

How pandemic-related travel regulations have changed workforce mobility policies

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Covid-19 affected almost all countries and workforces in every corner of the world. South Africa, and other countries with high infection rates or a different strain of the virus, have been placed on 'red' or 'high alert' lists for certain destinations, heightening the economic and social impact of the pandemic and creating challenges for both business and leisure travelers. The practical effect of such lists is that affected citizens cannot enter certain countries or must adhere to stricter entry requirements.



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In South Africa, airports are now open for both international and domestic travel, although entry into the country is subject to pandemic-related regulations, such as providing a valid negative Covid-19 test within a certain time. However, South Africa citizens travelling to other countries are, or have been, subject to much stricter entry conditions for certain destinations, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and France, where they face an outright ban on entry, or must comply with strict quarantine measures in order to enter. For those used to travelling for work reasons, such restrictions have resulted in substantial changes to how South African employers work with employees who are currently based in other countries and unable to enter the country.

Workforce mobility programmes

A recent survey by PWC pointed to an increased employer focus on workforce mobility policies. According to PWC, the impact of global travel restrictions has heightened the attention businesses are giving to their mobile workforce strategies, the safety and well-being of their employees and their remote working policies in general.

PWC conducted a survey of 250 global business leaders and found that attitudes around workforce mobility are changing, with many more businesses enabling flexible working. The report noted that around half of the companies surveyed now allowed international employees who were unable to travel, to continue working in their home countries remotely. As much

as a third of respondents said that they would focus on their workforce mobility programs going forward to allow international remote workers, who have been unable to move to other countries to take up offers of new employment, to begin or continue their employment where they are currently based.

Workforce mobility programmes are therefore evolving from mostly focusing on business travel arrangements to include extensive, up-to-date details on pandemic travel-related restrictions, in all jurisdictions where the business operates. The legal requirements of homeworking, including employment law and tax implications of working remotely for a foreign company, are also an essential part of these programmes. Also important is a plan to engage employees working remotely in other jurisdictions. These programmes look at ways to improve employee well-being and ensure that remote workers are regularly included as part of the team so that they don't become isolated due to their inability to be physically present. Employers should view their workforce mobility programmes holistically, taking into consideration both their workforce and the work environment they wish to maintain or create.

Nevertheless, restrictions on mobility and business activity within many countries have undoubtedly had a negative impact on the employment status and future employment possibilities for many people. With travel restrictions in place, some employees have not been able to physically return to work, and while many were able to work remotely, some had jobs that could not be performed outside of the business premises.

The latest labour force survey data from ILO Monitor shows there is a contrast between job losses in sectors that were hard hit by the pandemic – such as tourism and hospitality, arts and culture, retail and construction – and growth in employment in the sectors that required highly skilled workers (and who usually can more easily work remotely) - such as technology, media and telecommunications and financial services. The report also said there was jurisdictional variation in the severity of jobs crisis - some countries were worse off than others in terms of job losses in the sectors that were most affected and that mostly required workers to be physically present.

Workforce mobility clearly has both advantages and disadvantages for employers and employees. Businesses are adapting, however, and the move to a mobile workforce has opened up opportunities for employees in other countries with in-demand skills that can be delivered remotely, resulting in the growth of more globally diverse workforce. Further benefits to a mobile workforce have included cost savings in terms of lower overheads, reduction in IT infrastructure and reduced need for office space.

While business and leisure travel are expected to return to normal levels and will likely grow in future post-pandemic years, the trend towards workforce mobility has now taken up permanent residency in the employment policies of most global businesses.

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