client’s relocation service provider by aligning these services into a GV&I service delivery model.

(Contributed content appears in italics.)

**SPOUSAL/PARTNER ASSISTANCE**

Contributor: REA – Partners in Transition; submitted by Heidi B. Ravis, Ed.M., LMHC, global team leader and international career consultant

**DESCRIPTION OF ROLE AND SERVICES**

Spousal/partner assistance is a critical service to support selected assignees whose spouse/partner and dependent(s) are most receptive to international moves. Services provided help to prepare the couple and family to acclimate to a new culture and to identify potential challenges, including qualification to enter, reside, and seek employment in the host country. Consultants are also able to support the transition of spouse/partner/family members by helping them identify and pursue meaningful activities.

Accompanying spouse/partner dependents are a major consideration for successful relocation of an employee, as dependents risk losing the continuity of their career, social support network, and the general structure of their daily lives.

An emerging challenge for these services is the GV&I considerations for accompanying same-sex or unmarried opposite-sex partners to obtain “full” status to reside abroad. KPMG’s “Your Assignment Abroad: The 50 Most Common Concerns” summarizes, “In general, international assignment policies mirror the organization’s domestic policy on benefits to domestic partners, whether the partner is of the opposite or same sex. However, even if your company provides assistance … the host country may not allow for nonmarried partners to obtain residency permits.”

Out of all the “noncompliance” services in the relocation process, failure by a company and employee to engage in validated listening to an accompanying spouse/partner’s conditions for going abroad can be the definitive cause for assignment failure.

**ALIGNMENT OF SPOUSAL ASSISTANCE WITH GV&I**

REA – Partners in Transition provides career and acclimation support to spouses of relocated employees throughout the world. Spouses are referred to REA by relocation providers or by client companies. Visa and immigration services are managed by these sources and are already in progress or in place at the point of referral.

Because of REA’s role in the spouse’s career transition, the spouse’s work status is a vital piece of information guiding the support process. The consultant structures the coaching process accordingly—e.g., by focusing on services such as résumé development, career research, and networking prior to receipt of employment authorization. If the spouse requires visa sponsorship in order to work, the consultant guides the client’s job search accordingly, but again does not directly aid the spouse in obtaining sponsorship. If the spouse’s visa status does not permit paid employment, or if the spouse chooses not to work in the new destination, the consultant’s focus is on helping to find meaningful pursuits, e.g., volunteer work, study, and community involvement.

**DESTINATION SERVICES: PREVIEW TRIP, HOMEFINDING, AND SETTLING-IN SERVICES**

Contributor: Dwellworks; submitted by Dylan Sitlapersad, CRP, GMS, director, client services

**DESCRIPTION OF ROLE AND SERVICES**

Services offered by destination service providers (DSPs) include homefinding and settling-in assistance. Preview trip/homefinding includes area orientation tours, accompanied homefinding, or customized rental search and school search. Settling in includes advice and/or assistance with obtaining bank accounts, government documents (such as Social Security numbers), driver’s licenses and vehicle information, mobile phones, insurance, emergency services, and medical care. Some of these tasks cannot be completed without a valid visa or work permit in
hand. Information about shopping, dining, entertainment, and leisure activities is also offered.

Dwellworks serves as an international assignee’s resource during their entire relocation, providing detailed area familiarization through one-on-one consultations and personalized, accompanied services. Utilizing an in-house team of destination services managers and the local expertise of an extensive network of destination services consultants, Dwellworks helps relocating employees settle in quickly and be productive faster in their new location.

ALIGNING DESTINATION SERVICES WITH GV&I

It is very important for employers and service providers to set clear expectations on the process and the time it may take, and also the do’s and don’ts while the visa and immigration application is in process. For example, travel to the host country may delay the process while the immigration petition is pending. We do not have a definitive timeline of how long each visa application might take; however, destination services should not be initiated until the assignee is confident the visa/documentation will be awarded. Copies of proper final documentation are required for many services, including securing a property for rent.

Depending on client policy and mobility program practice, assignees may be liable for the lease obligations associated with their property and at a minimum are always responsible for the proper care of the property while in residence. For GV&I suppliers, it’s important to inform the destination services provider when milestones are completed in order to facilitate the settling-in process. Dwellworks says,

We strongly discourage the start of homefinding before the visa process is complete, as the assignee can be responsible for the lease regardless of whether or not their residence permit is approved. Some landlords require a copy of a visa or residence permit before an application is approved. Our settling-in services depend on whether or not a work permit/visa that allows the assignee to accept employment is received. For example, a Social Security number is given to those legally allowed to accept employment. We cannot assist with this service until the proper visa or work permit is received.

SCHOOL SERVICES

Contributor: School Choice International; submitted by Patricia Muesse, global field supervisor

DESCRIPTION OF ROLE & SERVICES

Providing an education for children accompanying parents abroad equivalent to home-country expectations is important to discuss when the company first offers an employee the opportunity to relocate. Immigration requirements for entering a host country’s academic system differ greatly. Local statutes and regulations can make identifying and accessing appropriate schooling options a time-consuming process for the employee, and an expensive undertaking for both company and employee.

ALIGNING SCHOOL SERVICES WITH GV&I

Helping families relocating both internationally and domestically can be a stressful process for employees moving with children, and even more complex when the child has special needs. Placing their children in the schools that meet their child’s needs and the parents’ educational goals for their child is often one of the most important decisions the family will make. The school placement process typically begins once an employee has accepted the assignment, but it can also occur when employers are attracting new talent or when an employee is considering a move but wants to ensure suitable school options are available before accepting.

From the perspective of school placement, the visa and immigration process is handled independently, and a consultant will typically receive information about the visa approval through the employee.

The first step is understanding the child. A family is usually planning a visit to the new area, and if applying
to private schools, the family may have already started the application process and be planning to complete student assessments and interviews during this visit. The education consultant assists in managing the relationship with the school as the employee plans the move. If the visa approval is delayed, the education consultant notifies the school that the child’s start date will change. Ensuring the school is completely informed about the family’s arrival is crucial to a successful school placement. In some cases, the visa approval timeline impacts the school start date and may influence whether or not a child gains acceptance into competitive private schools.

When a visa is denied, the time and energy a family has put into finding the right school for their child is unproductive. This can become a “chicken-and-egg” scenario—the family cannot confirm the move until the visa is approved, but they also do not want to move forward until they know a suitable school is chosen.

INTERNATIONAL HOUSEHOLD GOODS

 Contributor: Paxton International; submitted by Elaine C. Smythe, CRP, GMS, vice president, corporate sales and marketing, and Laura Carretta (Bolduc), international specialist

DESCRIPTION OF ROLE AND SERVICES

Our role as an international mover in the assignment process is managing the family’s personal effects and household goods to safely, securely, and efficiently arrive at the host or permanent location. As with other providers in the process, upfront planning and counseling are essential. Setting expectations and educating the assignee and family on the many touch points, next steps, and ongoing communication throughout the move are critical to our part in a successful assignment. It may seem like a mere operational component; however, when you’re handling and ultimately responsible for a family’s prized possessions, there’s a lot of emotion and especially anticipation on their end about the timing of the delivery.

The international move specialist contacts the employee and discusses the specifics of the move. The move specialist is the single point of contact for surveying household goods, addressing logistics of transportation, timing of home country packing and destination services for unloading and unpacking, identifying restricted and prohibited items that may be not be admitted by host country customs officials, and facilitating entry of goods with port authorities and customs officials.

ALIGNING INTERNATIONAL HOUSEHOLD GOODS WITH GV&I

“Timing and planning of the move is where we are impacted from a visa and immigration standpoint,” says Laura Carretta. “In a perfect world, by the time we receive a move initiation, the visa/work permit and other requirements are already in the works, but often this is not the case, and the assignee is just beginning the visa process.” From a moving perspective, our role is to ensure the assignee is informed of all documentation and customs regulations for the host country as it pertains to the goods; however, it is highly dependent on the host-country immigration authority and when they issue the work permit. Depending on the country, we may need to collect copies, or often the originals, of stamped passports, work permits, and the residence permit—then quickly return them to the assignee.

Staying abreast of changing regulations by country is important, as it impacts when we can release the goods at origin and plan for proper routing of the vessel or air shipment. In terms of integration with V&I partners, we have the opportunity to work with many attorneys and firms around the world; however, there is no one set way that we obtain the information and updates. This is typically done on a client-by-client basis. We often interface directly with our client’s immigration firm, the HR contact, the third-party relocation management company, and in many cases with the assignee to get status updates. Needless to say, when all parties involved are efficiently in the communication loop, our chances of planning a smooth international relocation increase, stress decreases, and we all become part of the successful assignment.

MASTERING SUCCESSFUL ALIGNMENT OF SERVICES

While it’s fine to understand that “timing is everything” and “upfront planning is key to successful relocation,” there are ways to put these mantras into practice rather than accept them as abstract theory.

Working with a GV&I supplier that has professionals possessing a broad understanding of all elements of the relocation process will allow a relocation supplier to maximize successful integration of relocation services, better coordinate with other suppliers, and ultimately offer the highest level of service to the end client.

Global visa and immigration suppliers that have employees with GMS-T or CRP certifications and / or
employees who have experience and exposure to elements of the relocation process beyond the immigration component can help establish clear and realistic expectations with clients.

The GV&I firm can be a critical communication center for sharing information on the strategies, timing, and status of immigration benefits with all parties.

The key elements to a company looking to go abroad for the first time or for an international company moving to emerging markets are:

a. A company must inform itself of the host country’s requirements and build its own awareness to identify what will define successful assignments. To do this, companies should engage suppliers that have the fluency to deliver their assigned service locally while understanding where their service fits in the overall relocation.

b. For any long-term assignment, the trifecta of employment, immigration, and tax are the core elements any company must address first, as these are the areas in which most countries are looking to share information across agencies for revenue collection purposes.

GV&I suppliers can monitor and track the immigration process and supply needed documents or information to all suppliers to achieve holistic success in the employee’s relocation by linking all relocation services to the type and timing of a specific immigration benefit.

**THE SECRET INGREDIENT**

The concept of integration and alignment of services within the global mobility context is also true within the bigger picture of successful business operations. As with all global business processes that include multiple suppliers, the proper alignment of services and data, accurate prioritization, and shared communication will be key in establishing highly effective service delivery for international assignments. This will become the “secret ingredient” of the best mobility service providers—an ingredient that cannot be provided through technology, but only through teamwork and a collaborative mindset.

Every country will have its own immigration regulations and will reserve the right to refuse entry of foreign nationals. Therefore, GV&I is mandatory for the success of an international assignment. Not having the required visa or immigration status can result in the assignee not being able to enter or conduct the necessary activities within the destination country and potentially invalidate the need for all or some relocation services.

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