

transcript

mobility matters, episode 6: DEI (diversity, equity & inclusion) in the asian context

WITH LISA JOHNSON AND RACHEAL FOO



racheal:

Welcome to Mobility Matters. I'm your host, Racheal Foo, and today I'm excited to explore some of the diversity, equity, and inclusion challenges for the Asian region with our DEI subject matter expert, Lisa Johnson, Director of Global DEI Solutions at Cartus. Lisa represents Cartus in the DEI space as a thought leader and solution facilitator for clients looking to address global DEI in their mobility solutions. Welcome, Lisa. And how are you today?

lisa:

I'm so happy to be here, Racheal, thank you.

racheal:

The last time we met was when you came to Singapore to facilitate an internal client forum for our top ten clients. We had a fascinating time exploring their individual journey in the DEI space, and how focused and determined they are in taking on some of the challenges that many organizations may not even be considering or aware of when you think DEI is a priority for many companies here in APAC. Why is it so important?

lisa:

Well, I had a great time on my last trip to Singapore, I would just want to start with that. And the conversation about DEI was so interesting, I think the DEI priority in Singapore and across the APAC region is just as strong as it is in other regions. Our most recent DEI mobility pulse survey that we did shows that 99% of companies that we

work with have DEI as a priority in their organizations. So, I see this as an acceleration and urgency around DEI, stemming from the impact of the pandemic. And also, a new look at what people want out of life that is coming out of the pandemic, not just life, but life and work. There's a strong sense of people wanting to be themselves and to come as you are to the workplace and in their daily lives. And that's on the personal side. But there's also a strong understanding that companies need to diverse ideas. They need diverse ideas, experiences, new ways of working in order to solve new problems, and to compete in whatever market they're in. So, there's that recognition that diversity is critical to the success of most organizations today.

racheal:

Yes, one of the key findings from our client forum that we quickly realize and acknowledge is that there are differences across regions, and even within the same organization, which makes it nuanced, and can be challenging. And you've also recently attended the Society of Human Resources conference last year. And there are a few key differences noted for the US versus the APAC. Can you share more on that?

lisa:

Absolutely. Racheal, it's so important to understand from a global view, and I think it's sometimes missing from the DEI conversation. And many of those of you who are listening to our podcast today are probably aware of it. DEI priorities vary globally, I don't think that's breaking news. But I do think it's missing a lot of times, as I said, from the

conversation within organizations. So, for example, in the APAC region, we may find more of a diversity focus in some companies and offices and regions within APAC on the multi-generational workforce, looking at the impact of generational differences on teams, on expectations in the workplace. In North America, that's important. But there's more of a focus on race and ethnicity, stemming from a historical perspective, but also from current events. That doesn't mean that multicultural workforce issues aren't important in North America or any region or that ethnicity and race are not important across different countries within Asia. However, the top visible priorities and companies DEI initiatives are not the same. The important takeaway to me in this whole conversation of how DEI varies globally, is that global DEI initiatives in companies need to take into consideration regional variations and not assume all of their regions or locations are going to be necessarily focused on the same priorities or even familiar with the same priorities.

racheal:

Yes, that is so true. One of the main issues that we noted during the program was gender inequality. This is especially true in the Asian culture, where societies and leaders have become more patriarchal or male-dominated. Gender inequality can manifest in many ways, such as males dominating the management levels, being favored for assignments over females in some organizations. To overcome this, some of our clients have carried out campaigns to develop female leaders and empower women to apply for leadership roles. And within Cartus, we have also been increasing our female leadership as part of our commitment to DEI. But beyond that, how can we reinforce that women are equally capable in the eyes of the management, or the selection manager when selecting candidates for an assignment?

lisa:

Racheal, you really hit the mark on that point, because one area of diversity that we do see across all regions as a top priority in organizations is a focus on women in the workforce. Part of this more universal focus for most regions is that it was one of the early formal areas of any corporate diversity initiatives, where gaps were identified. And they're easy to measure. They're very visible, aren't they? And but also, government started to look at the barriers to women entering and moving ahead in the workforce. And many countries over the years have set goals for creating more equity when it comes to gender inequity, creating more equity. And that pushed companies to take this area seriously and make progress.

So, I do want to focus for a minute on what you were just talking about Racheal with international assignments and that gap between male and female populations. For more than 20 years, the number of female assignees has pretty much stayed below 20% of the overall assignee population. And that's been pretty consistent. There are definitely a few exceptions. And I know we can all think of a company here or there that has made progress or sometimes a little, sometimes a lot of progress. But we know that at least part of the challenge for closing that gap between male and female assignee is has to do with unconscious bias in the selection of assignees. How manager select who is offered an assignment is often subjective, and it's based on who they know. But also based on characteristics that are hardwired into the selection managers own assumptions about who an assignee is, for example, if I know that a woman on my team has just had a baby, my unconscious bias may lead me to not ask her if she would consider an assignment, because I don't think she would want to go. Or if I know that a woman's partner has their own big career, I might opt my employee out of an opportunity, because of my own assumptions about her family's priorities and her partner's career, right?

So, in Cartus, our most recent DEI mobility pulse survey that we've already talked about, and we've talked about it on a on another podcast as well, there's a lot of really good information coming from that. But we did ask if managers who determine which employees are offered assignment opportunities, which we're calling selection managers and talking about today, if they get any training on how to be more inclusive in that important responsibility. And 70% of participants said that there's nothing offered today outside of what's offered to the general population around DEI. The good news is that of those 70%, well over half of them, 68%, see this as a realistic area to address. Selection managers can be allies of your company's diversity efforts, or they can be barriers to your diversity efforts. It's really a critical place and critical moment in the Global Mobility process, isn't it? That selection? So, one reason we see it is so critical at Cartus is that we know that employees who get international opportunities often have an advantage for moving into leadership roles in the future. So, to this end, we're looking at ways to address the needs of our clients who want to take their global mobility program to the next level with aligning DEI with mobility. And just as an example, because we're talking about this, we're introducing a new range of inclusive coaching workshops for managers, and one of them is focused on inclusive selection strategies. And I'm drawing

attention to it because I just think that's such a critical moment in the mobility process that can really increase more equity around diversity in assignee populations.

racheal:

Yes Lisa, your comments about the unconscious bias towards women been opted out for assignments have been real for me from my own experience, among the women that I know from my own personal group of friends and family. I've known for instances where women who have been outright discriminated against in their company for the circumstances, such as someone who might be pregnant and was forced to resign as the manager makes things difficult for her, or even a mother with young children having to put up with remarks indicating she is not capable of handling work and family responsibilities. These issues are very real in the workplace still today, and not just for the APAC region. So, I am interested in your view, how can we instill a mindset change for an inclusive workplace where employees are not discriminated for their roles outside of work?

lisa:

This is a question that companies committed to DEI are trying to answer are all around the world. And some companies and some parts of the world are further along with it than others. I think some of the success stories start with setting measurable goals to increase the numbers of women who are being hired, and then the number of women who are being developed and promoted into senior leadership roles. Part of it is making sure that inclusive management is an expectation and a competence that's being developed from the top of the organization down. But I also think that younger generations entering the workforce today are the most diverse, and I've seen a few studies recently. They're not just open to diversity, but they expect diversity in the workplace, more than any other generation that has come before them. So, we may be on the verge of a big leap towards more gender equality in the near future, and definitely more diversity. Companies with corporate cultures that drive inclusion, and reward inclusion and value inclusion are going to play a big part in this shift that I think we can expect going forward.

racheal:

Yes, I'm looking forward to this big shift that's going to happen.

lisa:

Right, me too. Me too, Racheal.

racheal:

Yes, and further your point on inclusion, another issue related to gender is supporting the LGBTQ+ population. Globally, we have become more receptive and inclusive, and many companies have made adjustments to their global mobility policies in providing support to this group of employees. Such as expanding the definition for families, supporting the employee's spouse or partner with work visa if it is legal in the assignment country, offering them more home leave if their spouse is not allowed to relocate with them. However, in Singapore, we are more conservative when compared to other Asian countries just last year to appeal to legalize same sex marriage was rejected. And hence it is still somehow a stigma in local context. What can companies do to provide more support for this group of employees?

lisa:

It's such a good question. And it does kind of tie back to what we were talking about before with some global DEI initiatives, but regional and local differences in the priorities. And in this case, what you're mentioning with the recent appeal to legalize same sex marriage in Singapore is a good example of, you know, a government's decision that impacts corporate DEI strategies. Last year, I was on a panel at the HRO (Human Resources Online) conference here in Singapore that you also attend to Racheal and as you remember, this was a really big topic for the HR professionals in the audience. What can companies do to provide more support to LGBTQ+ employees and their families in terms of global mobility policy and programs? And definitely, I see this in many companies at Cartus. We're partnering with our clients who are committed to inclusive mobility. And this is a big area for a lot of them. As you mentioned in your question, the reality is that apart from Australia, New Zealand and Taiwan, same sex marriages are still illegal in Singapore and across the APAC region. And in some cases, and countries, it's criminalized. So, companies that I work with and that I'm familiar with really remain careful to be compliant with immigration laws, and to be responsible for duty of care, meaning the safety of their employees and accompanying family members.

It's so important. And as you said, we see an interest in more inclusive policies for global mobility. And that includes offering more options for the reality of the more increasingly diverse, you know, definitions of families, so

more options for split families where the employee may accept a short-term assignment or an assignment and they are offered more home leave, or what we call reverse home leave so that the partner or family can visit them if they can't legally move with them to the new location. But we also see companies offering the employee's family the opportunity to relocate to a closer location within the region where perhaps same sex marriage is legal, and the employee can commute or visit more frequently.

But another question I'd ask those of you listening today, for your company's LGBTQ+ employees, who are hired in countries that are more inclusive, and you're looking to send them on an international assignment into locations where they can't be themselves legally or comfortably, is asking them - are you ready to, for example, go back into the closet for a temporary period of time on an assignment? That's another view of the challenge for the employee's mental health and well-being. So, one view is, you know, how can we do this legally with our global mobility policy? Should we take that risk, are there things that we can do to work around it, but the other is to really consider the employees view where they're currently in a situation where they can be themselves, they can be open and out and comfortable with that, but you're maybe asking them to go into a part of the world where they might have to go back in time a little bit in terms of their identity. And so, that's just another view of this. And it would definitely be a personal decision for the employee. But we would want the employee to go into the assignment with their eyes open.

So, all around, it's a really difficult situation, there aren't easy answers. And at the end of the day, we definitely see companies committed to DEI and inclusive mobility, that are adding more flexibility to their policy, often in the form of a core/flex policy, whereby the lifestyles and the individual needs of their employees can be met. So, the next step is to make that flexibility more explicit in how it supports diversity, showing single parent support or partner support and making it visible and not just implicit. So, I know at Cartus is, our goal is to help companies design, what we call "I belong" policies where diverse employees can see themselves supported in a policy and not just an exception. We really want inclusions, not exceptions to policy.

racheal:

Yes, Lisa, you mentioned some great steps and checklist for companies looking to be more supportive and inclusive in their policy. I noted an interesting point as we continue this conversation, that when I compare my own culture with that of another Asian country, like China or Taiwan. Even if we speak a common language, there are still differences in culture and in the spoken and unspoken language. This is often overlooked in an assignment, where the relocating employee may not be given sufficient support and education on cultural differences, which could undermine their assignments success. So, on this note, do you think more can be done to support the employee, and how we can ensure they can be successful in the new location.

lisa:

You know what I think this is a really good segue from my last comment about employees going into assignments with their eyes open, because intercultural training support is one of the best ways you can set your employees and their families up for success on an international assignment or transfer. And it's such a small investment to ensure that the employee is aware of their own cultural assumptions, and the culture of the new location. And I know that's not new, you know, I consider cross cultural training and language training to be the anchors of any DEI mobility strategy. In fact, they've been an integral part of most company's policies and support for many years, as most of you listening know. But now is the time to be explicit regarding the importance that these benefits have for the assignee and family's ability to adjust to the new location and to empower them to become included and to increase their sense of belonging. So, I think it's really making that connection for the assignee and the family and being more explicit about its relationship to inclusion and belonging, and less implicit.

So, a lot of times people have the misconception that if somebody is moving within the same region, and that's what you were just mentioning, Racheal, even within your own region, there's this misperception that if somebody is moving in the same region, they're going to find enough cultural similarities. And they will be able to adapt more quickly than people from other parts of the world coming into the region. But actually, there's a lot of research and even our own experiences show that what we call presumed similarity, that my culture and your culture are so similar that I don't really need to be ready for cultural differences, that can catch people off guard, and actually

slow down their ability to adapt and inhibit their success. So, I guess, you know, one of the lessons is that formally supporting the employee with the ability to work across different cultures and languages can benefit the company. It shows the company's commitment to cultural diversity, how they value it, and it also sets the employee up for success. You know, at the end of the day, the employee is better equipped to bridge the cultural gaps that they encounter. As you said, Racheal, sometimes within the same region, your employees might be blind to very real cultural differences that exist, and their ability to get up and running in their new role gets slowed down. Maybe it's an unconscious bias that my culture and your culture are very similar, because we're in the same region, you know, and so it's bringing that unconscious bias in as well, or trying to, you know, not look for the cultural differences. So, intercultural training is part of improving the employee experience. And it's part of inclusive onboarding,

racheal:

You are spot on addressing the employee experience, and how the right kind of support will make a difference in the onboarding and on the entire assignments as well. I think we have time for one last question before we close. I believe many of our listeners here today want to know, what are some of the success stories we have so far in working with our clients in integrating DEI into their business goals, and any advice for companies who are just embarking on this journey?

lisa:

So, it's a great question to wrap up with Racheal, because we've covered a lot of examples on today's episode of the podcast, we've been talking about global DEI strategies, and regional or local priorities that vary across cultures. We've talked about unconscious bias and its impact on inclusive selection of assignees. And the challenges of the gender gap that's still, you know, very real in international assignment programs. So, what I'm finding when we work with companies that are trying to align their global mobility programs, to their companies, DEI strategies, is that it's

important to start with the strategies and initiatives that are already in place in your particular organization. So, is your organization already training managers on inclusive leadership? If you are, then it's a great moment to add inclusion to the key roles that impact mobility, some of which we talked about today, like selection managers, but also for your global mobility teams, for your assignees. And for the receiving managers and their new teams? How do you support inclusion in your programs. So, start with any kind of initiatives that already are in place in your company, and they are in a lot of companies around developing inclusive managers and inclusive leadership.

Another place that you can start which a lot of companies are starting with this policy, is making policy more flexible to meet the diverse needs of diverse employees, so that they see themselves in your program. And they know that they were considered when you design to the policy. Many of our clients today are working with us to make their policies more inclusive. And that's an exciting evolution in our industry. And it's really important global mobility teams have the chance now to add DEI to their agendas, to increase their DEI confidence and apply it to the Global Mobility function. So, I guess if I had to give advice today on where to get started, it would be to really apply and consider the Global Mobility function. No matter where you are, in this journey, take the next step and move the line forward. So, we're in an economy that's a little uncertain, but we definitely still have this focus on the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion in our organizations. And I think we have the opportunity to try new things and to innovate. And I actually don't think it's just an opportunity. I think our companies are really demanding that of all of us in every single function. So, don't leave Global Mobility out of that, I would say,

racheal:

Let's do it, Lisa. Well, I think this is all the time we have. Thank you so much Lisa for the insightful sharing, and I learned so much from this conversation. We hope you have enjoyed today's episode, feel free to share it and let us know what you think.

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