

MOBILE WORKFORCE ANALYTICS:

THE HOLY GRAIL

Improve your mobility program, align with talent management, and deliver greater value to the business

By Amy Parrent, GMS-T, and Ellie Sullivan, SCRIP, SGMS-T

For decades, mobility professionals have understood the value of the mobile workforce, and that the people we move typically represent a company’s “special forces”—the executives, technical experts, critical recruits, and high potentials who drive global expansion and profitability. But when it comes to proving a return on the mobility investment, a formula has been as elusive as the Holy Grail.

That is, until now.

Over the past several years, tremendous strides have been made in big data and workforce analytics, with more and more companies now able to quantify the relationships that demonstrate why “mobility matters.”

As it relates to mobility, big data comes in two categories: descriptive and predictive. Descriptive analytics focuses on what is happening—counts, rates, volume, costs, and demographics (age,

tenure, gender). Predictive analytics looks for inferences about cause-and-effect relationships and provides insights into the “why.” For example, why do international assignees have a higher turnover rate, or what drives leadership readiness? The latter requires statistical modeling to produce meaningful or actionable insights.

DETERMINE THE IMPACT

Experts agree that the most important first step is to determine the *impact* of the analytics you are striving to create. In other words, what are the critical questions we need to answer with data, and what decisions will be made based on these answers?

When I (Amy) joined Whirlpool Corporation in 2014, the company’s talent objectives were to “grow Whirlpool’s current/future global leadership capability via an aggressive plan to increase global

experience of our leadership pipeline with a target expat mix skewed toward developmental and technical early career opportunities to expand the future leadership pipeline (FLP)."

The strategy I used focused on creating meaningful *hindsight*, actionable *insights*, and predictable *foresights* to help the business derive greater value from its mobile workforce. Mining multiple human resource information system (HRIS) reports, we scrutinized all the data we could collect, including:

- Where are our former expats today?
- Did the assignment positively impact their career?
- Did the assignment positively impact the business?

The results confirmed a very common outcome that too many of the "special forces" that Whirlpool had invested in were leaving the company (*hindsight*) upon repatriation. But it also provided strong evidence indicating that expats who stayed with the company enjoyed rapid career advancement and had a meaningful impact on the business (*insight*). Armed with these analytics, I embarked on a mission to rebrand mobility, improve the assignee experience, and align mobility's strategy with talent management to build the talent pipeline.

To help monitor and track their progress, I created dashboards that provide *hindsight*, *insight*, and *foresight* into Whirlpool's program. They provide line of sight into directionally successful trends and results.

Global mobility and talent management segment the company's mobile talent—think four-box model—and measure mobility ROI in several ways. For instance, for technical assignments, these groups measure business ROI by evaluating performance ratings and the extent to which the original assignment objectives were achieved.

For developmental assignments, they consider career ROI, which is measured by retention and advancement rates two years post-assignment.

For strategic assignments, they consider both business and career ROI.

Instead of trying to create a complex formulaic approach to ROI (compensation + relocation costs ÷ attrition, recruiting, training ÷ goals achieved = ROI), Whirlpool's analytics provide insight into business and career ROI achieved or unrealized. This helps management make more effective talent mobility decisions and recognize the long-term benefits of developing people with global skills that will drive company results.

HOLY GRAIL VS. SIPPY CUP

Haig Nalbantian, an HR industry veteran and senior partner at HR management consultant Mercer, where he co-leads the Workforce Sciences Institute, says, "We see more and more of our clients constructing a workforce strategy that's as detailed and evidence-based as any financial strategy or business strategy they have, yet their mobility leaders aren't applying these disciplines to the mobile sector of the workforce. Mobile workforce analytics is where big data was 10 to 15 years ago; as a discipline it is just beginning to emerge as a business imperative."

"Using workforce analytics to make evidence-based decisions will mean these companies are better equipped to leverage their mobile workforce and drive business performance," adds Nalbantian.

Even with tremendous strides in big data and workforce analytics, it can be difficult to get cooperation from talent management or HR to mine HRIS reports. Weichert Workforce Mobility's 2016 mobility survey reveals that despite moderate attempts to measure ROI, sadly, nearly 35 percent of companies aren't even concerned with measuring the value of mobility. If that's the case, reaching for a sippy cup may be less daunting than a quest for the Grail, and there are plenty of best practices that can directionally make a difference.

Andrew Sobel, leading author and business strategist, suggests, "The best ideas are really simple—perhaps initially you unburden yourself from trying to prove ROI and look instead for trends in the data you collect."

For instance, sort and analyze data you already have on turnover, advancement, and engagement to learn what is most important—i.e., if expatriates are less engaged than other employees, interview them and find out why. Consider mining LinkedIn to determine where previous expats have landed to reinforce the cost of attrition. With these analytics, you can build a business case for implementing best practices, making better decisions, and even a modest improvement in attrition can produce meaningful returns that might get C-suite attention.

When you've collected the "descriptive analytics" to evaluate your investments and are ready to churn big data, apply the workforce analytics that will demonstrate the relationships between the data and results.

GROWTH AND PROFITABILITY

What is the likely payback of chasing the Holy Grail of mobile workforce analytics? A 2013 Human Capital



QUESTIONS FOR THE QUEST

Utilization/Sourcing – Where do assignees come from and where do they go, geographically and across business lines?

Recruitment/Selection – What is the profile of an assignee? Who becomes an international assignee? Are they the right people? In the aggregate, are international assignments offered to—and accepted by—the right types of employees across the organization?

Performance – How do assignees perform during and following term? Do assignments lead to near-term enhancements in individual performance or group productivity?

Development – Are assignees more likely to advance during and following term?

Rewards – Are assignees rewarded in a manner to compensate for their own investments in making such moves?

Engagement – Are assignees engaged during and following term?

Retention – Are assignees more or less likely to stay during and following term? Are they more likely than others to stay with the organization, or quit, and by how much?

Succession – Are they more likely to be promoted than others in the workforce, all else being equal, because they went on assignment? Will they develop into leaders?

Impact – What are any key differences in these outcomes, driven by characteristics of their assignment—whether it's location-, department-, or program-related?

Management report, “Set Talent in Motion: Achieving Success With Talent Mobility,” draws the correlation between talent mobilizers and higher growth and profits. The report maintains that 81 percent of companies that embrace mobility as a key strategy and align their programs with their workforce plans and talent management objectives will yield better growth and profitability.

Weichert Workforce Mobility’s 2015 research, “Multidimensional Views on Workforce Mobility,” confirms that companies that are more nimble (with higher mobile populations) and use mobility more strategically enjoy higher revenue growth.

Finally, a 2014 analytic services report by the *Harvard Business Review*, “Strategic Global Mobility: Unlocking the Value of Cross-Border Assignments,”

drew similar conclusions. In this study, “strategists” enjoyed improved financial performance, higher employee engagement, and better succession planning, retention, and diversity.

This kind of evidence offers tangible proof that it is worth the effort and that analytics will help you manage mobility more effectively and add greater impact to your company’s business strategy. *M*

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