

Pushing the Boundaries: Emerging Global Health Care Needs for a Work-From-Anywhere Culture

by **Noelle Weinrich** | *GeoBlue*

Remember missing the train? Rush hour traffic? Changing out of your pajamas? What a nightmare. Even if you're still going into the office every morning, millions of others are joining the "great cubicle exodus" in exchange for a more flexible, remote lifestyle. The trend had already begun before anyone mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic. Technology was advancing, communication platforms were popping up left and right, and the next generation of employees was stepping into their roles already groomed for a virtual workspace. The pandemic just served as the final push for many of us hanging onto our name tags and key fobs. There is no question; remote workforces are here to stay. But an important question remains—Are employers ready? As the world becomes more adept at hosting virtual meetings and managing employees via dashboards and portals, the workforce will continue to push the boundaries—literally and figuratively—and move toward a work-from-anywhere culture. Remote workers are looking beyond their home offices, kitchen tables and spare bedrooms to find that remote opportunities truly open a "world" of possibilities.

Who Are These Digital Nomads?

Employees are redefining what it means to work remotely. According to the 2020 *State of Independence in America Re-*

port, digital nomads make up almost 11 million people in the United States.¹ Within that group, traditional workers who now identify as being "location independent" nearly doubled from 3.2 million in 2019 to 6.3 million in 2020.² Over the next two or three years, that number is expected to rise,

AT A GLANCE

- Employees are demanding more flexible working arrangements, with remote work being redefined to include working from anywhere in the world. Many employers are left to figure out how to manage this growing trend to attract and retain talent.
- Employee health benefit requirements for the globally mobile are different than for a U.S.-centric workforce. Relying on a domestic health plan can create financial and health care benefit-related issues, as well as undue stress and burden for employees and employers since domestic policies do not translate seamlessly abroad.
- Employers should consider the flexibility of their carrier's plans and seek out carriers that can support globally mobile populations with benefits that are designed for international travel and work outside the U.S. and plans that can be provided as either employer-sponsored or voluntary benefits.

signaling a growing trend. And, one in four (24%) U.S. digital nomads said they plan to travel internationally over the next year.³ But who exactly are these digital nomads? The answer isn't as cut and dried as employers may hope.

Remote workers are a unique breed compared with both a traditional workforce and each other. Some nomads have worked remotely for years, building their careers around a lifestyle that lets them travel the world without missing a single Monday morning meeting. Others look for short-term opportunities known as “work-cations.” However, both groups are seizing the opportunity to control how nomadic they want to be. While some find a single country to build a base in, others remain on the move—chasing new adventures every chance they get.

As a cohort, Gen Xers (age 41 to 56) are more likely than any other generational group to seek out job opportunities that have flexible schedules and enable them to work remotely.⁴ Millennials (age 25-40) also remain a key demographic since 42% of digital nomads are in the Millennial cohort.⁵

How Do Employers Respond?

Employers are faced with the difficult task of attracting, supporting and maintaining a remote workforce and developing capabilities to keep them engaged. They are also left to figure out what the work-from-anywhere trend means for their existing remote work policies, specifically the role employers should play in helping employees care for and maintain their health when they independently decide to work re-

TABLE I

Key Considerations for Employers

<p>Do you have highly skilled workers in technical and creative roles?</p>	<p>It's no surprise that digitally savvy workers with job functions such as IT, web design, digital marketing, creative design and engineering are most likely to seek location-independent status. Companies with a high concentration of technical work teams may be experiencing a surge in employees going global.</p>
<p>What type of international travel policy do you have?</p>	<p>Travel accident and travel medical policies are different, with travel medical policies providing primary medical coverage (including medically necessary evacuations) when outside the employee's home country. Both may only cover employees who are officially traveling on company business, not those who desire to be location independent.</p>
<p>If you have an international travel medical policy, does it cover leisure or vacation travel?</p>	<p>International travel medical policies may not cover leisure or vacation travel, which is how employers tend to view independent global mobility. Employees who independently decide to live and work outside their home country may assume they are covered but end up paying for their own medical expenses, including medically necessary evacuations if their condition calls for it.</p>

motely outside the U.S.—as a benefits sponsor or as an advisor to employees to choose international health coverage on their own.

The health benefit requirements for an international workforce vary greatly from those of a U.S.-centric workforce. Employees who are not offered international policies are forced to use their domestic plans overseas, which can create financial and health care benefit-related issues since domestic policies

do not translate seamlessly abroad. Benefit needs also vary depending on the length of time that employees plan to work away from the office. Those differences require employers to understand their options when proposing and negotiating benefits to current and future employees.

Following are some considerations about U.S. health plans and the potential pitfalls of applying a U.S. health plan for use internationally.

- If companies do not have proper international health coverage in place, employees could be left to rely on their U.S. health plans if they get sick or injured while outside the U.S. Health care systems vary by country and, in many countries, the government pays for health care. U.S. health care plans that include employee cost share—deductibles, copays and coinsurance—make it difficult for international providers to collect payment. As a result, employees may end up paying hundreds or thousands of dollars in health care costs that might not be reimbursed. Worse, they may be denied care until payment is rendered.
- U.S. health plan benefits are rooted in networks with negotiated rates

between the carrier and provider that are beneficial to the employee. Employees typically pay more out of pocket for out-of-network claims and, in some instances, out-of-network claims are not covered at all. A U.S. health plan policy may default international health-care claims to an out-of-network status, driving employees to pay more out of pocket, which may lead to the employee becoming dissatisfied with their benefits.

- Most U.S. health plans do not cover important services that are a must for international travel, such as medically necessary evacuation and repatriation. If an employee has a health event that requires a medically necessary evacuation and does not have adequate inter-

national travel medical coverage, this can result in undue financial and emotional burden for employees and possibly the employer (if the employer is self-insured and bears the health claims risk for their employees).

A Range of Solutions for Employers to Consider

Employers should consider their employees’ health insurance needs, even if they don’t plan to provide employer-sponsored health insurance. There are opportunities to steer employees in the direction of individual international policies that can provide the proper protection and mitigate the stress and financial burden of dealing with an unexpected health event in an unfamiliar health care system.

TABLE II

How International Health Care Plans May Benefit Globally Mobile Employees

Without an International Health Care Solution	Recommended Capabilities of an International Solution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk burden falls to the employer or domestic health plan. • Domestic telemedicine services may not extend globally. • Medically necessary evacuations are typically not covered, resulting in thousands of dollars that may not be reimbursed. • Plans risk noncompliance in countries with specific health insurance regulations. • Employees pay up-front for care that may not be reimbursed. • Domestic medical plans operate during U.S. business hours, which can result in delays in validating benefits and authorizing care. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The plan assumes 100% of the risk for claims. • Global telemedicine services are available, allowing worldwide access to doctors by mobile phone or video. • Medically necessary evacuation coverage is a benefit option. • All provided coverage satisfies visa requirements. • The carrier arranges for direct payment with providers, reducing the burden of out-of-pocket costs to employees. • Multilingual support is available 24/7/365 from an integrated customer service and medical assistance team.

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Consider these examples from two employers that, as of this writing, are currently building policies to empower worldwide location flexibility and support their employees' work-from-anywhere wishes:

- A large, well-known retailer is testing the waters before possibly embarking on a more permanent work-from-anywhere policy and employer-sponsored benefits that support worldwide location flexibility. This retailer allowed 2,000 of its employees to work from anywhere in the world during the month of July. The retailer plans to educate employees on the importance of travel medical insurance and promote travel medical policies for individuals/families as part of its education campaign.
- A global hospitality company recognized that its U.S. health plan did not sufficiently cover employees who wanted to independently travel and work internationally. As such, the company is offering a discount for U.S. employees who want to purchase an individual travel medical policy to help cover the gaps and limitations. For example, international health claims would be considered an out-of-network expense on the employer's U.S. health plan that may or may not be covered. Employees who opt to purchase a well-designed international travel medical plan have peace of mind knowing that they have coverage for medical services outside the U.S. without having to worry about any potential constraints brought on by a U.S. benefit plan design.

When looking for benefit solutions, employers should consider the flexibility of their carrier's plans and seek out carriers that are ready and willing to support a workforce that will undoubtedly continue to explore their options outside of the office and the U.S. This is judicious even if the employer is not ready or in the position to provide an employer-sponsored solution.


Employers that are ready to add international health coverage to their employee benefits in support of a work-from-anywhere culture should consider an international travel medical policy that covers employees for any type of international travel or add coverage for leisure travel in addition to a short-term business travel medical policy as a possible solution. Even if employers choose not to spon-

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sor health insurance for these digital nomads, providing educational opportunities on the potential risks as well as information on individual travel medical policies from a carrier experienced in covering members abroad will help employees protect themselves.

Global telemedicine services are another key benefit worth considering for international travel. Just like the telemedicine services inside the U.S., global telemedicine services provide users with the ability to virtually connect with a doctor. It's often the first line of defense for nonemergent, acute medical events such as a sore throat, the flu, a skin rash or even early COVID symptoms. With global telemedicine services, users can access doctors from their location wherever they are in the world. Users don't need to worry about having to search for and travel to a local doctor in an unfamiliar locale. Instead, doctors are available virtually to speak or video chat with anywhere. 

Endnotes

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