

GFMD Webinar on the impact of COVID-19 on migrants, migration and development 18 & 20 April 2020

Memo from the Business Advisory Group on migration, delivered by
Austin Fragomen, Chair Business Advisory Group on Migration
Menno Bart, Public Affairs Manager, The Adecco Group

IMPACT on Business and economies:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has devastating consequences on economies across the world; businesses are in survival mode: while some companies diversify their production lines, others have shut down operations in a manner that keeps the financial and operational heart of the organization beating and ready for rapid restoration of the economy.
- Governments have taken a range of restriction measures to contain the pandemic, including travel restrictions, closing of borders, quarantines, closing of visa application centers. The typical legal and regulatory requirements that govern legal pathways often conflict with the nature of the limitations taken by governments.
- Companies struggle with a range of challenges linked to place of employment, layoffs, leave entitlements, partial unemployment, extending visas and work permits for international / temporary workers, taxation and permanent establishment issues for expats who have returned home during this crisis but continue to "work" virtually in the host country.

SOLUTIONS:

1. **Immediate response:** short term, emergency reactions to keep employees in legal status, to counter the drop in labour supply and to protect the migrant workers.
 - Legal pathways: Special arrangements are necessary to keep employees in legal status. These need to address issues such as extending legal status when the immigration office is closed/none responsive and departing is impossible; working from home which is a change of worksite; reducing compensation where all workers in similar positions take the same reduction; temporarily furloughing employees with the intention to resume employment; making exceptions for entry of essential workers in sectors which deeply rely on foreign workers, including healthcare, construction, oil&gas industry, agriculture.
 - Oppose bars on immigration - migrant workers are necessary across all skill levels.
 - Health and Safety measures as well as repatriation (where possible) are implemented for all employees on a company's payroll (local and migrants).
 - Reskilling: The recruitment companies reallocate workers where they are most needed.
 - Through technology: keeping track of immigration status of all legal migrants, identifying legal migrants entitled to governmental assistance, allowing migrants to contact the immigration authorities regarding status.

- Safe back to work environment: national and local authorities, as well as business associations and companies, establish a range of workplace rules and guidelines to ensure a safe working environment with staggered returns to offices/factories. Examples include:
 - The three leaders in the Human Resource industry (Adecco/Randstad/Manpower) have created the #SafelyBacktoWork alliance, which outlines good practices ensuring a safe return to work.
 - Toyota and FIAT guidelines

2. **Moving forward**: Living in a “with-Covid-19-world”.

- Skills gap: The COVID-19 will change the migration landscape drastically, but it will not close the skills gap that every region of the world is facing. An efficient infrastructure for cross border skills mobility remains crucial; even more so for the global economy to recover.
- Public narrative: Avoid conflation in the public mind of migrants or international trade and mobility being the cause of the pandemic. Collaboration is needed to ensure a New Social Contract, whereby social protection is ensured, including to migrant workers.
- Digitalization of the immigration process: The crisis has highlighted the limitations of non-digital immigration processes, which will need to be improved to facilitate the end to end (Immigration, Labour, Consulate) requirements, have the capacity to track and communicate with the registered/legal migrants in the country, distinct identification of migrants for use of public health officials.
- Return: the employers’ community in countries of origin is worried about the reintegration of the returning migrants. The drop of remittances will have long lasting impact on economies.

GAPS highlighted by the crisis:

- This crisis has shed light on a serious concern to businesses: informality. Where appropriate legal pathways should be created to allow employment of essential workers in occupations where there are chronic shortages of local workers.
- The contagious nature of Covid-19 creates a public health paradox: if migrant workers, undocumented or otherwise, are unable to seek medical help or social assistance when sick, they will continue working, putting the wider community's health at risk. Provisions in law are needed to ensure access to health care to all.

While companies strive to overcome this crisis and take necessary measures, the Business Advisory Group addresses three points for the Governments’ consideration:

- Necessary changes in immigration procedures will be needed to assure that skills gaps can be addressed including all skill levels.
- A balanced approach between public well-being and economic relaunch must be adopted.
- A call to counter informality: the main objectives should be to identify the root causes of the existence of the informal economy and the barriers to formalization and to put in place policies to assist informal entrepreneurs to more easily formalize.