

## **Has the pandemic changed people's attitudes to relocating for a job within the UK and/or internationally?**

### Preamble

There is a short answer to this question (namely, yes, generally, for now) and a longer one, which I'll come to in a minute.

Relocation is about changing your primary residence for the purposes of taking up a new job. It has never been a straightforward thing to do. But 2020 has brought far greater hesitation about relocation than before. It's not that *the way* people make decisions about relocation has changed. They are still relying on a form of cost-benefit analysis. What has changed are the data they are plugging into this analysis. The uncertainties are visible, the pay-offs uncertain. Who here would bet on exactly what the UK economy is going to look like in spring of next year or whether now is the time to sell up and buy somewhere new? Added to this, the uncertainties of the pandemic have in 2020 formed an unholy alliance with the uncertainties of Brexit, to the point that these two sets of anxieties can become mutually reinforcing.

### Relocation vs changing jobs

I did say there was a longer answer to this question. First, the issue of people's willingness to relocate is different from the question of their willingness to change *jobs*. The story of 2020 may be that people remain willing to change jobs but have become less willing to change locations: their reluctance to relocate comes *despite* their attitude to changing jobs not *because* of it. Our experience is not that people have shut up shop this year and stopped wanting to hear about new job possibilities. Crises concentrate minds and heighten the need to know what your options are.

So, we should avoid over-generalising about candidates and their cost-benefit calculations. A lot depends on career stage and context. Staying put and sitting out the pandemic are all very

well if you are comfortably set up where you are and don't have any sense of a clock ticking in the background. That is not the reality for, say, early career academics who may not feel they have the luxury of passing up opportunities for promotion or for something resembling permanent appointment, wherever those opportunities are.

Even for more established figures – be they academics or professional services staff – the status quo may not be stable. More than ever, if you have reason to believe your institution is about to hit hard financial times, there is a push to bite the bullet and gravitate towards a more stable setting. And we have to add into this that ambitious, risk-taking people tend to see opportunity in uncertainty and to see the risk aversion of others as an opening.

### Whose relocation?

This brings me to the second point in my long answer. In thinking about *people's* attitudes to relocation, it is worth being clear on which *people* we have in mind. The days of decisions about jobs and moving being taken by a typically male breadwinner whose spouse and children dutifully followed his career plans are long over.

Moving these days is something couples and families do as one: the career needs of one part of the enterprise need to be reconciled with those of the other part. So, even in the calmest and most predictable of times, decisions about relocating involve multiple moving parts: as we all know well, a candidate has not truly been landed until all these moving parts are in sync.

This multiple-moving-parts-ness is posing special challenges in the current climate. Anticipating and managing the attitudes to relocation of *two* people, people who may themselves operate in different sectors of the economy each with its own particular economic prognosis, can be tough.

### The significance of relocation to the university market

The third point is about the possibilities the pandemic throws up. It's not an option for business and management schools to confine themselves to the local labour and student market. Mobility is the lifeblood of the sector. But the need for relocation can be an obstacle

to that mobility. Even when it goes smoothly, relocation is complex and uncertain. If we could construct a world in which schools and candidates alike could enjoy the benefits of mobility without *necessarily* having to go through the pains of relocation, that would be progress.

Of course, there is lots of debate about how much of the current virtual working will remain and how much we will revert to people working in buildings alongside one another. Some of these patterns will certainly persist, albeit the scope for virtual working will vary from one job category to another. It is a lot easier to apply, virtually, the finishing touches to your latest *Organization Science* article than it is to fix, virtually, your school's central heating system.

This points to a further truth about home-working: that, in so far as it is a perk, it is a perk that attaches more to those in the upper pay brackets of the business school workforce than those lower down the salary scale. The debate about the equity of home-working, and how far it may serve to deepen inequalities in the workforce, is revving up.

Either way, the more virtual the world of university work becomes, the less of a recruitment problem physical re-location becomes. The legacy of the pandemic may be to open up new recruitment possibilities for business and management schools: the benefits in terms of workforce diversity could be very significant.

But there is an equal and opposite effect here also. The *recruitment* benefits of relaxing the requirement for physical location and relocation may involve costs when it comes to *retention*. If people no longer have to move home in order to switch institutions, the grip those institutions have on them by virtue of being located where they are thereby weakens. The location of their institutions is part of what keeps staff rooted to them. If people can hold on to the location but shop around for another employer, that may prove attractive.

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