

Headline// How does age affect global mobility?

Standfirst// Michael Dickmann and Andrea Piacentini analyse new research from The RES Forum looking at the impact of age on assignees' needs and wants

Byline// Michael Dickmann and Andrea Piacentini

While the gender diversity of global assignees has been much discussed and analysed, age-related trends have been overlooked to date, which is why The RES Forum's 2017 annual report set out to explore them in detail.

The total global assignee population in our research sample was substantial: 15 per cent of companies surveyed employed more than 1,000 expatriates; 18 per cent employed between 501 and 1,000 expatriates; and 42 per cent had between 101 and 500 employees on global assignment.

Many organisations had significant numbers of expatriates from a wide cross-section of age groups (millennials/generation Y, generation X, and baby boomers). Control and coordination assignments – most likely among strategic assignments and career expats – are well represented. In addition, developmental expatriation, frequent among graduates and early career assignees, was also reasonably common. One-fifth (21 per cent) of the multinational companies surveyed operated in more than 76 countries; just over half (58 per cent) send assignees to more than 26 countries. We can assume that these companies are often very large and highly diverse, leading to increased pressures to have good talent and diversity management policies in place.

Respondents often told us that older assignees are more mature, know the organisation better, and have more developed and deeper social networks. This would support an argument that for certain types of assignments – control and coordination, trouble shooting, knowledge transfer etc – more experienced international assignees would be a better fit.

As the American author, Barbara Delinsky, said: "The important part of growing older was the growing part." Organisations often take full advantage of this as they deploy older assignees most commonly on strategic projects or control and coordination assignments where their job is in a senior position and they aim to instil the right culture, policies and processes in a subsidiary. Younger employees are more likely to be given assignments that have a primary focus on professional development.

However, our data also indicated some challenges in the use of older expatriates. As potential assignees get older, companies believe that it becomes more difficult to identify suitable candidates and to motivate them to accept postings.

Obviously, it is important for employers to understand their globally mobile employees. Our research found that different sets of drivers motivate the different age groups:

- Personal drivers were most important to generation Y/millennials

- The expatriation package was most important to generation X expatriates
- All age groups sought fulfilment and career progression. However, career impact was more important to generation Y/millennials and generation X expatriates, compared to their older counterparts
- Professional challenge in global assignments was most important to generation Y/millennials, compared to other generations
- Younger expatriates perceive a stronger need to expand their social capital, even though it is probably older assignees who use their social networks more for work purposes
- Partner and dual career considerations, as well as family and educational concerns, are more pressing for generation X expatriates than for other age groups
- Security concerns are more important to generation X and baby boomers, while generation Y/millennials are more concerned about the attractiveness of specific host locations

Other interesting observations include the fact that generation Y/millennials change employers more often (36 per cent) and are more frequently promoted (25 per cent) than their older peers. Generation X expatriates fit more successfully into their host teams and are seen to facilitate knowledge transfer more than younger peers, while business learning is more extensive for generation X expatriates than baby boomers. However, there is no strong indication that the performance of baby boomers is inferior to that of younger generations when on assignment.

The headline conclusion is that there are different views in companies on what different generational segments expect from an international assignment, and the suitability of the different generations to go on a particular assignment is perceived to vary from one generation to the next. Age-sensitive global mobility approaches would benefit organizations.

Are these differences in expectations and suitability real or imagined? If imagined, how can we create tools which allow biases to be reduced from the decision-making process in selecting assignees but also allow companies to maximise the potential talent pools available to them? That is, fundamentally, the crux of the issue and surely there is a strong commercial argument for doing so.

Michael Dickmann is professor of international HRM at Cranfield University School of Management, and strategic advisor to [The RES Forum](#). Andrea Piacentini is co-founder of The RES Forum and head of reward, UK and Europe, at Standard Life.