

**WORKFORCE MOBILITY  
MANAGEMENT LESSONS...**

**FROM **VANN****



# HALEN

**SPOTTING SMALL PROBLEMS BEFORE THEY  
BECOME FULL-BLOWN DISASTERS IS A 'JUMP'  
TOWARD THE OPTIMIZATION OF YOUR  
MOBILE WORKFORCE**

**BY TIM McCARNEY, SCRP, SGMS**





**T**he rock band Van Halen will forever be remembered for spandex, teased hair, and changing lead singers more often than most people change socks. But there's another side to VH that you likely never suspected: The band that launched such hit songs as "Hot for Teacher" and "Jamie's Cryin'" pioneered a unique methodology for spotting red flags that can be valuable to today's corporate mobility managers. Yes, you read that correctly.

It all starts with M&M's. Brown M&M's, to be precise.

### THE BROWN M&M'S CLAUSE

At the height of their powers in the early 1980s, Van Halen had a stipulation in their touring contract requiring any venue hosting their show to provide a backstage bowl of M&M's candies with the brown ones removed. If a venue didn't comply, and a single brown M&M was discovered in the mix, the band could walk but still get paid.

It was an act that reeked of rock-star hubris; mega-millionaires sticking it to the little guy simply because they could. But if you believe the band's original lead singer, David Lee Roth—and the guy wrote "Runnin' With the Devil," so we pretty much have to—the language was driven not by ego, but by safety concerns.

Back in the day, Van Halen's stage show was an elaborate production, involving everything from a levitating drum kit to zip line harnesses. It was unlike anything the auditoriums that hosted them—or the union workers hired to construct their sets—had ever seen. Careful attention to detail was required to avoid serious or catastrophic injury.

Knowing this, the band buried the M&M's clause in its contracts amid complex language about load-bearing beams and maximum wattage. If Roth and crew arrived on-site and found brown M&M's in the dressing room, it meant the venue hadn't read the contract word-for-word, and the well-being of Van Halen, the fans, and the arena staff could be compromised.

In this regard, Van Halen took a small chocolate candy and used it as a trigger for identifying when something needed attention. A number of business publications have since used "the brown M&M's technique" to help managers detect small problems before they become full-blown disasters.

It can also serve as a lesson to folks who oversee corporate mobility programs. Is there long-neglected language buried in your policy that's causing unnecessary cost overruns? Or a component of your program that's screaming for attention but gets lost in the day-to-day struggle?

Just as Roth didn't have the time to check every electrical outlet in every concert hall on his own, you likely don't have time to regularly inspect every aspect of your program or policy. But devising your own system to alert you to the "brown M&M's" can be a giant step—or, dare we say, "jump"—toward the optimization of your mobile workforce.

It may seem daunting, but if a guy who spent the better part of his career on stages across the world wearing nothing but chaps can develop such a system, surely you can, too!

To help you out, here's a look at some of the red flags we routinely find in our work with corporate mobility managers. Consider them conversation starters as you ruminate on areas of your program or policy that could be crying for help.

### THE 300-PAGE POLICY CONUNDRUM

Van Halen knew what they were doing when they buried the M&M's clause in their contract—nobody reads the fine print. Likewise, if your relocation policy is an endless loop of boring details and conditions, your mobile employees aren't likely to read it, and that lack of understanding about their benefits will only add unnecessary confusion and ill feelings once their move begins. One option is to provide a CliffsNotes-like supplement that highlights upfront the points they want—and need—to know: things like how much they're receiving, how their expenses will be reimbursed, whether their family is covered, etc.

### WHO'S AUTHORIZING WHOM?

Is your authorization process riddled with redundant forms and actions? For example, does it require that a form be filled out by a recruiter who passes it to a team member who inputs it into an online form that someone else needs to approve—all before an authorization can take place? This can add days to the process when time is most critical and talent is needed in a specific location. Beyond the administrative functions, your authorization process should infuse each move with a sense of purpose, letting





stakeholders understand the reasoning behind it, anticipated costs, and the likely ROI.

### **MIND THE EXCEPTIONS . . .**

Exceptions can represent the most volatile part of your mobility budget, so it makes sense for companies to build formal processes around them, especially for requesting and approving them. Unfortunately, a lot of companies are missing the boat; Weichert's 2016 mobility survey found that little more than half of companies have processes in place for requesting and approving exceptions (54 and 55 percent, respectively).

It's a small change that can make a big difference. In fact, according to Jennifer Connell, practice leader with Weichert Workforce Mobility's Consulting Services group, "Simply knowing that senior management will be reviewing requests is often enough to discourage employees from requesting them."

### **. . . BUT TRACK THE EXCEPTIONS**

On the flip side, Weichert's survey found that 62 percent of companies track and analyze exceptions, which can drive greater cost savings. Good news, but that means 38 percent of companies aren't learning from their exceptions. Considering that tracking exceptions provides valuable insight into spend and allows companies to adjust their policies to better suit employee needs, there's almost no excuse for not doing it.

### **EMBRACE FLEXIBILITY**

With today's workforce more demographically diverse and motivated by very different professional and personal needs than those of 10 or even

five years ago, it's no time to be caught peddling one-size-fits-all benefits packages on your employees. Savvy companies offer flexible benefits that align with each employee's unique needs and career trajectory. Understanding and delivering what certain employee demographics require will keep your program competitive.

Among flexible programs, tiered policies remain the top choice, but core-flex is becoming an increasingly popular option. According to Weichert's survey, 56 percent of companies expect core-flex programs to grow in the coming year.

### **GET SOME PAYBACK**

No company wants to be left empty-handed if the high-priced and highly prized talent they paid to relocate skips off to a competitor. Payback agreements deter this; they allow companies to recoup some or all of their original investment if the employee leaves prematurely. With the cost of relocation continuing to escalate, payback agreements have become a critical component of any comprehensive workforce mobility program. If you don't have a payback agreement in place, get one. If you have one, make sure it's still got teeth. Have your employee sign before issuing any payments, and work with legal to consider any controls that need to be in place to facilitate repayment.

### **USE LUMP SUMS WISELY**

Weichert's survey showed fewer companies using lump sums for some employees—44 percent in 2016 vs. 50 percent in 2015. Among the companies that do, 45 percent felt they provide employees with greater flexibility. If you offer a lump sum to your employees, make sure that you don't include such tax-deductible



components as final move expenses and household goods shipment/storage. Since most companies provide tax assistance on the lump sum, this equates to extra costs, especially when multiplied by your total number of mobile employees.

### EMBRACE NEW TECHNOLOGIES

We can all agree that managing your mobility budget is important, but how you manage it is just as critical. Weichert's survey revealed that 54 percent of companies use such outdated methods as Excel spreadsheets to create cost estimates, which makes the process of budgeting and reporting more onerous than it needs to be. The good news: The survey also showed that 66 percent expect technology improvements to advance overall program administration.

### DON'T FORGET THE FAMILY

There's plenty of evidence to suggest that family issues represent a primary roadblock to successful relocations, both domestic and international. The tragedy is that in most cases, the loss of a sizable investment in your employee could have been prevented with a little more planning. If you want to get the best return on your investment, you have to ask yourself whether you truly are doing all you can to make your employees and their families successful. Spousal assistance

and family counseling (destination services) can go a long way toward overcoming resistance, increasing acceptance, and replacing a spouse's income, giving the employee more purchasing power in the destination location to ensure that the family selects a new neighborhood/home where they will be successful.

### GET ON THE SAME PAGE

Van Halen endured a number of personnel changes through the years, and it's fair to guess that every new player had to acquaint himself with the band's extensive catalog—although the jury's still out on Gary Cherone. It's a gentle reminder that in rock music as well as in business, the only constant is change. If your team or management has undergone some personnel changes in recent years, it might be an ideal time to provide staff with some basic relo education, on your own or in partnership with Worldwide ERC®. This will give all team members a back-to-basics perspective and, who knows, perhaps even the insight to spot the brown M&M's in your program, helping you avoid risks and improve results. *M*

---

*Tim McCarney, SCRP, SGMS, is vice president of marketing with Weichert Workforce Mobility in Norwell, Massachusetts. He can be reached at +1 781 982 5026 or [tmccarney@weichertwm.com](mailto:tmccarney@weichertwm.com).*

## REUNITING THE ONES YOU LOVE . . . anywhere in the world!



# WORLD CARE PET TRANSPORT®

### What our customers say

“ . . . pets are family and we worry about them while traveling alone. My 12 yr. old dog, who is a great dog, has a bad case of separation anxiety and **WorldCare** took every appropriate measure to keep her calm and in a loving environment. From start to finish I knew my girls were in good hands!! ” A.M.

Visit us at the 2016 Global Workforce Symposium  
in Washington, D.C. from October 5-7, Booth 110

**Door-to-door pet transport trusted by families & Fortune 500 companies**

**WorldCarePet.com    [Reece@WorldCarePet.com](mailto:Reece@WorldCarePet.com)    203.662.0672**

