

A BRAVE NEW WORLD

By Matthew Bradford

Technology isn't just changing the relocation game, it's rewriting the rules entirely

From self-serve mobile apps to data-driven APIs, self-driving trucks and virtual relocation assistants, moving employees to and from their assignment destination has come a long way since the relocation industry first began. It's a brave new world out there, and keeping up with the fast pace these days is just par for the course.

"Technology in general has evolved incredibly over the last couple decades, and yes, that's especially true in relocation where it's a vastly different industry than when I started about 20 years ago," says Ellen McMahon, senior vice president of information technology with Cartus. "It's an exciting time to be in IT, if not a bit overwhelming because the change of pace is so fast today."

The industry has certainly come a long way from its landline, its Rolodex and its carbon copy contract roots. Now the tools of the relocation trade range from smart vehicles and GPS-enabled trucks to predictive software and video conferencing.

Like everything in mobility, this evolution has been driven by employee trends. Specifically, the growing popularity of mobile devices has rewired assignee expectations, creating on-demand 24/7 service wherever, whenever, and on any device with an Internet connection. "Many of the apps and self-serve models we're seeing today have been driven primarily by the new devices we not only work with, but use constantly in our daily lives. Today, corporate clients want the ability to communicate with relocating employees in the way those employees prefer, and that means making services available through a variety of modes and devices," says McMahon.

Not every transferee prefers the complete digital experience, however. Here again, technology is bridging the gap for those that prefer a human touch to manage more complex or personal aspects of a relocation. "What we've seen is a growing need to provide relocating employees with the option to video conference or instant message with their relocation provider, or have access to a live service provider representative over their mobile device at any hour of the day," offers McMahon. "There are now all these different ways to communicate, and it all comes down to who the

person is and what they're comfortable using. That flexibility is huge, and it's one of the biggest changes that relocation companies have had to adapt to by broadening their offerings."

VIRTUAL ASSISTANCE

One of the more promising technologies to come out of the artificial intelligence renaissance is the "virtual assistant," a product of mobile technologies and machine learning that can recognize natural speech and leverage online data to provide users with advice, answers, and even a joke or two on the fly.

Already, virtual assistants such as Apple's Siri and Google's Alexa have become household names, going so far as to be installed in households as a physical device that can perform everything from home monitoring to temperature control and instant shopping via voice commands. Given their popularity and utility among consumers, it's only a matter of time before virtual relocation assistants become a standard offering for relocating employees.

"Imagine having an AI (artificial intelligence) assistant with a natural language processing engine as part of its search engine that could give you an answer to any question you had about your relocation, and then also be able to analyze the context of your question to make sure it's being interpreted correctly and to make sure you're also getting the best possible answer," notes McMahon. "Even better, a virtual assistant in relocation could be designed to do the bulk of the work for you, whether it's submitting your expense report or filing the appropriate paperwork. I absolutely see the virtual customer assistant as something that clients will expect for their transferring employees down the road."

With the advance of artificial intelligence and machine learning comes new ways in which employee data can be collected and assessed to create a more successful relocation and save money for employers. Known as predictive and prescriptive analytics (aka data analytics), there is a growing body of tools that can be used to dig through the customer statistics and industry numbers to find out more about what customers want, and the most efficient, cost-effective ways to meet their needs.

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The good news is that relocation stakeholders already have years of data to work with. Moving forward, says McMahon, the next step will be to put that data to work on behalf of clients: “Relocations are quite expensive today, especially if you’re doing assignments overseas. Clients are looking for tools to help them ensure their money is being spent wisely, and that’s where using data analytics can be crucial in predicting ways that will save them money, what kind of assignments have the highest return on investment, and which employees will have the highest probability of success.” (For more on data analytics, turn to pg. 40.)

SHARED ECONOMY

With a move to self-serve models also comes a rise in “shared economy” services. These are companies like Uber and Airbnb that give users the digital tools to connect with other users and “share” transportation, accommodations, or even pet-sitting venues with one another. In so doing, these services bypass traditional cab companies, movers, hotel chains and other traditional service providers.

It’s not hard to see how the shared economy can shake up the relocation industry. By giving relocating employees the authority to find their own ride and place to stay, the very nature of relocation services is likely to look very different in the future. “Language training, for example, is going through an evolution right now with the creation of virtual marketplaces that bring together language trainers and relocating employees,” says McMahon. “These marketplaces match trainers and materials to relocating employees, allowing the employees to select their trainers and then rate them.”

If the choice of technology has your head spinning, just wait. Artificial intelligence programs, virtual technologies and mobile devices continue to evolve at break-neck speeds, and entire sectors are committed to introducing the next big “disruptor.”

In the near future, that “disruptor” may very well be virtual reality applications that allow relocating employees to take virtual tours of their assignment destination or walk through the halls of their future home on the other side of the world. It may also be self-driving vehicles that negate the need to arrange transportation, or fleets of self-driving trucks that aren’t beholden to typical regulations and working hours.

“Driverless trucks seem more and more likely every day, and when they finally do hit the road they’re going to dramatically change the world of household goods shipping,” predicts McMahon. “It’s not only getting harder to find people to drive trucks, but there are all these government regulations on how long drivers can work due to safety. If you can take that human factor out of the equation, you can definitely shorten the delivery time and make the whole process much more consistent.”

Today’s technology can indeed be overwhelming. But relocation professionals can take solace in the fact that virtually all industries are being challenged to keep pace and stay ahead in their respective markets. As for the business of moving people, McMahon says, “We’re used to adapting and we have a history of working with new tools and trends; it’s part of what we do. Moving forward, we’re all going to have innovation departments, and we’re all going to need to align ourselves with people that are skilled in using those technologies in new and unique ways. So that means a lot of experimenting, prototyping, and developing new software.”

Sure enough, technological innovation will be critical for relocation providers in the days and years ahead. In the words of McMahon: “You need to be acquiring new skills, retraining the people you have, and constantly staying on top of what’s out there.” ■