Mobility User Experience Research Study: Key Findings (condensed)

Submitted by Susan Stuart, User Experience Research Consultant for DHR, June 14, 2019

**Overview**

A User Experience Research and Analysis project was undertaken at UNICEF from January to June 2019 to explore International Professional (IP) staff’s perceptions and experiences of the Mobility policy and program, along with those of P6/ D1/ D2 managers of IP staff.

Quantitative and qualitative methodologies, including surveys, focus groups, and interviews, were used to gather data on staff’s views around the world, both in-person and remotely. Secondary (background) research was also conducted. The objective of this study was to inform future discussions, analyses, and ideation on improvements to the Mobility policy, process, and communications.   
  
 **About the Participants**

**Survey responses received:**

* 1231 from IP staff, nearly 3,000 comments submitted and reviewed; 85% completion rate
* 15 from P6/ D1/ D2 managers of IP staff; 100% completion rate
* 35 in Human Resources
* Regional breakdown:
* 235 in New York
* 230 in ESAR
* 199 in WCAR
* 118 in MENAR
* 99 in EAPRO
* 97 in SAR
* 76 in Geneva
* 67 in Copenhagen
* 50 in LACRO
* 46 in ECAR
* 1 in Washington
* Gender breakdown:
* 50.28% women
* 49.07% men
* 8 gender-variant/ non-conforming

**Staff interviewed:**

* 110 IP staff in focus groups or one-to-one (remotely or in person)
* 14 HR staff in a workshop or one-to-one
* 6 D1/ D2 managers of IP staff
* Senior management staff members at DHR, as well as all Regional Chiefs of HR
* Additional senior management in the Supply Division, along with a staff member who has conducted an independent study of Mobility with Supply staff
* Staff in “H,” “A,” “B,” “C,” “D,” and “E” duty stations, some in remote or isolated areas

Representatives from two staff groups were also interviewed: the Global Staff Association and the Gender PUSH Initiative.

Note: the majority of time and focus in this study was on qualitative research—dialogue and limited observation, hearing staff’s stories, and exploring various issues surrounding Mobility with them.

**Key Findings**

**Goals of Mobility**

* Staff varied quite a bit in their perceptions of a sound rationale for mandated Mobility, sometimes agreeing with senior management in DHR, and adding the prevention of stagnation as an important goal. But some didn’t agree with a rationale for mandated Mobility at all.
* Staff agreed with these goals most often: broadening of skillsets globally (73.49% agreed); equitable sharing of UNICEF’s responsibilities and opportunities (63.86% agreed); breaking down “silos”—better understanding between all locations and functions (62.31% agreed).
* Many staff didn’t immediately connect being an International Professional to Mobility, or give examples of how regular, diverse international exposure is important to their daily work. More often, work examples were cited in the context of lack of field experience impacting deliverables negatively if HQ staff haven’t experienced field context.
* There were suspected hidden agendas, such as using Mobility to manage low-performing staff out of the organization, which seems to be stigmatizing the managed rotation exercise.

**What the Mobility program is doing well**

* Beneficial webinars, some Yammer responses helpful
* Some accolades for career coaching integration
* Some reported positive reassignment outcomes for some staff
* Many staff still believe in the positive benefits of Mobility, despite the time, expense and disruption to work.

**Managed rotation’s biggest challenges**

* Reassignment outcomes: displacement, including potential separation for good and loyal performers; also, poor matches personally or professionally for some staff
* “Lottery” nature of timing of TOD with suitable posts; many reports of not enough suitable posts inside or outside the rotation pool now
* Stress, anxiety, uncertainty, lowered morale, and time-consuming process (the application and hiring process especially); some strong emotions, strong words: “humiliating,” “demoralizing”
* Managed rotation was supposed to relieve pressure from field staff especially—but while successful outcomes have been reported by some, most field staff feel there is more pressure and stress now due to more competition, a stricter mandate and deadlines, and threat of separation
* Stigmatization: rumors of poor quality candidates and posts in the pool
* Perceived managerial bias in candidate selection, deferment and non-rotational posts
* Lack of communication and transparency in candidate selection process from both DHR and hiring offices has caused anxiety and lowered morale
* Increased distrust (both ways: managers distrustful of candidates (PERs ignored) and risk-adverse, applicants distrustful they’re being given a fair shot); numerous complaints about lack of transparency and inconsistent hiring practices, deceptive hiring practices, hiring practices lacking in professionalism and integrity
* Networking guideline is viewed poorly by most staff; it seems to be actually increasing silos, perceptions of unfairness, wasted time on applications and preferences for private matches. There were many complaints about inappropriate power structures, “Old Boys Club” culture, and lobbying practices. Isolated staff are often shouldering UNICEF’s heaviest burdens, yet at an extreme disadvantage; it’s an uncomfortable guideline for staff who are not isolated as well.
* Staff feel stuck in “H” or “field” or “E” silos (labeled as only able to work in these environments)
* Some staff feel personally constrained in meeting the Mobility mandate, or in the choices they can make (family, LGBT, personal suitability to work in particular locales)

**Mobility is counterintuitive**

* How “managed” is the managed rotation exercise, really?
* There are disadvantages whether you are included in the rotation exercise or not
* The advice to try to avoid an exercise that has so much time, effort, and investment from UNICEF in it doesn’t make sense
* Rotation first appears to be a career-booster, yet many well-performing staff end up barely able to keep a job at all
* Conflicting contract terms: staff members sign a contract for a duty station, but expected to “go where the organization needs them to go,” conflicts with timelines of contracts sometimes; 61% of IP staff respondents reported being aware of the requirement for Mobility prior to employment, and 39% said they were not
* Expectations of current supervisor helping staff find jobs seen as unrealistic by most (many supervisors want to keep good staff, and push poor-performing staff out any way they can)
* Communications on long process not frequent enough; not enough candidate feedback; inconsistent, untrustworthy, and even insulting hiring office screening requests (such as for written tests)
* Not enough concise reference and orientation information on the program, its rules, procedures and expectations
* Not all staff understand “H” to field moves are especially encouraged; “H” to “H” and “E” to “E” doesn’t seem like real Mobility

**Other challenges + barriers**

* Managed rotation exercise is generally seen as taking too long
* The program is not helping with cross-functional or inter-agency moves, despite the policy language. According to the survey, only 6.97% of IP staff are very confident that they would be considered for cross-functional moves, and only 23.75% indicated they were somewhat confident. Most staff (40.79%) are somewhat unconfident, and 28.5% are very unconfident.
* Some staff wanted to take part in the exercise earlier (or later)
* Numerous staff mentioned wanting Mobility linked to career development more
* Some staff feel functionally miscategorized, which has implications for their internal job prospects
* Uncertainty of whether every function really need to rotate, how interchangeable posts with the same titles are across duty stations
* Lateral “swaps” are tricky—especially due to the perceived networking bias
* Lots of discussions about the PER not doing its job in establishing trust in a risk-adverse hiring environment; PIP was said to be a spectacular step forward by one D1 manager, and time-consuming (unrealistic) by others
* [Women viewed Mobility less positively](https://www.surveymonkey.com/stories/SM-69T95W9V) overall [than men by a margin of 5-10%](https://www.surveymonkey.com/stories/SM-SVWH5W9V/)
* Impact on marriages, children
* Quite a few staff still prefer “E” to “E” moves and don’t want UNICEF to block these movements

**Relocation experience: time and realistic duty station information is most important**

* Relocation and acclimation indicated by most staff to be challenging or somewhat challenging, with only 16% indicating these issues were very challenging, and 18% indicating they weren’t a challenge at all
* Time off between assignments (minimum 2 weeks) was the top request
* Complaints of inaccurate classifications, or duty stations not fitting expectations (air quality, family-appropriate environments)
* Timing with school schedules (international schools’ deadlines in the spring)
* Advance notice (1-2 years even) of reassignments is desired, to help with planning
* Flexi-work/ tele-work transitions are desired
* Language courses were a common request
* Lots of other minor logistical and support requests were made

**Centralization of the managed rotation exercise**

* 23.5 % of IP respondents indicated they wanted the rotation panel to take control of the candidate selection process
* 54.5% of IP respondents (80% of P6/ D1/ D2) were satisfied with hiring managers having control
* However, the comments indicated that this question was confusing to some, and loaded to others (“rotation panel” is an unfamiliar concept to many, and many hiring managers already felt they had no control)
* Many wrote comments that they wanted to see “joint control”
* A few others want it to be outsourced or managed more by functional area leads or consultants

**Other Mobility efforts**

* Staff have asked for more benchmarking information from other agencies
* The most common perception is that other agencies receive far fewer complaints, with many comparisons to specific processes used by UNHCR, WFP, UNDP, ILO as well as EU and other diplomatic organizations