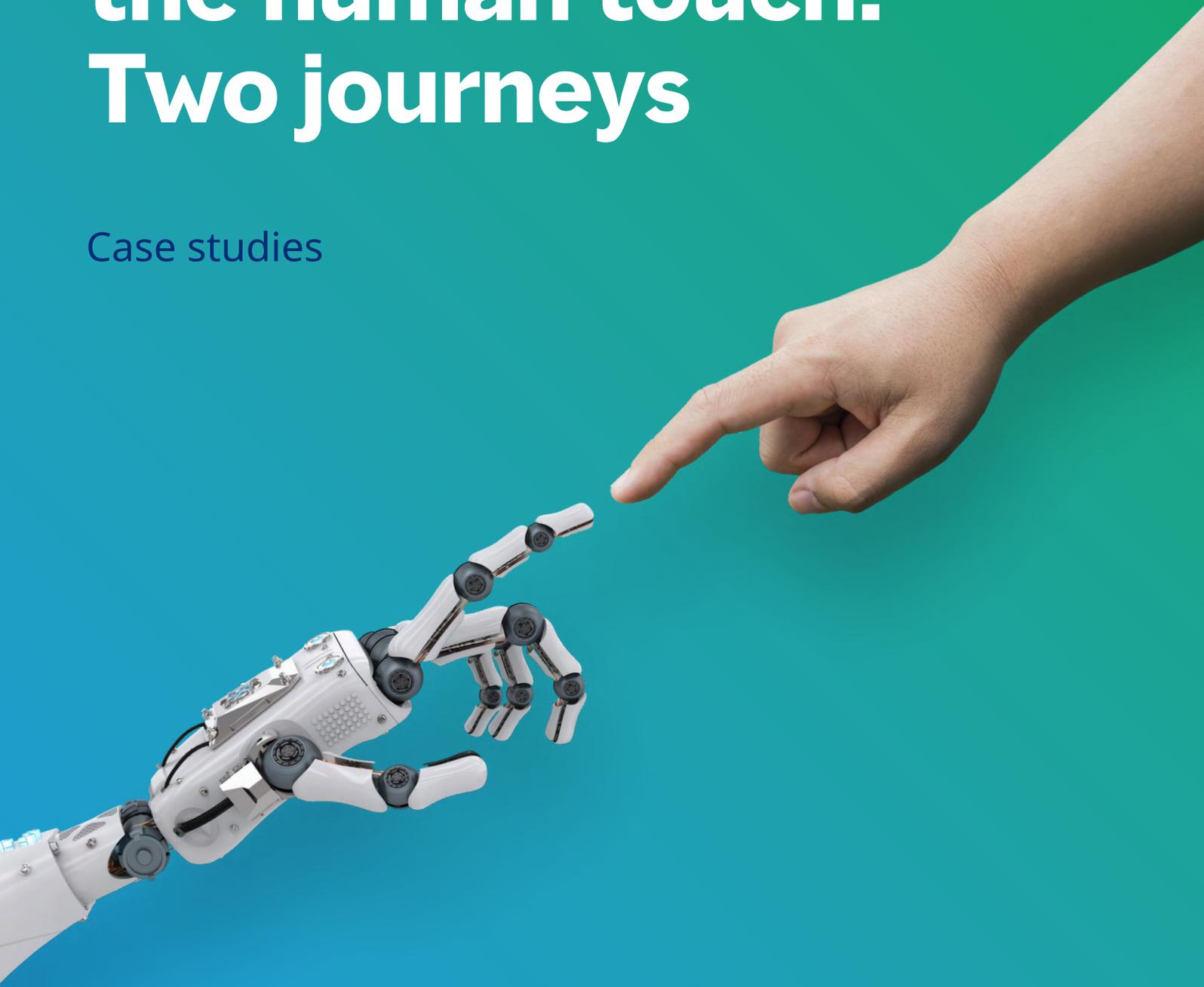


# Combining mobility technology and the human touch: Two journeys

Case studies



As organizations continue on the journey of digital transformation, many are turning to technology solutions that can simplify the management of international and domestic assignments. Implemented smartly, technology has the power to revolutionize the way global mobility works and collaborates.

Here are the stories of two organizations that have transformed their mobility functions by implementing Mercer's [Mobility Management Platform](#).

## Arla Foods

Dairy company Arla Foods is a multinational cooperative owned by around 9,000 farmers. Well known for brands such as Lurpak, it is the fourth-largest dairy company and the largest organic dairy producer in the world.

With 20,000 employees, Arla fields a team of five global mobility colleagues based mainly in Denmark. The team manages around 200 cross-border setups a year, ranging from commuter situations to short-term assignments, local transfers and permanent hires. It also has around 50 long-term assignments, mainly based outside Europe.

### Mobility challenges

Arla identified a number of elements it wanted to improve across its global mobility program:

- **Dependence on external vendors.** Arla's close relationships with vendors in areas such as relocation services and tax helps it provide a great assignee experience. But the company relied heavily on these vendors to get a full overview of active assignments. So, for example, reporting on who was on assignment or due to return from assignment within the next six to 12 months required that Arla approach its vendors to compile a list. The company knew creating a comprehensive overview within its own systems would not only create efficiencies but also free it to work with vendors and partners on more innovative initiatives that could move mobility forward.
- **Lack of assignment overview and history.** Arla's mobility system did not always contain the full picture of an assignment. For instance, it might not provide data on why an exception was made in a particular case. This was problematic because the company does not adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to assignments. In addition, if colleagues were on leave, the team could spend substantial amounts of time digging into data. Arla needed a full, quickly accessible, in-house overview of mobility.
- **Lack of awareness from employees outside mobility.** Stakeholders such as HR business partners need information about which employees they are responsible for and where an assignment stands. Arla wanted to give them easy access to this information. Removing the need for business partners to consult the mobility team for basic information would also open the door to more-productive conversations about assignments and their value.

Inneke Padilla Wolthoorn, Arla Foods' Head of Global Mobility and Travel, explains, "We wanted to have conversations with our business partners not just about assignment status or populations but on real impact."

- **Inconsistent employee experience.** A survey showed employees felt somewhat removed from the company once they were out on assignment, especially those moving far away. Having to use a vendor's platform with a different set of credentials did not help this situation. Arla recognized that taking its mobility solution in house would provide a familiar interface that would help these employees feel like part of the company.

## A business case for the new tool

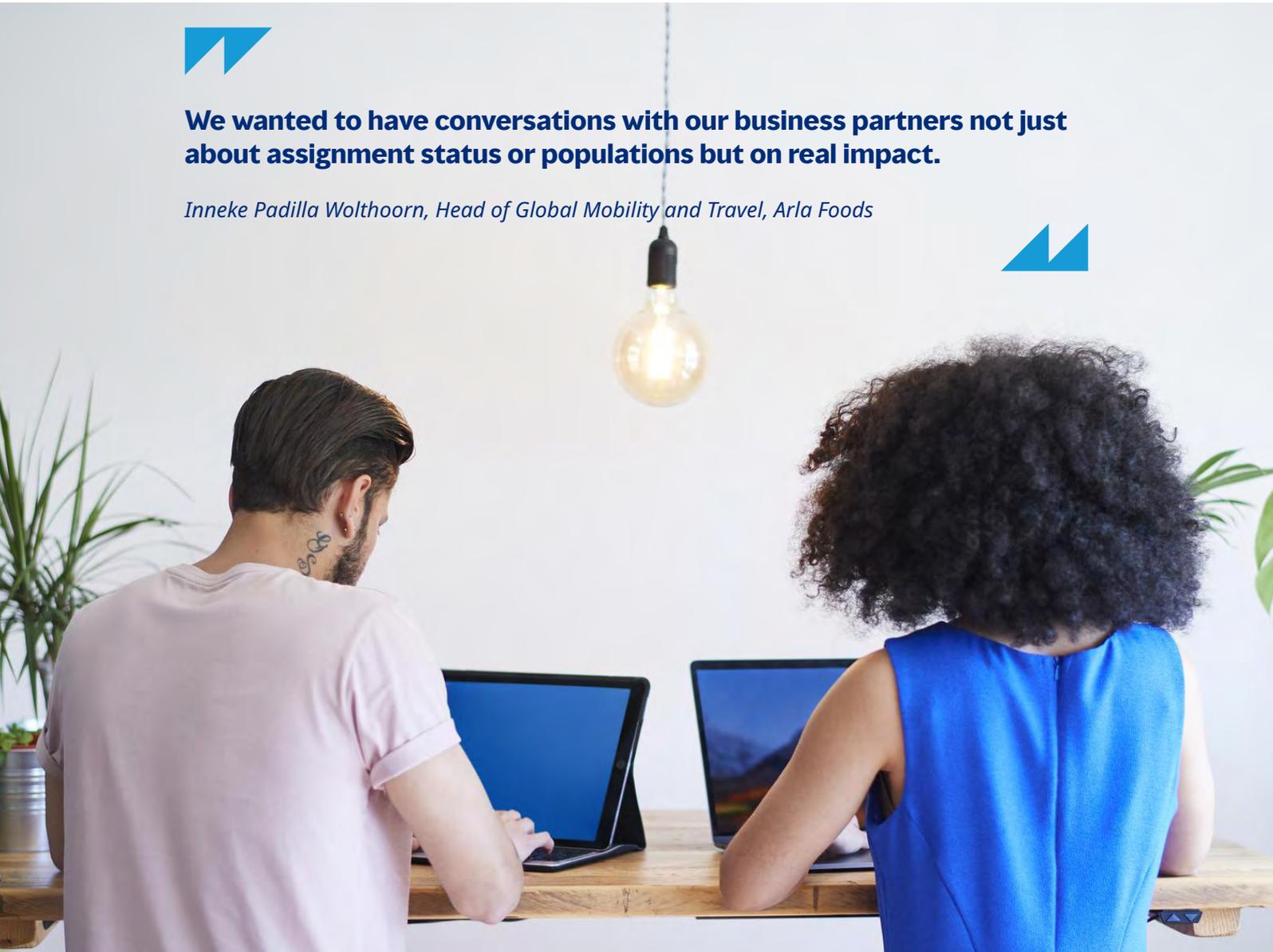
In making the case for a new mobility tool, Arla stressed to decision makers that the new digital platform was not meant as a cost-saving exercise. Instead, the project was about enabling a complete overview of mobility, creating a good experience for assignees and HR business partners, and helping assignees feel at home when they were far away.

Nevertheless, the team explained that introducing a new platform and lowering dependence on vendors to track assignments would help reduce soft costs. One way it would do so was by reducing resources and time spent on compiling and analyzing assignment data and freeing users to focus on value-added tasks.



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*Inneke Padilla Wolthoorn, Head of Global Mobility and Travel, Arla Foods*



## Benefits

Arla decided to deploy Mercer's Mobility Management Platform, kicking off its project in January 2021. Testing began in August, during which Arla made 45 system enhancements. Starting in October, Arla conducted around 20 training and pop-in sessions to educate stakeholders about the new platform, and the system went live in November.

Despite a drop in assignments caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Arla experienced some clear benefits in just a few months:

- **Accessible overview.** The mobility team is now able to quickly compile a full picture of active assignments. It can cut and slice data as needed by different business areas to provide overviews for HR business partners, who can also access this data themselves.
- **User experience.** HR business partners are very happy with the new platform, which frees them from having to approach the mobility team to get the information they need.
- **Full history.** The new system allows global mobility colleagues to enter notes that can be read only by their team. This means they can input confidential information about why exceptions were made in a particular case, why an assignment was extended, or why it was terminated early. Being able to record significant takeaways from conversations with stakeholders has already proved to be a huge benefit.



## Lessons learned

Arla identified the following elements as crucial to a smooth implementation:

### Allocating resources

When introducing a new digital tool, organizations need to be clear about how much involvement will be needed from global mobility. At Arla, the employee responsible for implementation from the mobility side spent around 75% of their time on the project in the last four months before go-live. And three mobility employees worked on the system for many hours a day during the testing phase. These are significant resources in a team of five. It's important to consider which resources are available in the team, what work can be prioritized during this process and what can be deprioritized.

### Aligning roles and responsibilities

Multiple parties are involved in the implementation process, from IT to procurement and data specialists. It is crucial to gather all stakeholders together in the beginning to gain a full overview.

### Understanding IT issues

Global mobility experts involved in deploying technology need to navigate a world that is IT driven. These individuals have to be prepared to quickly grasp the processes and languages used by their IT colleagues.

### Managing the project

In an ideal world, a dedicated project manager oversees the deployment. The right person for this job understands not only what the team needs from a pure global mobility perspective but also elements such as IT, procurement and data, acting as a link between mobility and these functions.

Arla managed this process internally with the aid of a strong team, but, as Wolthoorn explains, "Having that one person who can speak all languages would have been worth a lot for the team."

### Communicating with stakeholders

Robust communication about the platform was key to Arla's success. The company hosted multiple sessions with groups that included assignees, HR business partners and managers. It recorded training sessions to make sure teams understood how the platform worked. This need for communication does not end once the system is live. New employees need training, and both assignees and business partners may need refreshers.

## Next steps

At present, assignments are still initiated in both the old and new systems. Arla is working toward using the old system only for maintaining tax and compliance records on assignments that predate the new tool. It will shut down the old system when these assignments are finalized.

Recognizing that any system is only as good as the data it contains, the company will also continue to educate all system users, from global mobility to assignees to HR business partners, encouraging them to take full advantage of the system to take mobility to the next level.

# Bühler

Plant equipment group Bühler manufactures technologies for products as diverse as smartphones, solar panels, beer, lipstick, banknotes, food, and vehicles.

Assignments have always played an important role in Bühler's history. As a multinational company, it is constantly moving employees across the globe. A matrix organization with strong and autonomous regions, it has seven regional hubs with their own global mobility managers, while the Swiss headquarters operates as a center of excellence.

## Mobility challenges

Despite this tradition of global mobility, Bühler faced some challenges:

- **Low awareness of global policies and processes.** Bühler had long-established global mobility policies and processes, but regions and subsidiaries sometimes adopted their own approaches. Assignment initiation, in particular, often deviated from the standard process, and there was a lack of understanding of global mobility and its complexity. A clear business case was often missing and was rarely linked with succession or career planning.
- **Time-consuming, manual reporting.** A lack of automation led to problems with analyzing data and creating reports. In addition, with many entities using different HR systems, assignment data were exchanged manually, and were not always accurate.
- **Lack of global data management.** It was extremely difficult to calculate the entire mobility population across the group. The organization needed a full picture of the number of assignments and how long people were away.
- **Low cost transparency.** Bühler also lacked a fast and easy way to evaluate assignment costs and present them to the business. Cost projections were rarely requested, and there was little awareness of total assignment cost.

## Mobility goals

Bühler set out to take global mobility to the next level and reposition it within the group. It also needed to satisfy the requirements from both HR and management to manage costs effectively. The company decided to implement Mercer's Mobility Management Platform (MMP) and, in doing so, aimed to achieve the following goals:

- **Modernize global mobility.** As Jasmin Hosbak, one of Bühler's HR managers for Global Mobility, explains, "The image of global mobility internally had become a little bit dusty and needed a brush-up. We wanted to reposition the topic within the company and give it a new and modern touch."
- **Manage assignments at group level.** Bühler needed a standardized and well-structured tool to help it manage assignments at group level to reduce costs and increase efficiency. This would facilitate better collaboration with stakeholders and consistent management of all assignments.



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*Jasmin Hosbak, HR Manager for Global Mobility, Bühler*



- **Increase awareness of and harmonize global mobility processes.** The company needed to ensure global mobility managers were consulted before mobility decisions were made and potential assignees approached. Following a clear workflow would standardize processes and guarantee that employees' assignments were handled professionally and equitably, no matter their home countries or where they were assigned to.
- **Boost transparency and control worldwide.** Bühler not only wanted to make sure it always knew who its assignees were and where they were assigned, it also wanted to make sure the right assignment phases were initiated at the right times.
- **Easily gather and report assignment data.** The group also needed to be able to rapidly present essential data to stakeholders and the executive board.

## Barriers to moving forward

The company identified hurdles it needed to overcome before embarking on its project:

- **Shortage of time and resources.** Implementing a new tool can be a significant project that creates extra workload, particularly if an organization is trying to solve many challenges at once. Engaged with the business full time, Bühler's mobility team understood there would never be a perfect time to introduce new technology. The company engaged three people from the global

team to work on the project, including one full-time project leader. The project members also received support from two members of their IT departments and from the global mobility team on specific topics.

- **Project buy-in.** Bühler needed to foster acceptance of the importance of digitalizing mobility and a willingness to change. It became clear that the company could not implement a new tool without revising its processes. To roll out the project globally, it would also have to review its policies. As a company that had successfully moved people around the globe for years, it knew its approach was working, but it also needed to be open to new opportunities and innovations. As Hosbak explains, "It's not always easy to convince people around you to get on board and out of their comfort zone. Successful change can't be implemented by just one person: you have to make sure your stakeholders and those who are directly affected by change are convinced by your project and willing to adapt."
- **Project expansion.** The group also had to examine its catalog of services to identify what it could offer in house, what it needed to outsource, what its assignees' needs were and how it should support its assignees. This meant adding new subprojects to the main project.
- **Lack of project sponsors.** HR can sometimes find it hard to compete with other essential projects in which it is easier to make a case about profitability and results. But the team knew it was vital to get the management support to lead the project to success.



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## A business case for the new tool

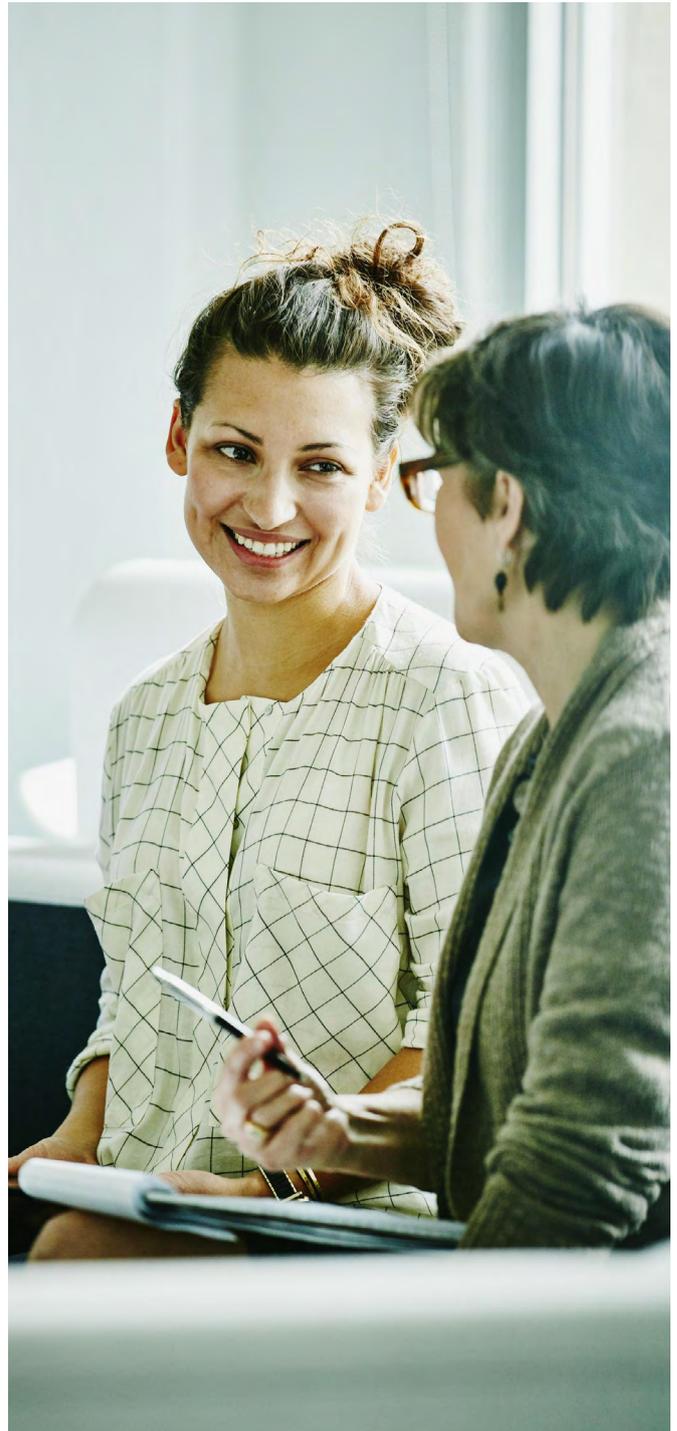
To make the necessary business case for its new mobility management tool, the team laid out the following potential benefits:

- **Increased efficiency and professionalism in assignment administration.** The new tool would enable mobility employees to spend less time on administering assignments and more on being valued business partners and consultants.
- **Streamlined processes.** Technology would not only improve mobility processes but also enable global standards where possible, a sometimes difficult proposition in the dynamic field of mobility.
- **Cost transparency.** Bühler wanted to make establishing the value proposition and providing cost projections mandatory steps in assignments. Using the new technology, managers would be able to present a clear and structured plan covering business need, desired outcome, expected talent development, and next career steps.
- **Improved stakeholder collaboration.** The new tool would allow mobility teams to communicate and share documents with stakeholders in an easy and secure way. And assignees could access all the information and documents they needed on one platform – anytime, anywhere.
- **Clear link between global mobility and talent management.** Assignments had not officially been promoted as part of the talent management strategy. Linking these two processes with the new technology would enhance Bühler's ability to foster talent.

## Benefits

Having received the go-ahead to deploy Mercer's Mobility Management Platform, Bühler implemented the tool in just nine months during the COVID-19 pandemic. It soon saw significant benefits.

- **Improved communication and collaboration.** In less than a year, communication and collaboration with global business partners had increased significantly. The mobility team now has a very proactive and interested HR community and shares its mobility experiences on a regular basis. Assignees appreciate the new platform and the support they receive, complimenting the professional and clearly structured management of assignments.
- **Global approach.** The company now has a global mobility approach that is well perceived. Awareness of processes has increased, and the global mobility function is increasingly regarded as a trusted business partner, with contact made much earlier in the process than before.
- **Data quality and management.** Bühler can now quickly access data on all assignees. It can produce reports rapidly and adjust them with a single click, saving time and resources and providing a better experience for diverse stakeholders.
- **Increased cost awareness.** An assignment's value proposition and cost projections are readily available, having been made mandatory steps of the new workflows. Stakeholders have intuitive tools with which to discuss assignments, plan them with the business and provide the best solutions for their cases.



## Lessons learned

Bühler had a smooth implementation and believes the following actions contributed significantly to its project success:

### Building a strong project team

Selecting a diverse and committed project team covering different skill sets is key. The team should include an experienced project manager as well as a global mobility manager with deep knowledge of processes and policies and, ideally, an affinity for technology. IT is an important partner too. Bühler had access to IT people who laid the project groundwork and could answer technical questions promptly. Also important was support from a colleague with strong skills in marketing and communication.

### Laying the groundwork thoroughly

Organizations undertaking a technology project must not underestimate the importance of the preparation and conception phase. They must become thoroughly familiar with the tool and its features before commencing implementation. The concept development phase, during which key decisions about the future setup are made, is critical. Looking at the bigger picture and thinking ahead prevents teams from continually revising decisions.

### Preparing to adjust the system after implementation

New technology will not be perfect from day one. There are always bugs and errors, things that must be adjusted or added after launch, and workflow elements that do not perform as expected. Even with extensive testing before the tool goes live, only real-life experience can show how the technology is working.

## Next steps

Hosbak and her team are pleased with the progress they have made so far on their technology journey, and will continue to adapt and further develop their use of the tool.

Her team now plans to use it to strengthen the **link between mobility and talent management**. By connecting the assignment and talent management tool, Bühler can ensure international moves are integrated into career paths, especially for key positions, where international experience is crucial.

Integrating the annual performance review with assignment processes, particularly in cases of assignment extension or repatriation, will allow the company to examine assignee performance in detail and track an individual's development. It could also help the team identify candidates who are willing and flexible enough to move so that it can create a global talent pool that provides opportunities for talent not just from headquarters but from across the group. This will also aid succession planning by helping ensure the right people are in place when an assignment ends and enabling a smooth transition with the assignee.

The company also plans to **integrate shadow payroll** to aid regulatory compliance and reduce risk. It wants to use the tool to align compensation data between home and host company and share this information in real time.

## Recommendations for organizations digitalizing mobility

Hosbak has three key recommendations for organizations embarking on a similar project:

- 1. Know your technology before implementing.** Get a good feel for the technology you plan to implement, and remember that no tool will fully fit your needs. Invite different providers for demos to see what a tool looks like, understand its features, and ask questions.
- 2. Get the right people on board.** Remember that implementing a new tool requires a change management initiative. Think about the people using the technology, and get them involved. Make sure to have the right people on board to support and encourage you during the process.
- 3. Stay open-minded, and be patient.** Technology doesn't always show its value right away. People need training and time to adapt to new processes, and small adjustments will be needed. Be ready to compromise and adapt to a new way of doing things. And to prevent future problems with upgrades, take care not to over-customize a new tool.

## What we've learned

Digitalizing global mobility does not mean fully automating mobility processes, nor can it replace human expertise. The experiences of these two organizations illustrate the importance of considerations such as process documentation, stakeholder buy-in, IT support, and robust project preparation.

One common theme is the time required for implementation. Both of the organizations chose to use technology in a significant way, consequently adding to the implementation, effort, and cost. Mercer has now designed MMP to offer three modules, allowing organizations to start small and treat technology as a phased journey rather than a "big bang" approach.

Crucially, these case studies show how mobility technology has the power not only to improve processes and increase transparency but also to elevate the entire mobility function and help it grow. User experience dramatically improves along the way, bringing global mobility into the 21st century.



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