

BUILDING A TRUSTED SUPPLIER RELATIONSHIP

The Key to Workforce Mobility Optimization

By Terry Davis, SCRIP, SGMS, and Dave Bencivengo, GMS

Global workforce mobility continues to evolve at a rapid pace. The demographics of today's mobile employees are shifting, the speed of deployment has become more urgent, and business objectives are constantly changing.

On top of that, the types of mobile assignments that companies require continue to reach beyond the scope of what would be considered a "traditional" move—in which a transferee moves from one location to another for three to five years. Today's companies are using commuter assignments, rotational assignments, and extended business travel policies to advance their business goals. That's often just fine for the talent they're moving—especially in the case of millennials—because these individuals would rather take on a series of assignments in different locations than drop anchor in one place for an extended period of time.

The pace of this change has put greater demands on the relocation service delivery model. Faced with an increasing array of options for deploying mobile talent—and greater opportunities for leveraging

their mobility programs to attract, engage, and retain the best talent—most employers find themselves in need of insight and strategic guidance from a trusted, seasoned relocation adviser.

We'll take a look at the art of forging trusted partnerships, from the perspective of both a relocation provider (Dave at Weichert Workforce Mobility) and corporate client (Terry at EY, as Ernst & Young is now known).

THE RELOCATION SERVICE PROVIDER PERSPECTIVE

In workforce mobility, good partnerships are built on communication, transparency, and trust. Relocation experts can begin laying this foundation by shifting their focus away from completing simple transactions and toward building collaborative relationships with clients. To the relocation provider, this means transforming from a preferred supplier into the trusted strategic partner whose sound workforce mobility advice matters and whose contributions, products, insights, and processes are viewed as key to the client's long-term success.

Perhaps most significantly, a trusted service provider serves as a sounding board for the challenges and tough issues that senior leaders face in managing their companies' workforce mobility programs.

Becoming a trusted service provider—a true partner invested in client success—is a privilege earned through the simple act of listening. Understanding what's important to clients and involving them every step of the way is always the first priority. Trusted service providers set clear agendas, participate in frank discussions, ask insightful questions, and provide informed consultation. From the onset of the relationship, the provider must understand the client's unique mobility needs, challenges, budget, goals, and culture—and then tailor the service approach accordingly.

The trusted service provider is also expected to bring innovation and fresh ideas to the table. Whether the client needs to lower costs, expand recruitment, reduce global payroll compliance risks, or implement an intercontinental group move, we must always be thinking of ways to serve clients better and advance their priorities. Many-to-many relationships, an approach that allows the service provider to bring its best thinkers together with the client's internal experts, fuels innovation and enables stronger alliances that lead to broader satisfaction with the partnership.

As a trusted service provider, we are the person or company the client turns to when an issue first arises. But it also means we're more likely to get a call from a client wanting to get our thoughts on how their mobility program can drive their business and workforce management strategies, or how we can help them engineer a greenfield operation in a region where they have no presence or with which they have no familiarity. We hear "Have you got a minute? I'd like to bounce something off you and get your reaction" with increased regularity.

The trusted relationship should also encompass education- and knowledge-sharing. As the subject-matter experts, the service provider has an obligation

to ensure that clients are continually updated on best practices, emerging trends, or governmental rulings that could impact their programs. The first point of knowledge sharing should be the day-to-day contact, but other channels could include websites, research papers, blogs, webinars, and regular meetings. For example, Weichert Workforce Mobility conducts an annual forum that brings clients and supply chain partners (move management partners, etc.) together to discuss challenges, benchmark policies, and share success stories. This annual summit, in which both the provider and the client are sharing subject matter expertise and encouraging peer-to-peer learning, has proven to be an excellent resource for professional development for both.

Most importantly, the trusted service provider takes a vested interest in creating success for client contacts by helping them achieve their professional goals. This is why understanding the objectives for which they are personally accountable is so important. By synthesizing numerous data points, helping clients understand and explain their program's unique cost drivers, and making sure their policy continues to reflect the best practices for their specific industry,

the trusted service provider also helps ensure that workforce mobility remains a vital component of the client's talent management strategy.

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THE CLIENT PERSPECTIVE

Many companies may view a trusted relationship with a mobility adviser as one-sided. "They're the ones who are selling to us," they might think. "It's up to them to earn our trust." But trust is a two-way street, and a successful, collaborative partnership requires commitment on both sides.

This is something we practice at EY within the Americas mobility department. In fact, we embrace our relocation management service provider holistically and view it as a vital extension of our team.

Leveraging the many-to-many philosophy, our partner establishes relationships for us with subject matter experts throughout the relocation management company. By doing this, they've encouraged broader collaboration, deepened their understanding of our priorities, and positioned themselves to offer objective, more actionable advice.

EY also actively seeks to leverage our provider's experience and insight to make our program stronger. I make a point of ensuring that my team participates in webinars, conferences, and other educational offerings that our provider offers. I don't want my team's only communication with the provider to be on a file. Those connections and conversations outside of the transactional are incredibly important, as they enable our teams to work more collaboratively.

Relationships should be mutually respectful and beneficial, and sometimes that means being an advocate for your provider within your organization. The root of partnership is in making a deal that is fair to all parties, and then honoring and protecting that deal.

To that point, some companies are locked in an eternal struggle to squeeze their providers and pressure them to cut costs year over year. While cost-efficiency is obviously important and the need to keep costs in check is unrelenting, there's no value in bankrupting your providers. For most companies, the ideal end state is having a relocation provider that does a great job and works with your company to ensure that it has optimized its total cost of ownership, so that there's no need to continually challenge the provider or bring the program out to bid. That's what happens in a true provider-client relationship and what, invariably, will lead to the best total solution.

For example, a trusted strategic service provider can help its client craft and maintain a more cost-effective policy that has greater influence on a company's direct costs than any other variable. A trusted service provider might also strive to reduce exceptions such as temporary living—one of the most frequently occurring exceptions—which are typically the result of poor planning stemming from employees trying to sell their homes without expert advice and appropriate services.

In our specific case, the partners we transfer mostly own higher-value homes, which can impact marketing time and potential number of buyers. I trust our service provider to develop a model to meet my business needs and sell these homes expeditiously, but it's a model in which we remain actively involved. My team works closely with our service provider's team, holding

monthly calls to review pre-acquisition reports, discuss unique properties, share challenges, and develop strategies to effectively market each home. When our partners take the time to plan, be strategic, and help us identify ways to work together to avoid unnecessary costs, they are adding value to the relationship.

I, in turn, make certain that my team is always open to addressing items such as proper conditioning and repairs, and ensuring that each property is priced right from the start. And we're not averse to taking counsel when it's time to have a tough conversation with a transferee or broker. It's not about telling our service provider, "We hired you. You figure this out." As a client, I embrace the spirit of partnership and realize that there's more to be gained, on both sides, by working together.

FOCUSING ON GOALS

The increasing complexity of workforce mobility management isn't likely to subside anytime soon; in fact, as companies continue to set their sights globally and the mobile workforce demographic keeps shifting, the process may become more involved, complex, and exciting! Considering the investment in every move, a trusted relationship with a strategic workforce mobility company can help to bring clarity and sustained success.

Going forward, we are likely to see companies continue to focus on cost, but to a slightly lesser degree, and concentrate more on learning to be better relationship managers so that they can have healthy, long-term strategic relationships with the right suppliers rather than insisting that fees, rates, and rebates keep changing. And as more providers look for ways to add value and be strategic long-term partners with their clients, we can *all* spend less time on the bidding process and more time focusing on achieving our collective goals.

What is refreshing is how many companies are embracing this model and collaborating to drive lower costs, increased efficiency, greater productivity, stronger supplier relationships, and ultimately, a competitive workforce mobility program that supports the company's talent management goals and business strategy. *M*

Terry Davis, SCRP, SGMS, is associate director for Americas mobility for EY in Cleveland. He is a member of the Worldwide ERC® Hall of Leaders. He can be reached at +1 216 583 2991 or by email at terry.davis@ey.com. Dave Bencivengo, GMS, is executive vice president with Weichert Workforce Mobility in Morris Plains, NJ. He can be reached at +1 973 359 8398 or by email at dbencivengo@weichertwm.com.