

WORKERS WANT TO MOVE MORE THAN BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

Steve Jordan interviews Casey Phelps of Graebel following the company's release of an extraordinary survey report showing that COVID has made people want to move with work more than in the past, not less.



On 19 April 2021, Graebel released the result of a survey* that had been conducted at the end of February. It concluded, remarkably, that 59% of employees are now more willing to move overseas than they were before the pandemic. In fact, 80% of workers would relocate during the pandemic, including 31% who would relocate internationally. I was astounded, so I contacted Casey Phelps, Senior Vice President of Client

Services EMEA at Graebel Companies, Inc, a global mobility expert, to try to put some meat on the bones.

It seemed to me to be extraordinary that, despite all the fears about travel, the uncertainties about health services and the potential risks of contracting this potentially awful disease, people would want to relocate more than they did before. I asked Casey if she knew why. She said that she'd been thinking about that a lot and had studied the survey many times. One conclusion was

that there may be an element of 'revenge travel'. "People have been cooped up for over a year and they want a different experience," she said. "Before the pandemic we weren't using Zoom this much. I think that has changed the way people are viewing the world. It's more scary than it was before but, if we can deal with this, we can deal with anything."

So, perhaps Zoom has opened up a new world for people and now they want to see some of it for real. "People have been interacting with their global counterparts way more than they used to," said Casey. "I think we've seen levels of collaboration, even internally, that have skyrocketed. It's maybe changed the landscape of human nature, at least for a short time."

Where do they want to go?

Of the four generations surveyed, boomers are the most willing to move during the pandemic, with 85% open to relocating. 40% of boomers are willing to relocate internationally and 61% of them are prepared to stay for more than three years. Europe was the top destination with London being the top city followed by Paris and Rome. New York and Tokyo also ranked highly. "This is similar to what we have seen prior and post pandemic," said Casey. "There is



also a desire to move away from the big cities so there's an interesting dilemma. This may drive different types of relocation in the future. We are also seeing more self-administered moves."

But Casey added that it would still be companies that would drive the choice of location. "That desire to be 'in person' is not going away," said Casey. "Relocating for work is still seen as a smart, beneficial career move for workers around the world. It's proof that the global mobility industry isn't slowing down anytime soon. Workers are undeterred and ready to relocate to advance their careers, and companies must be prepared to support their mobile employees."

Improved packages

The survey highlighted that, to attract world-class talent, companies need to create strong talent mobility offerings and programmes that create exceptional experiences for mobile employees. For example, 92% said that they would need a financial incentive, such as a pay rise, promotion, housing allowance and reimbursement of moving expenses. I wondered if this was contradictory: if people want to move more, why do they need greater incentives?

Casey didn't think that had changed much since before the pandemic. Money and position had always been important. "I think it's about attracting the right talent," she said. "Just because someone is willing to move doesn't mean they are the right person for that position. It's not just about attracting the talent, it's about keeping the talent. You need to get the right people in and give them the right level of support because you have to build assignments and if, at the end, instead of repatriating to the home country they decide to go to another organisation, you have lost the ROI on that individual." Casey said that it is important to be flexible with the packages and make sure they fit the individual's needs.

Lump sum confidence

More than half the respondents said that they would prefer their employer to handle all the logistics for them while relocating. I wondered whether this had changed and whether it heralded the end to the previously growing trend for companies to award lump sum allowances to some assignees?

Casey said that there will always be a combination of lump sums and full-service moves, but there may be a desire by some employees to move away from the lump sum model as it's more difficult should an emergency hit, such as the pandemic. "Full-service moves did give an extra level of support," she explained. "That's not to say that mobility departments completely ignored their lump summers. But I think people are thinking more about that type of thing now. They are thinking 'what if?'. Before we were all moving so freely around the world that people were not asking those questions."

Will the number of lump sum allowances now reduce as a result? Casey didn't know but she did think that companies may need to look at their lump sum programmes and maybe offer more variety to be more competitive.

Family relocations

Around half the respondents said they would only be willing to relocate without their families if it were for less than six

months. By contrast, 36% said they would relocate without their families, even for over three years, because they were concerned about how family members would adjust to the relocation. The reciprocal of that, of course, is that 64% would want to take their families with them.

Casey speculated on the likely effect of single people who might be relocating alone. These people would be used to building a social network of friends, which would be much more difficult during a pandemic. "So as a single person, or someone moving without a family, how likely would you be to want to relocate?" she asked. "It's not just about supporting people with families, it's also about supporting those people who don't have families. How do you look at their benefits to make it an attractive proposition for them?"

The company perspective

Of course, it's all very well for people to want to move, but it also requires their companies to be willing to provide the opportunities. Does Casey feel that the desire for corporations to relocate their staff is still as strong? "I think it goes back to that talent retention tool. How do you get the right types of people into those jobs? If 57% of people want to move in person, how do you convince them to work virtually? There are so many different things that we get from being in person and I think companies realise that. If you are not in person, you don't have the water-cooler talk, you don't have that experience of almost learning through osmosis. The opportunity to do everything virtually was a big concern of the mobility industry but I think the survey says that we will continue to see people move, be excited about moving and companies will continue to use relocation as an incentive and as a talent management tool."

Positive future

In closing, Casey said that the mobility industry has always had to be flexible in the face of major events such as 9/11 or the financial crisis in 2008. "This is no different. It's pushed us into the future as far as technology is concerned. I think it will drive more flexibility in the mobility industry and perhaps we'll see more core flex programmes, more managed moves and we will continue to see people move more and more after the pandemic is over."

Let's hope she's right.

**The survey was conducted by Wakefield Research among 1,000 knowledge workers, ages 18-75 across nine markets: Canada, China (Tier 1 cities), France, Germany, India, the UK, the US, Singapore and Switzerland, between February 22 and March 1, 2021.*

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