

# Building a diverse and inclusive mobile workforce



welcome to brighter

Fostering diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the mobile workforce has been a perennial problem for companies. Many employers reject candidates for international assignments because of unconscious bias. Many employees do not even apply for such assignments in the first place due to a perceived lack of support for their needs.

The resulting low representation of women and minorities in the mobile workforce affects diversity at the managerial level. And, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately affected women and minority groups, has made it even harder for these groups to take advantage of mobility opportunities and reversed some of the DEI progress made before the crisis hit.

## Diversity, equity and inclusion matter

Diversity is about representation: How well our workforce reflects the communities we represent and serve. If diversity is about the mix, inclusion is about getting that mix to work well together. Inclusion creates an environment in which diversity can flourish. It relates to how well our culture, environment and experience instill a sense of belonging, authenticity and trust.

Dr. Laraine Kaminsky, a consultant and leader in global diversity and inclusiveness, expresses the essence of inclusion succinctly, "I am not different from you, I am different like you." Our way to inclusion is to focus on how we respond to difference, whatever form it takes, to increase the chance that we will welcome and cherish this difference.

Equity, meanwhile, involves designing systems to ensure access to, and equity in, the areas of pay, progression and experience. Equity and inclusion set the foundation for longer-term results and involve a lot more than simply focusing on the numbers or levels of representation.



## DEI and mobility are linked

Focusing on DEI is to every organization’s advantage because it helps widen the available talent pool. When the right policies are used, the opportunity to go on assignment will be offered to candidates who would not normally be considered or those who would otherwise have dismissed applying.

Mobility is a way for women and minorities to break the glass ceiling, because international experience can improve career perspectives; a lack of such experience, in contrast, can hamper progression. Depending on how we approach it, mobility can be both part of the problem and the solution. Assignees and their families can be the target of discrimination because of their nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, gender, sexual orientation, disability or age. This is complicated by the fact that some differences are “invisible.” Providing relevant support to the different employee groups helps them succeed on assignment and improves both their motivation and productivity.

## A unique opportunity to broaden mobility programs

Despite the great benefits that DEI in mobility programs can bring to both individuals and employers, many organizations are failing to take advantage of this opportunity.

[Mercer research](#) shows that only around 50% of organizations are taking or planning to take any measures to achieve gender diversity in their mobility programs. What’s more, only 12% have undertaken initiatives to promote and facilitate mobility opportunities for minority employee groups, whether that be older and younger workers, LGBT+ employees, ethnic and national minority groups, or assignees with physical disabilities.

COVID-19 presents an opportunity for these organizations to adapt their mobility programs to appeal to a broader range of workers. The rise of remote working during the crisis allowed many enterprises to maintain business continuity. Now, organizations can create new possibilities for employees to work from home, or a location of their choice, using remote working and virtual assignments.

However, in seeking to expand their mobility programs in this way, organizations need to remember that not all employees are equally prepared for remote working, and that challenges at home differ from person to person. For example, single parents may face disproportionate difficulties and need additional help or more flexible working arrangements.

## A bright future for DEI and mobility

Attendees at our recent Talent Mobility and Expatriate Management Conference painted a bright picture of the future of DEI. A heartening 82% of participants were optimistic or very optimistic about the impact of the new world of work on DEI.

Participants saw some barriers ahead, the biggest two being a lack of coordination between mobility, DEI and talent teams; and a lack of flexibility in policies. However, few saw a lack of suitable candidates as an obstacle. This is encouraging, because the perceived lack of diverse talent in the pipeline had been mentioned previously as a barrier to DEI progress.

<b>Lack of coordination between mobility, DEI and talent teams</b>	<b>64%</b>
<b>Lack of flexibility in policies</b>	<b>14%</b>
<b>Lack of role model and perceived support for women and minority groups</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>Lack of awareness around DEI</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>Lack of suitable candidates</b>	<b>5%</b>

Source: 2021 Mercer Talent Mobility and Expatriate Management Conference – spot poll

## Turning stumbling stones to building blocks

One way to overcome the obstacles mentioned above is to adopt an evidence-based approach. By diagnosing the situation and engaging before taking action – and, importantly, assuming accountability for including DEI in mobility – organizations can break down some barriers to success.



## Diagnose

Starting with the facts is always best, so organizations need to establish their current situation first. In a recent [Mercer Let's Get Real About Equality study](#), over 80% of participants saw the importance of DEI – yet only around a quarter tracked gender- and age-specific health needs. If we don't know where we are, our initiatives are less likely to be impactful.

Actions that make a difference include:

1. Using **workforce data** to analyze:
  - Workforce progression – Monitor the evolution of former expatriates' careers to identify which employees were promoted faster, left the company or stalled in their career.
  - Pay progression – Significant pay distortion among expatriates can be caused by the types of expatriate pay packages used over time (such as home-based approaches, local-plus approaches, and inflated local salaries). It can also be a symptom of unconscious bias or underperforming minority groups.
2. Capturing **employees' feedback** during an assignment, upon return or after return can help organizations understand how global mobility is perceived, and how it is linked to career progression and levels of inclusion within local teams.
3. Looking at **policies and provisions**: Are these fully inclusive and supportive of single people or those in partnerships? Do they have home-leave provisions if a partner cannot join, including for legal reasons if the partner belongs to the LGBT+ community? Are there any gaps in terms and conditions, benefits and overall guidelines?

Organizations can also weigh up progression opportunities and pay equity, as well as talent management issues, such as promotion and succession planning, and career equity. These make assignments more valuable or beneficial for employees. But all of this analysis needs to be underpinned by robust communications, change management and a clear understanding that perception may differ from reality.

## Engage

Organizations need to equip and prepare leaders (at middle and senior levels) for what's coming and share the messaging that will be sent to employees. In a mobile world, engaging the right people and collaborating across the business is essential.

Fighting unconscious bias means talking openly about issues linked to global mobility. The challenge is to distinguish between objective (hardship) and subjective (unconscious bias and cultural issues) barriers to mobility. Organizations must also recognize that there may be a significant disconnect between official DEI initiatives and the realities of expatriation on the ground.

## Take action

Once the facts are identified, we can act on the areas with the most impact and priorities for change. Here are some examples of what to do.

### ***Include measures for specific groups***

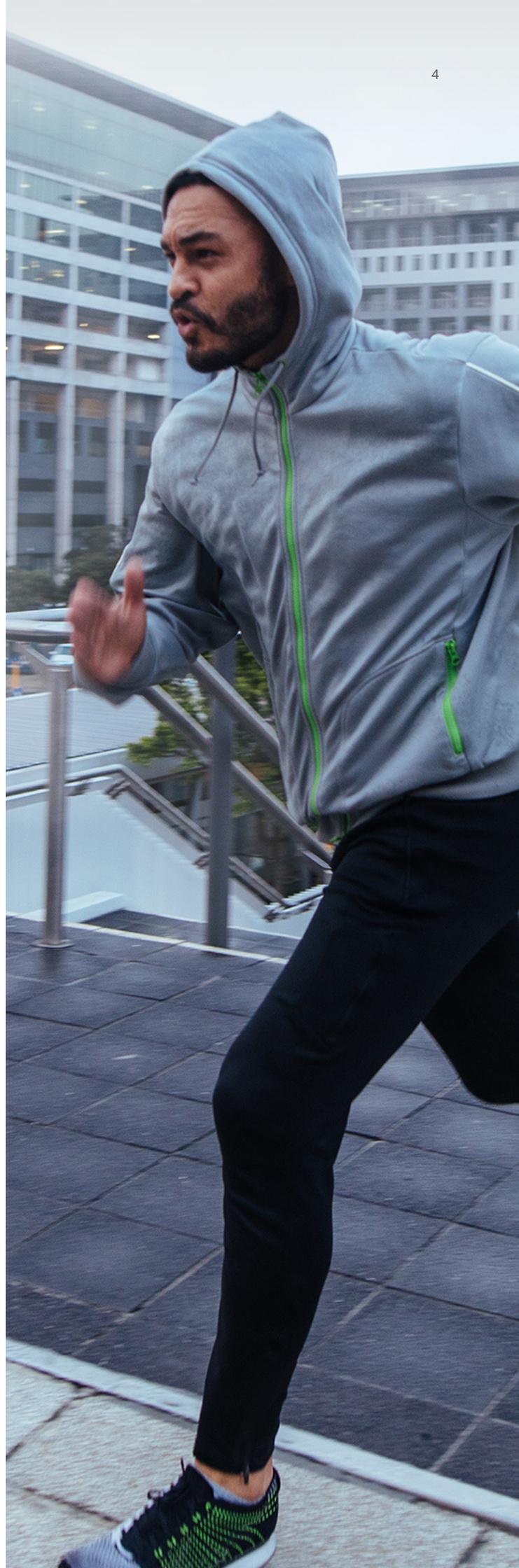
- Mention diversity more explicitly in the policy.
- Introduce an allowance to cover childcare for single mothers.
- Provide special support for expatriates caring for elderly parents.
- Offer support and information regarding specific sexual offence laws in the country.

### ***Allow flexibility in the choice or implementation of benefits and allowances***

- Provide the option to repurpose an existing budget – for example, by exchanging childcare or education allowances in the host location for support for elderly parents remaining at home.
- Enable ad hoc decisions to support individual circumstances.
- Adjust the degree of flexibility while providing precise guidelines, giving individuals more freedom to choose options that suit them.

### ***Provide communications, cultural training and coaching***

- Provide resources so employees can learn about the situation in the proposed host country and make informed decisions.
- Create awareness around discrimination in the host-country.
- Ensure assignees have a point of contact or mentor who is familiar with diversity issues and can act as a role model.



## Assume accountability

In our Let's Get Real About Equality study, only half of the participants had a DEI plan with metrics and goals. If it doesn't get measured, it doesn't get done! To help ensure they are achieving their DEI goals, organizations need to identify what governance looks like, whether there is a process in place to revisit initiatives, and how best to progress.

One way to foster accountability is to track the diversity of the assignee population, including candidate selection and offer acceptances, and to analyze whether candidates are being offered the right opportunities.

## A chance for mobility managers to add value

The DEI debate provides an opportunity for mobility managers to play a strategic role by addressing one of the most important challenges companies currently face. Global mobility alone cannot solve all DEI issues, but it should at least be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

Visit our [website](#) to learn how Mercer DEI solutions can help you make a difference.

## About the authors

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