

Crisis response in workforce mobility

Organizations today operate in an increasingly complex and volatile global environment, where crises such as health pandemics, geopolitical conflicts and regional security upheavals can rapidly disrupt workforce mobility and business continuity. Recent experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict can help guide and inform actions in current or future events, including the evolving conflict in the Middle East.



COVID-19 pandemic — Navigating a global health crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented health emergency that forced organizations to rethink mobility and workforce management on a global scale. As the virus spread rapidly, companies prioritized employee health and safety by swiftly implementing remote work policies and suspending international and domestic travel.

Early in the pandemic (March 2020)

Organizations took a wait and see approach to evacuation

8%

had evacuated or were in the process of evacuating expatriate employees from affected locations

2%

had evacuated family members only

61%

were monitoring the situation

28%

had no plans to evacuate employees or their families

Travel restrictions were quickly enacted by organizations

36%

banned all business travel globally

19%

recalled all travelers

56%

canceled or suspended large international meetings requiring travel

Hindsight is 20-20 and some organizations may take a different approach if a similar situation arises in the future. The lockdowns enforced in many jurisdictions around the world left some employees stuck in their host country, unable to return home for an extended period.

The pandemic caused disruption in every aspect of almost everyone's lives. Organizations focused on retaining employees through redeployment, voluntary leave and salary adjustments rather than layoffs, preserving workforce stability for recovery. Flexible work arrangements became a permanent fixture for many, allowing significant portions of their workforce to work remotely. This shift not only minimized health risks but also enabled employees on assignments to adapt to new working models, balancing operational needs with personal wellbeing.

Russia-Ukraine conflict — Responding to safety and security challenges

The Russia-Ukraine conflict introduced a complex safety and security crisis requiring rapid, safety-driven mobility decisions. Organizations prioritized evacuations and relocations for employees in or near conflict zones. The crisis underscored the importance of situational awareness, agile crisis management and flexible mobility policies to safeguard a diverse global workforce.

Early in the Russia-Ukraine conflict (March 2022)

Some organizations assisted with evacuation of local Ukrainian employees

9%

evacuated employees and immediate family members

50%

evacuated employees and their families upon request

Most organizations evacuated expatriates on assignment in Ukraine

36%

repatriated expat employees

27%

evacuated expat employees to continue their assignment from a new location

9%

evacuated expat employees to a new location and put their assignment on hold

Currency devaluation prompted organizations to make financial adjustments for expatriates who remained in Ukraine

23%

provided an emergency allowance or lump sum payment

19%

provided a salary advance

15%

paid in hard currency or split pay across multiple currencies

8%

provided a hardship fund

Middle East — Managing acute regional security risks

The evolving situation in the Middle East involving Iran presents a different set of mobility challenges, with implications extending beyond a single country and affecting travel, security and operations across parts of the Middle East. Organizations are managing heightened uncertainty through tighter travel restrictions, enhanced security monitoring and, in some cases, precautionary or cross-border evacuations for expatriates and their families. Disruptions to airspace, border access and local infrastructure have required organizations to reassess assignment viability, duty of care obligations and access to emergency medical and evacuation services. Insurance coverage, security provider readiness and real-time intelligence have become critical components of expatriate risk management in this environment.

Applying lessons while recognizing each crisis is unique

While lessons from COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine conflict provide valuable guidance — including the importance of early decision making, clear communication and flexible mobility policies — each crisis presents distinct risks and requires a tailored response. Unlike the largely country confined Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Iran regional conflict has demonstrated the potential for rapid regional spillover, increasing exposure for employees across multiple neighboring countries. This reinforces the need for strong situational awareness, scenario planning and proportionate responses that balance employee safety with business continuity. Organizations with adaptable policies and clear escalation frameworks are better positioned to respond effectively as conditions evolve.



Common mobility actions across crises

Across these diverse crises, several consistent mobility actions have emerged as critical to effective organizational response:

Repatriation and relocation

Removing employees from unsafe environments remains foundational, whether due to health risks or conflict. Temporary relocations to safer countries or regions support employee safety and operational continuity.

Assignment suspension

Pausing or terminating assignments in volatile regions balances employee safety with business needs.

Support services

Financial assistance, mental health resources, legal aid and military leave policies address the multifaceted needs of affected employees.

Communication

Transparent, frequent and empathetic communication maintains trust and provides timely guidance.

Security measures

Cybersecurity enhancements and operational security protocols protect employees and assets.

Flexible work arrangements

Remote work and redeployment options enable continuity when physical presence is unsafe or impractical.

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