

A decorative graphic featuring a series of overlapping diagonal stripes in shades of orange, yellow, and pink, creating a dynamic, geometric pattern.

New variants, new restrictions and access to vaccines - why this means ongoing disruption for mobility

Author: Raj Mann, Senior Manager

As seen with the United Kingdom (UK) and France recently, the emergence of new COVID-19 variants can result in new restrictions being enforced, even for fully vaccinated travellers. As a result, ongoing unpredictability and complexities around mobility continue to delay the gradual easing of entry/quarantine restrictions.

In addition, many countries, including those with high vaccination rollout rates, are continuing to take a cautious approach to new variants.

New variants, new restrictions

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in increased complexities when crossing borders; particularly between countries experiencing differing levels of infection rates, new variants of concern and slower vaccination rollouts.

Since January 2021, we have seen countries react quickly to the emergence of new variants including the Alpha (UK) variant, and more recently the Delta and Beta variants.

Given the uncertainty around how current vaccines will work against new variations of COVID-19, restrictions implemented in response to new variants often include fully vaccinated travellers. The UK government's recent announcement to carve-out a new 'amber-plus' categorisation for France in response to the Beta variant, illustrates the uncertainty and speed at which governments are approaching new restrictions in response to new variants.

Which vaccine for which borders?

Access to vaccines will impact how an individual may cross borders. Further, not all COVID-19 vaccines are recognised and approved in all countries, resulting in challenges that go beyond access.

Each country has autonomy to set their own eligibility requirements, resulting in the list of approved vaccines differing from one country to the next. For example, while tools like the European Union (EU) Digital COVID Certificate are helping to increase alignment across the EU when it comes to European Medicines Agency (EMA) approved vaccines, member states retain ultimate autonomy when choosing to approve additional non-EMA approved vaccines. As an example, Hungary and Slovakia have approved Russia's Sputnik vaccine, which is yet to be approved by the EMA.

These variances have increased challenges in mobility assignment planning and business travel, particularly for employees embarking on multiple location assignments.

Mobility policy for the uncertain assignment: Flexibility and forward planning

While vaccine requirements are not new for global travel, the challenges arising from the COVID-19 vaccine (particularly around access and approval status of type of vaccine) mean that the hurdles assignees, business travellers and global mobility professionals are facing are unique to this pandemic.

In times of disruption, flexibility and forward planning should be prioritised. While employers may have global mobility policies in place for remote working and stranded individuals, the focus should also now include discussions on vaccines.

Key questions for global mobility professionals include:

- How do you plan for your globally mobile workforce receiving the 'right' type of vaccine for their next global assignment?
- How do you plan for multiple-location assignments, where differing vaccine requirements exist in each location?
- What if an assignee (or their accompanying dependants) cannot access a vaccine or chooses not to take one?
- Will assignment costs (including the associated quarantine costs, if any) cover the individuals who choose to travel to their base country to receive a vaccine, even if they may be able to access the vaccine on assignment?

The global workforce and the fight for skilled talent

COVID-19 has called into focus the balance of protecting the local labour workforce and immigration policy, given rising unemployment rates caused by the pandemic.

Many countries, including Australia and the UK, are already publishing updated priority job and shortage occupation lists, given identified skills gaps created by the pandemic. Other countries, particularly those where the economy is tourism-sector dependent, are placing greater focus on ensuring the local labour workforce are prioritised for re-employment through more stringent labour market testing and quota systems.

What this ongoing shift in immigration policy means for companies with a global workforce is that employee profile data will be critical to ensure the best talent is available in the right place, at the right time. Locating existing talent within the global workforce in order to fill critical roles, in locations with increasing protectionism will increase agility and cost effectiveness across mobility programmes.

Given the current situation, the COVID-19 pandemic will likely remain a disrupter for global mobility for the foreseeable future. Immigration policy will not just become increasingly complicated, but vulnerable to ongoing change at very short notice.

Further discussion



Raj Mann
Senior Manager - Global Immigration

Should you have any questions on the above or would like to discuss further, please do not hesitate to reach out to Raj Mann (raj.x.mann@pwc.com) or your usual PwC contact.