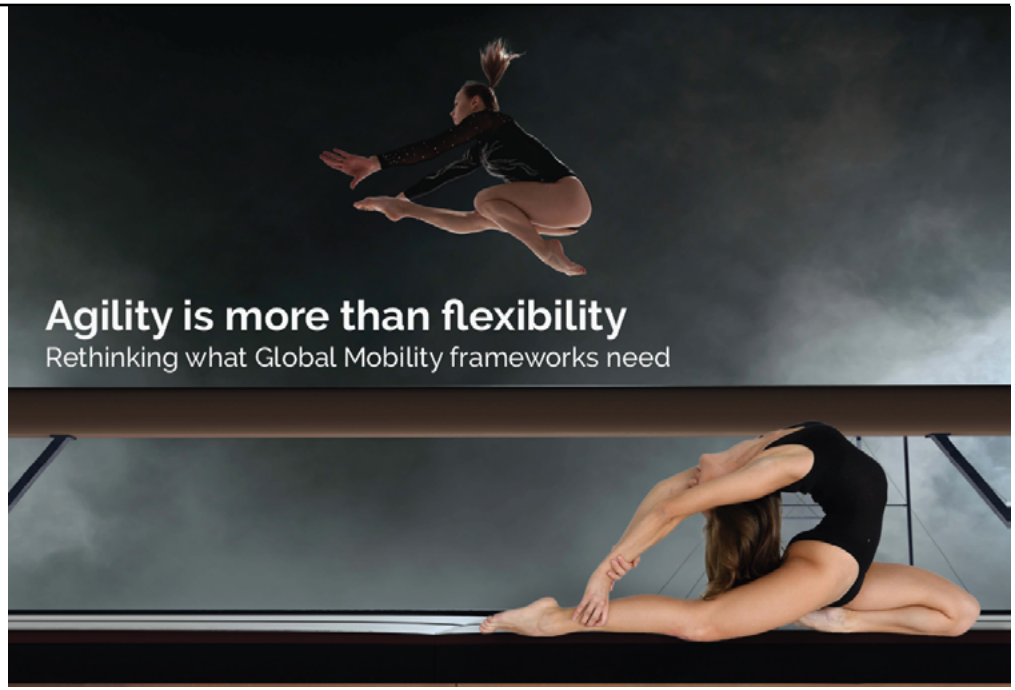
Agility Is More Than Flexibility: Rethinking How Mobility Functions Are Built



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In the field of Global Mobility, the word “agility” is often mentioned in many different contexts, to the extent that its real meaning becomes blurred. Agility is often assumed to be a synonym for flexibility, but although the two are related, they are not the same. For HR teams, having an ability to flex and stretch without breaking is undoubtedly of critical importance. Being able to exercise such flexibility in a fast, controlled, sustained and purposeful way is what converts that flexibility into agility.

To appreciate the semantic difference between the two terms, it is useful to ponder on the contrast between yoga and gymnastics. While the flexibility shown in some yoga positions is a valuable attribute, taken by itself it is not agility, but simply an important prerequisite for it. Real agility uses flexibility and combines it with strength, speed, coordination and, above all, purpose. Both disciplines require careful control and coordination of every part of the body. Without that coordination, individual movements may be impressive in isolation but would fail to achieve the intended outcomes.

The same principle applies to Global Mobility. For Mobility professionals, the objective is to provide reliable, consistent support to assignees and business leaders while responding to changing business needs. This requires an understanding of current and emerging requirements, supported by a framework of policies, processes, technology and service providers that can be mobilised effectively. At the same time, Mobility teams must monitor legislative changes, geopolitical developments and emerging HR priorities to anticipate risks, maintain compliance and remain competitive. Meeting these demands requires a combination of competence, experience and judgement that is difficult to replicate consistently across multiple locations within a single organisation.

This raises an important question: does the decentralisation of Mobility management make organisations more agile? At first glance it might appear that allowing each country or business unit to manage Mobility independently would give local teams the freedom to respond to their immediate circumstances. However, local flexibility does not automatically translate into organisational agility. Decisions made independently, often with the best of intentions, can lead to inconsistent policies, fragmented processes, duplicated effort and limited visibility across the organisation. What works well in one location may create complications elsewhere, while the cumulative effect of local decisions may undermine broader business objectives and make it difficult to have a holistic and truly strategic approach to Mobility.

Returning to the gymnastics analogy, individual limbs may be capable of impressive movements and flexibility, but without coordination they cannot deliver a coherent performance. Similarly, a collection of locally responsive Mobility functions does not necessarily add up to an agile global capability.

Some of the world's best organisations increasingly recognise that genuine agility depends not simply on the freedom to adapt, but on having a structure that makes adaptation possible without sacrificing coherence or control. Such a structure must be robust enough to provide consistency and protect the organisation, yet flexible enough to accommodate changing priorities and circumstances. Agility, in this sense, is not reactive improvisation. It is a capability deliberately built into the operating model.

The GEC model: Coordinating flexibility to create agility

A Global Employment Company (GEC) can provide such a structure by bringing greater visibility, governance and control to the employment and management of an international mobile workforce. Rather than relying on multiple, independently managed arrangements, an organisation can establish a more coherent framework through which its global Mobility activities are coordinated.

The value of this approach extends beyond centralisation for its own sake. A well-designed GEC model can help an organisation establish clearer accountability, improve oversight of its mobile population, standardise core processes and make better-informed decisions across countries and business units. It can also reduce the complexity associated with managing international assignments through numerous local employment arrangements, while supporting more consistent risk management and service delivery.

Crucially, central coordination need not mean that every decision must be made centrally. A well-designed model can establish common principles and clear boundaries while allowing appropriate decisions to be taken close to the business. Local expertise remains essential, but it operates within a framework that connects local actions to global priorities.

This is where coordination becomes a source of agility rather than a limitation on it. The organisation gains the ability to respond to local requirements while retaining a consolidated view of its international workforce and the risks, costs and business objectives associated with it.

Governance should enable judgement, not replace it

The stronger governance arising from a GEC model is sometimes perceived as an obstacle to agility. This concern deserves consideration, but compliance, risk management and agility are not inherently in conflict.

Most of the times the friction arises not from the existence of governance, but from how it is is designed and implemented. If every decision must pass through a sequence of approvals, regardless of its complexity or risk, even a highly capable team will struggle to respond quickly. Conversely, a function that defines clear decision-making boundaries, distinguishes routine matters from exceptional cases and establishes appropriate escalation routes can give its people genuine freedom to act.

The objective is not to reduce governance indiscriminately, but to make it proportionate to the decisions being taken. Routine matters should be handled efficiently within agreed parameters, while decisions involving material legal, financial or reputational risks receive the appropriate scrutiny. Technology and clearly defined responsibilities can further reduce unnecessary administrative friction.

This distinction is particularly relevant to Global Mobility, where decisions may have implications across employment law, taxation, immigration, payroll, employee experience and business continuity. Speed without adequate coordination can create risks that outweigh the immediate benefits of a rapid response. Equally, excessive controls can prevent an organisation from taking legitimate opportunities. Effective governance enables informed judgement,



allowing the organisation to move quickly where it can and exercise caution where it must.

Building agility into the operating model by design

Ultimately, agility is not achieved simply by giving local teams more freedom, nor by centralising every decision. It depends on finding the right balance between local responsiveness and global coordination.

This is why the underlying employment structure, together with the design of processes, roles and responsibilities, matters more than it may initially appear. A GEC is not a universal solution, nor does establishing one automatically create agility. Its value depends on whether the model is appropriate for the organisation's international workforce, business objectives and risk profile, and whether it is supported by effective operating processes and clear accountability.

When these elements are aligned, the GEC can become more than an employment vehicle. It can serve as part of the organisation's global talent infrastructure, enabling a more coherent approach to deploying international talent, managing risk and responding to changing business priorities.

The distinction is fundamental: flexibility gives an organisation the capacity to adapt; agility enables it to adapt in a coordinated, purposeful and sustainable way. The real challenge for Global Mobility leaders is therefore not simply to make their functions more flexible, but to design an operating model in which that flexibility translates into measurable business value.