

# Mobile Minds

An Alternative to Physical Migration  
in the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution



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## INTRODUCTION

Globally, progress on immigration procedures that allow for the free movement of talent has stalled as business, government, and civil society continue to struggle to find a balance between the need for skilled labor, preserving national interests, and protecting the rights of workers. Meanwhile, new technologies and workplace practices have allowed the unprecedented development of a global remote workforce, which benefit businesses, communities, and ecosystems, regardless of the physical location of talent.

Remote work is a growing phenomenon on a global scale. In India, 53 percent of workers prefer to work from home. In the United States, 37 percent of all workers work remotely at least occasionally, up from 9 percent in 1995. The United Kingdom has 54 percent of its workers engaging in remote work. In developing countries, estimates show that between 10 and 20 percent of managers work remotely.

Governments and companies are also beginning to formalize remote work. Saudi Arabia has 500 companies in 70 cities that allow workers to work remotely. In Japan in 2016, Toyota announced that it will let one-third of its workforce, start working remotely. And Turkey took steps to regulate remote work, including protecting remote workers against discrimination based on how they perform their work.

Even as remote work grows worldwide, there are issues when it comes to using remote work for cross-border hiring. The skills gap that exists in many developing and developed economies is something remote work is suited to handle. Around the world, studies show that skills shortages prevented 45 percent of employers in the Asia-Pacific, 61 percent of employers in India, and 68 percent of employers in Brazil from filling vacancies. Remote work can bring skilled talent from outside the country for in-demand jobs like engineering, software development, and call center work, without the social and cost impacts of physical migration--both on migrants and communities affected by physical migration.

For most of the twentieth century, part of “being human” meant people traveling to and from worksites each day. But in this century, remote work can flip the fundamental nature of when, where, and how we work. Similarly, “work” in this century is what people do, not where they do it from. Even with the current challenges in cross-border hiring, remote work shows clear economic, business, and societal benefits, and should be utilized as an alternative to physical, work-related migration.

Migration in the twenty-first century is  
the movement of mindpower, not simply bodies.

Mobile Minds is a high-skilled migration project led by the World Economic Forum’s Global Future Council on the Future of Migration that aims to promote global economic prosperity by advancing information about, access to, and use of a cross-border remote workforce in addressing current and future labor shortages.

As Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, contends in his book, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*, “we are at the beginning of a revolution that is fundamentally changing the way we live, work and relate to one another.” Remote work is uniquely positioned to harness the “range of new technologies that are fusing the physical, digital and biological worlds, impacting all disciplines, economies and industries, and even challenging ideas about what it means to be human.”

Mobile Minds will bring together globally renowned experts to develop policy recommendations for businesses and governments, address challenges such as taxation and skills gaps, and create a virtual space for all stakeholders to collaborate and share best practices.

## THE BENEFITS OF REMOTE WORKPLACE

Companies and organizations that have adopted remote work practices experience a number of benefits. Furthermore, companies and governments have touted the environmental and social impacts of remote teams.

### **The most common benefits experienced by employers include:**

- Real estate cost savings
- Improved worker productivity
- Increased talent pools
- Human resources cost savings through improved retention and reduced turnover
- Improved ability to grow, scale, and stay agile

### **For society, there are several key benefits from remote work, that also benefit business:**

- Reducing unemployment and underemployment in economically depressed/underdeveloped areas
- Improving gender equity in the workplace, particularly in senior roles
- Mitigating global traffic issues by reducing commuters
- Emergency and natural disaster preparedness
- Environmental impacts
- Social and cultural benefits

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## REAL ESTATE COST SAVINGS

The first consideration for most businesses when changing operational practices is the bottom line. Hiring people who work remotely provides employers with a number cost benefits. When people work remotely, businesses need less real estate for offices, which means lower utility and maintenance costs, and less office equipment to purchase and maintain. This cost is sometimes eliminated and sometimes passed onto the workers, so it will be important to develop policies that help mitigate any costs incurred by workers.

Dell is one of the leading corporate voices for remote work. In 2012, Dell launched its “[2020 Legacy of Good Plan](#)” which, among other initiatives, pledged to make 50 percent of its workforce remote by 2020 through an initiative it calls Connected Workplaces.

Dell is on track to meeting its goal of having 50 percent of its workers telecommuting by 2020: in 2016, 25 percent of Dell’s employees work remotely. Since 2013, [Dell has reduced its real estate costs](#) by \$39.5 million as a result of its Connected Workplace program. In FY16 alone, the company implemented remote work initiatives in 23 Dell locations around the globe.

How much money could the average business save? \$22,000 USD per remote worker, per year, according to [Global Workplace Analytics](#) (GWA), the leading research firm on emerging remote workplace strategies.

Its analysis of over 4,000 documents on telecommuting shows an average savings of \$11,000 USD per remote worker, per year, for just half-time remote work (where the employees splits his or her time between the office and remote work).

Mobile Minds seeks to harness the experience and knowledge of companies like Dell--companies that have implemented remote work on a global scale--to help guide its work in supporting cross-border remote hiring for many more companies.

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## IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY

When asked about the impact working remotely has on their productivity, most people say it makes them more productive. 65 percent of respondents in a [survey of over 3,000 people interested in flexible and remote work arrangements](#) said they would be more productive telecommuting than working in a traditional workplace.

**The main reasons for productivity gains from remote work include:**

- Fewer distractions or interruptions from colleagues
- A quieter work environment
- Less time spent commuting to and from work, and less commute-related stress
- Fewer meetings
- A reduction in office politics
- A more comfortable office environment
- Fewer work disruptions due to inclement weather (like snow storms) or major events (like a major sporting events)

Stanford University conducted a [remote work study](#) over 10 months at Shanghai-based CTrip, a billion-dollar NASDAQ-listed company. The researchers found a 13 percent performance increase among remote workers. This increase was attributed to more time spent working (taking fewer breaks and sick days) and more calls taken (because of a quieter work environment).

At Deloitte LLP, a global business consulting firm, 95 percent of its people use some form of flexibility in determining how, where, and when they work. In tracking the success of its initiative, [Deloitte's research correlates flexible work with high performance](#) in work quality, productivity, and business growth.

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*95 percent of Deloitte's employees have flexibility in how, where, and when they work*

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## ABILITY TO GROW, SCALE, AND STAY AGILE

Remote work can help companies grow, scale, and stay agile. Employee and freelance costs are often the largest expenses a company incurs, especially as new entrepreneurs start and grow their companies. Remote work makes it possible for a new company to grow and add staff faster than if it had to hire in-office staff.

London-based software company [Canonical](#) uses remote work on a global scale: 75 percent of the 700+ workers work remotely from around the world. Director of People and Culture at Canonical, Claire O'Connell says, "We need to view the world through a global lens, tapping into the best talent in the industry, regardless of their location."

As more companies enter the global market, remote work will become increasingly useful and utilized. And one of the main goals of Mobile Minds is to help guide a public and private remote work collaboration to help companies and workers thrive in this global market.

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## INCREASED TALENT POOLS

Companies without remote workforces are restricted to hiring talent located only within their geographic area, or recruiting those willing to relocate. By hiring people to work remotely, companies extend their talent pools far beyond geographic limitations, tapping into highly-skilled talent that may live hundreds or thousands of miles away.

[Remote.co](#), a resource for companies and teams that utilize remote work, has interviewed senior leaders from over 100 companies from all over the world with remote workforces that make up 50 percent or more of their staff.

[Greenback Expat Tax Services](#) is a global company with no official headquarters, and 100 percent of its workers work remotely. Co-Founder Carrie McKeegan says,

*“If we limited ourselves to hiring only those who could commute to a city location, it would seriously hamper our ability to find the kind of highly-skilled (and specialized) talent we need to offer our customers the very best service.”*

*(Carrie McKeegan, co-found of the remote company Greenback Expat Tax Services)*

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## HUMAN RESOURCES COST SAVINGS: BETTER RETENTION AND LOWER TURNOVER

The need to attract talent is only part of remote work’s role in personnel matters. In well-established and new businesses alike, remote work is increasingly used to retain workers. In the Stanford University study of Shanghai-based CTrip, remote work reduced turnover by 50 percent. Aetna has seen even more dramatic results. [Annual voluntary turnover for Aetna employees](#) who work remotely is two to three percent, as compared to company-wide turnover, at about eight percent.

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*Annual voluntary turnover at Aetna:  
-- Remote workers: 2-3 percent  
-- In-Office Workers: 8 percent  
(Meister, J., Forbes, 2014)*

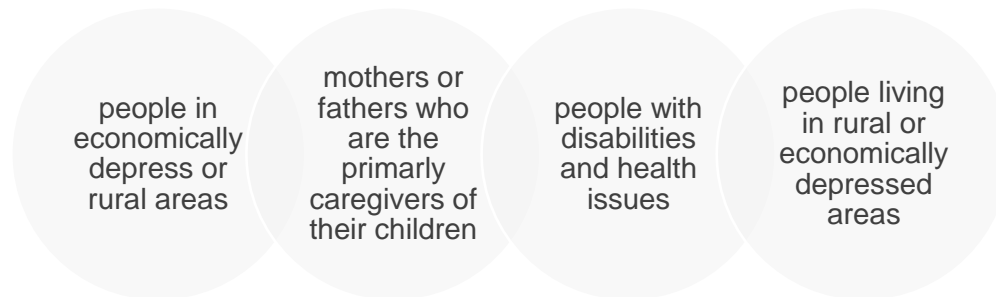
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One of the main reasons that remote and flexible work options help with retention is the impact those options have on a worker’s quality of life. In 2016, MIT and the University of Minnesota conducted the first-ever [control group study on flexible work](#) (including remote work). The 12-month study of over 800 workers at a Fortune 500 company found that workers who participated in a pilot work flexibility program were more satisfied at work, felt less burnt-out, and had lower psychological stress levels than employees who did not participate.

Germany-based SAP, the largest business software company in the world, has a strong remote work program: 15.7 percent of its [staff work from home across the world](#). And retention is one of the program’s big benefits, writes [Caroleigh Deneen](#), mother of four and Senior UX Designer at SAP. “It gives SAP a huge competitive advantage in attracting and retaining mothers with young children. And why wouldn’t it want to, moms are some of the most efficient and productive members of the work force.”

Mobile Minds understands that the benefits of cross-border remote work will be experienced by companies AND workers, alike. And one of the biggest benefits of remote work is its ability to expand workplace diversity

**Remote work brings opportunity to those who, for a variety of reasons, cannot participate in traditional work environments:**



Remote work expands the opportunity for these people, and makes companies stronger, society stronger, and people stronger.

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## GLOBAL TRAFFIC MITIGATION

In the last several years, unprecedented traffic jams caused havoc and made headlines in Beijing (where a 62-mile long traffic jam kept people stranded for 12 days), Chicago (where hundreds of cars froze in place on the roads during a winter blizzard), and New Dehli (where heavy rains cause miles-long backups).

The *New York Times* recently reported on the “[traffic jam that never ends](#)” in the Bangladesh city of Dhaka, saying, “it is traffic that has sealed Dhaka’s reputation as...the world’s most broken city.” Relief may be on the way for the “world’s most broken city,” in the form of remote work.

Online freelance work website [Upwork reported](#) that, in 2009, Bangladesh accounted for only 2 percent of the total hours worked on its site. In 2014, it accounted for 10 percent, making Bangladesh the number three country for contractors, behind only the Philippines and India. Remote work also brings financial relief.

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*With remote work, a Bangladeshi contractor can earn the average annual income in less than two weeks.*

*(Cooper, M., Upwork, 2012)*

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According to Upwork’s report, “The per-capita gross national income in Bangladesh was \$700 in 2010. Assuming the average contractor earns \$10 an hour, a Bangladeshi contractor can earn the average annual income in less than 2 weeks of work” through remote freelance jobs.

PwC’s [report on global megatrends](#) predicts that by 2040, 9 billion people worldwide will live in urban areas—more than the entire population of the world right now. Gridlock due to increased traffic, predicts PwC, will cause food, water, and emergency treatment delays in urban areas.

Remote work has a tremendous role to play in overcoming current and future traffic issues. Global Workplace Analytics reports that, in the U.S. alone, if everyone who held a remote work-compatible job worked remotely just half the time, it would save more than 1,600 lives annually, prevent almost 99,000 injuries, and save over \$12 billion a year in direct and indirect costs associated with traffic accidents. Imagine the reduction in urban dysfunction if, over the next several decades, remote work was adopted and scaled on a global level.

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## EMERGENCY AND DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Remote work also helps municipalities and businesses maintain continuity during emergency and disaster situations. Global Workplace Analytics reports that 75 percent of remote workers say they could continue to work in the event of a disaster, compared with just 28 percent of non-remote workers who say the same.

Hurricane Sandy struck New York City and the surrounding area in 2012. McGraw Hill Financial (now S&P 500) is global credit and capital analytics company headquartered in New York, with offices in London, Islamabad, Buenos Aires, Manila, and other locations. VP of Human Resources, Sheila O'Neill, says that the storm made them realize just how useful remote work could be.

“The Sandy experience brought a level of understanding to all our teams that we can operate with a significant part of our workforce working outside of the office environment,” says O'Neill. “Each of the individual businesses experienced first-hand how they could make mass remote work effective and productive.” McGraw Hill Financial realized that remote work could play a large role in keeping the company running during future emergencies.

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*In the event of a disaster, who says they can keep working?*

*-- Remote workers: 75 percent*

*-- In-Office Workers: 28 percent*

*(Global Workplace Analytics, 2016)*

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## ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The environmental benefits of remote work are numerous. Remote work means fewer people commuting to and from work, lowering carbon emissions, reducing fuel consumption and the need for oil. And when people work remotely, organizations need less office space, lowering the environmental impact of constructing new buildings, maintaining old ones, and heating or cooling those spaces.

Government agencies now track the environmental impact of their remote work programs. The United States Federal Government enacted the Federal Telework Program in 2010 and has released several reports detailing the program's environmental and other benefits.

For example, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recognized that telework reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by about 40 percent from fiscal year 2008 to fiscal year 2013. The General Services Administration's implementation of telework reduced office space by 40 percent. That lessened the GSA's environmental impact and saved the agency \$24.6 million in annual rent.

Private-sector companies also track environmental benefits from remote work. At Xerox, headquartered in the U.S. with hundreds of locations in Latin America, Western Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia/Pacific, more than 8,000 employees (11 percent of its workforce) work from home full-time as part of its Virtual Workforce Program. Through telecommuting, Xerox reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 40,894 metric tons, and its remote staff used 4.6 million fewer gallons of gas.

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*The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reduced greenhouse its gas emissions by about 40 percent with remote work.*

*(U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016)*

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Dell also reports big environmental gains because from remote work. It says Dell employees collectively avoid 35,000 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e per year through working remotely--the equivalent of taking almost 7,500



cars off the road for a year. And each Dell employee reduces his or her gas consumption by an average of 175 gallons per year.

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## **SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BENEFITS**

One of the biggest potential benefits of cross-border remote work is helping to balance the workforce needs of developed and developing countries.

As the Global Future Council on the Future of Migration (formerly the Global Agenda Council on Migration) has already written, by the middle of this century, the balance of working-age people to those age 60 and over will tip in most developed nations. “As a result, numerous organizations will be unable to find enough employees in their home markets to sustain profitability and growth,” writes the GFC. On the flipside, developing nations will have a far greater share of working-age people, but a severe lack of job opportunities.

As the GFC prescribes, “Education institutions, business, governments and non-governmental organizations must come together to propose new frameworks and solutions that will create a new talent environment, suitable for the era of workforce scarcity and balancing the needs of both developed and developing economies.” Remote work can be one of those solutions.

Remote jobs provide an alternative to work-related migration. They bring opportunities to rural regions lacking local jobs, and to economically depressed areas after industries have come and gone. And remote work does all of this while keeping families together, reducing work-related migration, positively impacting the environment, and reducing business operating costs.

## **CHALLENGES OF CROSS-BORDER HIRING**

While remote work does bring with it a wealth of benefits for the companies and organizations implementing it, and for the people working remotely, it is not without its challenges. Cross-border hiring, for remote workers or physical migrants, is inherently complicated in areas like taxation, employment and labor law, and migration policies.

**Strong policy recommendations and mandates are necessary to protect remote workers from issues like wage depression due to increased home office expenses, additional training in career fields common in remote work, or increased competition from a more global pool of candidates vying for remote work opportunities.**

The U.N.’s International Labor Organization is well-positioned to assist Mobile Minds with setting labor standards, developing policies, and devising programs that support remote workers.

Mobile Minds seeks to address the challenges in cross-border remote work by making business practice and policy recommendations, developing skill and certification standards, working on taxation issues, and developing a virtual space where members of the remote work community, businesses, governments, and all stakeholders can collaborate and develop remote work’s global future.

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## **TAXATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND LABOR LAWS**

From a business’s perspective, the concerns regarding remote work and employment laws have to do with corporate taxes and work permissions issues that may be triggered by hiring a remote worker.

For example, the act of employing a worker residing in a country, when the hiring company has no approved presence in that country, might trigger income and value-added tax liabilities related to “Permanent Establishment” taxes.

Deloitte Austria says that governments look at a variety of factors when deciding if a company’s presence in their country constitutes a permanent establishment, including whether an employee has a home office within the country (even if the company has no other locations or operations within the country).

Another consideration for companies hiring remote workers in different countries is compliance with host countries’ employment laws and related tax laws. Minimum wages, part-time and full-time status differences, overtime compliance, background checks, employee versus freelance classifications, and other details are different from country to country, and even within countries when states and provinces have their own laws.

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## **MIGRATION POLICIES**

International migration policies, across all regions, are increasingly inconsistent and contradict the economic and societal realities that are bringing remote work to the forefront.

Developed companies face a shortage of skilled youth as populations decline, while some developing countries experience extreme youth unemployment. But economic migrants face complicated and restrictive migration policies that hinder the bringing together of skilled workers and work opportunities.

Furthermore, both expected and unexpected sudden changes to migration policies mean that companies have to be constantly aware of the potential impacts upon their globalized workforces. For example, conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, Britain’s impending exit from the European Union, and renegotiated or new trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) all have an impact on work-related migration, making remote work an increasingly attractive alternative to physical migration.

In a report on the challenges for human resource management and global business strategy, the *Economist Intelligence Unit* concluded that, “The growth of liberal cross-border trade, the use of communications technology and the expansion of transnational companies are not likely to let up. Attracting global talent requires staying abreast of new strategies for finding and attracting talent.”

So, despite the challenges presented by taxation and employment law, political considerations, and migration policies, remote work remains a worthwhile option to promote global prosperity, relieve labor shortages, and support strategic business objectives. Mobile Minds recognizes that, even with widespread adoption of remote work, physical migration processes will still need to be improved, and that remote work is just one many solutions necessary to reach this goal.

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## **THE GROWTH OF FREELANCE WORKERS AND WAGE ISSUES**

One of the ways companies have already been successful in hiring remote workers across borders is to hire freelance contractors, rather than employees, to work remotely. While this does ease some of the taxation and migration challenges faced by businesses, freelance work presents a challenge in and of itself.

Because freelance workers are independent and self-employed, they assume more work-related risk than a traditional employee. The burden of healthcare coverage, invoicing, business taxes, employment taxes, retirement savings, paid time off, sick leave, work-related injury, and other common employment benefits falls completely on their shoulders. Burdening remote workers with expenses normally carried by companies is one barrier for migrants, especially those in the lower economic classes, to be successful with remote work.

**Mobile Minds will work with companies, governments, and related organizations to create policies for strong worker protections.**

One main way to ensure remote worker migrants are not saddled with excess costs is to amend and update tax and labor laws to make it easier for companies to hire remote workers as *employees*, rather than freelancers.

Companies may also encounter legal issues when hiring freelancers, as more attention is placed on the line between freelance and employee status. Furthermore, because the going rate for work varies between geographic markets, it's possible that without the right oversight and policies, individuals may be in a race to the bottom for wages. It's important that companies understand the differences between freelancers and employees before they begin hiring remote freelancers en masse.

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## **EDUCATION AND THE SKILLS GAP**

Education and remote jobs go hand in hand. The skills gap can only be solved by making sure that workers are trained for the most in-demand jobs, in order to compete for them on a global scale.

For example, in traffic-clogged Dhaka, Bangladesh, Daffodil University reported a large increase in computer class enrollment in recent years. In 2010, fewer than 100 students were studying computer science and technology. In 2016, there 800 to 1,200 students enrolled each year. This increase is credited almost completely to the huge increase in freelance remote jobs available to trained and skilled Bangladeshis.

Professional networking and career site, LinkedIn, has created the Economic Graph, a digital representation of the global economy with the goal of connecting talent and opportunity on a "massive scale." As part of this project, LinkedIn released a list of the top 25 in-demand skills in 2016.

Not surprisingly, the top ten skills (and most of the list of 25) are an exact match to the skills gap reported by countries across the world, and they are directly related to remote work itself.

More can and should be done to encourage educational opportunities for high-demand skill areas. Organizations like Skillcrush are creating online learning platforms to teach in-demand technology skills outside of a traditional classroom environment. More colleges and universities are creating fully-online programs to reach students who cannot, for a variety of reasons, attend classes on-site.

For people who cannot access traditional education, such as women or people in rural and remote areas, on-demand and online learning, much like remote work, has the potential to transform the way professionals learn and grow their skill sets, and to close the skills gap.

## REMOTE WORK: ACTIONABLE STEPS

### FOR BUSINESSES

At this point, businesses can begin by considering how remote work can help to grow and develop their workforces and support their business goals. Areas such as skills gaps, pressing hiring needs, jobs suited for remote work, current remote workers, potential cross-border hiring options, business expansion opportunities, and labor regulations and laws are all excellent starting points.

Furthermore, companies already engaged in remote work need to start tracking their programs to truly understand and refine their benefits. Only 3 percent of companies with flexible and remote work programs conduct any sort of formalized analysis.

**Action Step: In order to implement remote work on a global scale, businesses must begin tracking remote and flexible work now.**

### FOR GOVERNMENTS

First and foremost, government agencies should also conduct internal remote work audits to determine their own current and potential remote work implementations, and the benefits and challenges inherent in those. The U.S. Federal Government offers an excellent example for a successfully implemented remote work program for government employees.

**Action Step: Laws and policies regarding cross-border hiring, work visas/permits, freelancing, permanent establishment, and others need to be reconsidered for the changing landscape of**

### FOR SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS

Remote work won't be the only solution to the global skills dilemma. Education is hugely important in order for more people to learn the most in-demand skills. And more organizations are needed to organize remote workers and remote jobs, to connect talent and opportunity.

Andela is an excellent example of an organization connecting talent to opportunity. They find the top one percent of developers on the African continent and connect them with companies in-need of development talent, companies like IBM and Microsoft, as well as many other lesser-known businesses in other countries that are in dire need of developers. And when Andela recruits developers, they also send them through an intensive training to solidify their skills.

Outside of tech-related career fields is NaTakallam, an organization transforming the Syrian crisis into an opportunity. The organization "pairs displaced Syrians with Arabic learners around the world for language practice over Skype. The platform offers affordable, flexible, tailored Arabic practice with native speakers. On the other end, NaTakallam offers a valuable income source and enriching job opportunity to displaced Syrians mostly in Lebanon, but also in Turkey, Egypt, France, Brazil and Germany."

**Action Step: Education and job placement organizations should consider the ways in which they can adapt their services to support remote work and cross-border hiring.**

## CONCLUSION

When it comes to the challenges of cross-border remote work, companies attempting cross-border mergers and acquisitions encounter similar challenges. In those circumstances, as in remote work, the benefits outweigh the challenges, and solutions can be developed to support cross-border remote work.

**We must recognize that a globalized world requires a globalized labor market, and that the coming decades will only bring more need for solutions like remote work.**

GFC is a melting pot of globally-renowned experts from business, government, academia, and civil society, and that makes Mobile Minds uniquely situated to achieve inclusive change by bringing a diversity of stakeholders to the table.

**Mobile Minds aims to create public-private cooperation towards the following goals:**



The World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report 2015-2016 found that inflexible labor markets make it difficult for countries to improve productivity and prosperity, and thus, that inflexibility makes them less competitive.

The most competitive countries in the world, the report states, are those that nurture innovation and talent in ways that align with the changing nature of work--including by adopting policies that support remote work.

In fact, remote and flexible work was found to be the top "demographic and socio-economic driver of change" in employment and the global future of work. The 2016 WEF report, The Future of Jobs says, "Organizations are likely to have an ever-smaller pool of core full-time employees for fixed functions, backed up by colleagues in other countries and external consultants and contractors for specific projects."

In other words, the future of work is mobile--both mobile minds, and mobile work. It makes sense, then, that the top "technological driver of change" is mobile internet and cloud technology, two keys to successful remote work. Clearly, even with policy and political difficulties in cross-border hiring, global remote work is the future of the workforce.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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