

SUSTAINABILITY IN GLOBAL MOBILITY

Mike Wincott
AIRINC, Brussels



In my last white paper, *From Mobility to Mobilization*, I explored half a dozen topics that are likely to be priorities for Global Mobility in the near future. Of all the topics raised, sustainability struck a chord that resonated widely.

We are hearing sustainability come up in more and more conversations in our personal and professional lives. Now, the question of how to implement sustainable assignments is increasingly a topic of conversation in Global Mobility circles, too.

Before looking at the contribution that Global Mobility can make towards sustainability, it might be worth a whistle-stop tour of the wider context and some definitions.

My favorite definition of sustainability was coined almost 35 years ago, but it has withstood the test of time. It is borrowed from the 1987 *World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)* report, “Our common future” and it defines sustainability as:

“Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Most commonly associated with the climate crisis, sustainability is not just about carbon emissions.

There are three pillars to sustainability, known as the 3Ps:

-  **PROFITS** (being economically sustainable)
-  **PLANET** (being environmentally sustainable)
-  **PEOPLE** (being socially & culturally sustainable).

To be truly sustainable, all three pillars need to be addressed and that requires us to focus on topics as broad as biodiversity, pollution, waste, and resource depletion. As reassuring (or daunting) as it is to have a single measurable problem and solution to focus on, addressing carbon footprints alone doesn't provide the holistic approach that is needed.

In my *Mobility to Mobilization* white paper, I touched on four key areas. Let's do a deeper dive into each of them to identify how Global Mobility can make a positive contribution to meeting sustainability goals.

Behavioral change

The climate crisis is driving behavioral changes in individuals and organizations. Over time, many of us have been modifying our personal behaviors to try to live greener lifestyles. For example, we have expanded from three to five Rs of Recycling (Refuse - Reduce - Repurpose - Reuse - Recycle). We compost more, take our own bags to the supermarket, use energy-efficient lightbulbs and appliances, think twice about using the car for short distances and buy local (possibly organic) products. The list goes on and the individual actions combine to make a significant impact.



These individual behaviors of consumers and employees are also leading organizations to modify their behavior to become more environmentally conscious. The climate crisis is changing the landscape within which companies operate and they are responding to their customers' demands.

Companies are focusing not only on their own sustainability, but on that of their supply chains. From a Global Mobility perspective, the supply chain is one of the areas where the function can exercise its greatest influence. Using its wide global reach, Global Mobility can require vendors to implement environmentally friendly practices that are felt globally.

Leveraging the supply chain effectively to change behaviors has a multiplying effect that can dramatically magnify the function's sustainability impact. In RFP's, we are starting to see organizations request information or certification from vendors to show their commitment to environmentally sustainable business practices. This nascent trend is likely to develop rapidly, and Global Mobility providers should adopt green practices as this will be increasingly expected.

Given it is also widely recognized that this is a journey, best practice tender requests are including a ratchet clause to ensure the service provider demonstrates ongoing improvements throughout the lifetime of the contract.



Sustainability as a competitive advantage

It has been widely reported in recent months that employee churn is rising to unprecedented levels following the pandemic. As employees re-evaluate their priorities, many are looking for jobs that better align to their personal goals and values. Sustainability credentials are increasingly seen as a competitive advantage in this challenging environment.

Companies have found that they need to demonstrate action if they are to recruit successfully, while they also need to offer flexible and sustainable employment solutions.

Here, too, Global Mobility has a role to play through the development of mobility options that support the business' talent needs and employees' personal sustainability agendas. Most obviously, this has manifested itself over the last year in supporting remote working and developing virtual assignment programs that allow employees to gain valuable international experience. However, I have seen other innovative programs being developed, for example, with companies seeking to drive positive change in host locations by supporting and encouraging assignees to get involved with local sustainability organizations or projects. Broadening the goals of the assignment beyond the work itself can create positive engagement and a valuable investment in the local community.



Finally, in terms of credentials, it is important not to fall into the trap of "greenwashing". Don't portray your mobility program as sustainable until you have adopted clear goals and meaningful practices. Likewise, it is best to sound a note of caution to avoid greenwashing in the supply chain. It is always worth scratching at the surface to make sure that the credentials pass scrutiny.



Responsibility to influence and drive change

Global Mobility has, by its nature, one of the highest per-capita carbon footprints of any HR function. With this comes responsibility to influence and help drive positive changes.

Given the travel and movement required in international assignments, by their very nature, assignees will have large carbon footprints. Depending on the distances between the home and host countries and the frequency of travel between the two, assignees' relocation and home leave flights alone will eclipse any other efforts they might be making to live an otherwise greener lifestyle.

Although it is not realistic to ask Global Mobility to ground all assignees and cancel international assignments, perhaps Global Mobility can guide the business in reassessing the true need and value of an assignment, especially in light of all we have learned this last year about the effectiveness of working remotely. Can the role be performed remotely, or can it be filled locally? If an employee is on a commuter assignment, could the balance be tipped in favour of working from home, with a reduced frequency of travel between the commuter locations? If an assignee is traveling a shorter distance, could Global Mobility incentivise them to use the travel method with the lowest environmental impact – for example, carpooling or taking a train instead of a plane?



Another innovative approach I have recently seen is to give expatriates the option of trading down on assignment travel and home-leave flights. Where the corporate travel policy still offers business class trips, some, or all, of the cash value saved is then invested in sustainability projects. For example, a business class trip from Dubai to Frankfurt costs approximately EUR 2,000. The economy class equivalent is EUR 600. A family of four could contribute up to EUR 5,600 to the company's sustainability fund by electing to travel economy on their home leave trip.



Global Mobility's contribution

There are many positive steps that Global Mobility can take to contribute towards their organization's sustainability goals. Global Mobility can influence, implement, and encourage sustainable practices across different facets of the mobility program. Measurable, relevant insights are critical if the right decisions are to be made. That's still a big challenge; however, many start-ups are tackling this issue and rapidly bringing exciting new innovations to the table.

While these measurement capabilities are evolving, forward-thinking Global Mobility teams are not resting on their laurels. I've seen initiatives in areas as diverse as the relocation process, energy infrastructures of homes, consumption and shopping habits of assignees:

Relocation

Rather than shipping household goods, companies are providing the option of an allowance to purchase or rent furniture in the host location. Relocation providers are being asked to help the assignee to connect into the local second-hand markets and freecycle communities. Similarly, assignees are incentivised to choose low-impact relocation options, for example, by paying a cash allowance in lieu of airfreight to eliminate this high-carbon benefit.

Accommodation

Where possible, some organizations are starting to require assignees live in energy-efficient properties or they may require landlords to make adjustments prior to signing a lease.

Consumption habits

Utility allowances may be based on the cost of green energy providers and utility support may be limited to energy usage levels that are aligned to energy-efficient properties. The assignee is then responsible for any incremental costs associated with making energy-inefficient choices.

Of course, different host locations will lend themselves to certain solutions more than others. Challenges exist, but there is plenty that can be done!

