



2024 ATLAS® FORUM RECAPS

GENERAL SESSIONS

CALL TO ORDER & WELCOME WITH JACK GRIFFIN

Jack Griffin, Chairman & CEO of Atlas® World Group, opened the 55th Atlas Forum on Moving to welcome attending corporate relocation professionals and introduce the 2024 theme “Imagine.” While 2023 was not a booming year for the industry due to higher interest rates, lingering fallout from the pandemic, and other challenges, it offers an opportunity to imagine the future of the industry.

Jack provided an overview of Atlas’ [57th Annual Corporate Relocation Survey](#), the industry’s first and longest-running investigation into corporate relocation policies and practices, which helps us understand today’s challenges and how corporate relocation professionals can answer them. This year’s survey found that relocation volumes and budgets continued to increase in 2023, with most companies anticipating further increases in 2024. At the same time, 64% of companies reported that an employee declined relocation in 2023.

These insights, combined with rapid changes to technology, the real estate market, and customer expectations, will be key for the industry to focus on new technology, artificial intelligence (AI), and an enhanced customer experience that offers the best possible service. While 2023 brought major shifts to the relocation industry, now is the time to imagine a better future. And Atlas believes the best is yet to come.

CRYSTAL WASHINGTON

In a dynamic introduction, Crystal Washington took the stage as the first keynote speaker at Atlas Forum. Washington is a technology strategist and certified futurist who specializes in making complex social media, app, and web topics accessible and easy to understand for everyday people. She asked the audience how often they stopped to consider their work’s impact on the United States and globally. Washington reminded them that, as relocation industry professionals, their work keeps the world running – the unsung heroes of global transportation.

Being a leader is critical at this time of intense and rapid change. Washington illustrated how business cycles have shrunk from 75 years to less than seven, and when change happens this fast, no one can

wait to be told what to do next. To adapt, businesses must secure their futures and steer their industries: the unsung heroes must put on their own capes in order to futureproof.

Washington demonstrated that human brains have not caught up to the rate of constant change today. Accelerating change this quickly goes against human nature, which Washington illustrated in an interactive portion, which found that many in attendance needed to brush up on their wilderness survival skills. Despite all the potential negative connotations, a period of advanced change is also called a renaissance. This presents an opportunity for leaders to make their voices heard because people are capable of changing, even if it occurs slowly.

There is no one big trend that will miraculously futureproof the relocation industry – or any industry. Instead, Washington encouraged the audience to embrace a culture of curiosity by locating the “Easter eggs” of the future, scanning the horizon for trends, actively planning by working through different potential scenarios, and taking action against unwanted scenarios today.

In her parting words, Washington incorporated the Atlas Forum theme of “Imagine”: “Remember, as leaders in relocation, you are living in a time of change and renaissance when you can set and direct trends.” Adopt a culture of curiosity and imagine the possibilities.

JOSH SUNDQUIST

Before Atlas Van Lines President and COO Ryan McConnell introduced the afternoon keynote speaker, he encouraged optimism for the relocation industry. He had recently heard the motto “Survive until ‘25,” but McConnell encouraged the audience to find optimism in the cyclical market because there is a bright future ahead. It was the perfect introduction for Josh Sundquist, a motivational speaker, Paralympian, comedian, and bestselling author.

Sundquist’s engaging session on perseverance began with the story of his first ski race. The audience journeyed with him from excitement at the beginning of the race to disappointment when he fell, through his commitment to getting back up as many times as it took to finish the race and accomplishment when he finally reached the bottom of the slope. Only 20% of his race result was based on his speed; the other 80% was based on how fast he got back up.

As Sundquist shared his story – from losing his leg to cancer in childhood to becoming a Paralympian and later, a father – he reiterated his message of perseverance. Uncertainty means you may not know where you are going next, but you should take the next shaky step forward anyway. His mantra is 1MT1MT: “One more thing, one more time.” Everyone has their own 1MT1MT. It may be next Monday, next month, or next year, but you never know which thing will make the marginal difference. It is not about working harder, it is about working on harder things – the things you do not want to do and want to procrastinate on. That is how you differentiate yourself and, in a callback to Crystal Washington’s opening keynote, make yourself AI-proof, future-proof, and valuable in your role.

His parting story followed his first baseball game when he was cleared for physical activity following his amputation. In life, he shared, there are not typically three strikes and you are out. You take as many strikes as you can, and you are only out when you say so. You just have to keep swinging.

SUGAR RAY LEONARD

POWER is an acronym – at least it is for Sugar Ray Leonard. Legendary sports icon, Olympic champion, and Hall of Famer, Sugar Ray Leonard spoke to the audience at Forum about putting in the work to become the best at what you do. For Leonard, that work is POWER: Prepare, Overcome, Win Every Round.

On a journey through some of his most iconic fights, Leonard shared his dreams (“the GPS to success”) that gave him the determination to fully develop his talent. “The successful do what they must in order to be the best,” he said, using a relatable office example of going in early or leaving late because your competitors are not making the same kinds of sacrifices. You have to put in the roadwork to know their weak points and your strong points, whether those are related to boxing or relocation management.

But first, you have to believe in yourself. Leonard said the saying is true: “If you don’t believe in yourself, no one else will.” That is what separates the winners from the losers. Sometimes, though, even with determination, the body has to catch up with the mind. Your dreams are there, but you have to put in the roadwork to build the strength, stamina, or resolve to meet them and go the distance. What happens when you face setbacks? Keep your composure and stay in control because setbacks will happen, and being able to get back up when you get knocked down is the sign of a champion.

A victory is more than winning a fight; it is accomplishing what you set out to do or giving it your best shot. A dream becoming a reality becomes a victory. You must always strive to attain it, but you have to have a plan – and a good team in your corner – to turn the dream into a reality.

LEARNING SESSIONS

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE: THE CSR PERSPECTIVE

Moderator

Jessica Nichols – Director National Accounts, Avail Resource Management

Panelists

Shari Kangail – Director of Customer Service, Nelson Westerberg

Wendy Gibson – National Account Relocation Specialist, Imlach Group

Tracie Buchholtz – Relocation Counselor, Palmer Moving Services

Brigitte Coble – Director of Service Delivery, Atlantic Relocation Systems

Managing a move from start to finish requires coordination and attention to detail. Managing a customer's first-time move also involves reassurance and patience. Esteemed customer service professionals from Atlas Agents across the country held two breakout sessions at Forum to give the customer service representative (CSR) perspective of a move. Attendees heard first-hand how these CSRs overcome the challenges of managing moves, dealing with unforeseen circumstances, and ensuring each customer receives the highest level of service.

Moderated by Director of National Accounts, Avail Resource Management, **Jessica Nichols**, the panelists walked through the moving process from the introductory call and scheduling dates to the final delivery and follow-up. The panelists emphasized the importance of finding common ground with the customer or transferee at the start of the process. The first call is more than going over policy; it is the beginning of a key relationship that will last for the duration of the client's move. First-time movers are nervous, and it is a CSR's job to build a personal rapport with the transferee so if they have any questions or concerns, they know their CSR is their advocate.

The common theme for the session was the importance of flexibility and setting transferees' expectations. Customers want instant service and expect that moving a one-bedroom apartment should come with next-day delivery. If their items are being stored for three weeks, they expect to be able to have access to them. If they inadvisably drop a Bluetooth tracker in their belongings and it pings outside of their anticipated A-to-B route, they want to know why. A skilled CSR can assuage transferees' fears, update them regularly, and find solutions for tough requests. As the average size of moves continues to change, and transferees' expectations change as well, customer service representatives will be the bridge to ensure successful moves and happy transferees.

RELOCATION IN THE ERA OF HIGH REAL ESTATE PRICES + HIGH INTEREST RATES

Moderator

Dan Lammers – SVP, Operations, Ace Relocation Systems

Panelists

Rachel Guerin – Relocation Director, The Agency

Lisa Fontana – Senior Account Executive, Rocket Mortgage

Charles Ameno – Global Mobility Leader, Intuit

During this dynamic discussion, the experienced panelists opened the floor to discuss the challenges presented by today's competitive real estate environment as well as opportunities to support transferees as a result. The panelists recognized that many challenges with finding and affording a home in today's hyper-competitive real estate environment are specific to the market or location. For example, markets that were overheated during the pandemic are now trending downward, including Austin, Texas, and South Florida markets. In some markets, it has become more affordable to rent than to become a homeowner. Real estate will always be a good investment, but it depends on the cycle.

Further, some markets are also experiencing an insurance crisis related to natural disasters. In Florida, insurance companies are going bankrupt and cannot operate unless the state pays more money or property owners pay higher rates. Many hope that private insurance companies will come into the market. At the same time, property taxes are also increasing and becoming unaffordable for many places, including Florida and California.

Because of these challenges, real estate agents and relocation service providers must adapt to assist their clients. Depending on the culture and goals of each company, many professionals are adapting by leveraging creative finances, like kicking in commissions, giving lump sums to assist the transferee with their specific needs, and going above and beyond to make transferees happy. With inflation in the housing and wage markets, some companies are paying employees more to keep up with overall costs, not just real estate. While the country is not currently in a wage crisis, in many ways it feels like it is. It is important to educate the transferee throughout the relocation process and include the Head of Compensation in the conversation.

Relocation professionals and real estate agents are closely watching The National Association of Realtors (NAR) ruling as it continues to evolve, as well. Major national discussions are underway, with local laws, practices, and trends being implemented in the meantime. The real estate agent population may dwindle and there may be a race to the bottom on commissions, with discount brokerages capitalizing on this. The impact of the NAR ruling will be better understood in July when it gets approved, but now and in the future, it is important to educate home buyers, so they understand the landscape.

In addition to the real estate market, workforce trends are continuing to evolve. Many companies are approaching remote work as a cyclical trend, but it is not likely a trend that will disappear. There is a large population of remote workers that continues to impact relocations. Some companies that were remote-first are now requiring workers to return to the office and are paying for employees to move closer. While we are still a strong labor market, there are signs it may be slowing down, and many workers who are given an ultimatum to move closer to their jobs are leaving as a result.

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL!

Moderator

Sandy Beyer – Director, Global Talent Mobility, Salesforce

Panelists

Mirela Marin – Head of Global Mobility, Take2 Game Group

Betsy Ortolano – Manager, Global Mobility & Immigration, Polaris

Jonique Colbert – Manager, Relocation, Schlumberger

When it comes to a company's mobility program, there is one thing everyone can agree on: there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Programs depend on the needs of the transferee or the population they are moving to and how the mobility program is designed. Each model has its advantages and disadvantages, with unique aspects that work best for different organizations.

When companies have direct contracts with suppliers, RMCs have total control over the process and price, but it depends on the client or program in question. One of the key advantages is that the company is not just another number. The relationship can be built over time, and it is not just one move they are responsible for. The supplier has an invested interest in its success, and there is a direct line to the service provider if something happens after hours or urgently. On the other hand, if you have a direct relationship that goes south, there are challenges. Corporations do not always have the resources to vet multiple suppliers.

Advantages when RMCs are directed to use selected suppliers include added value and knowledge of the RMC individual. Companies that are growing or do not have an established program need the resources from RMCs and can build relationships with the movers on a client's behalf. RMCs have experience, direct knowledge, and flexibility that corporate clients may not always have. The top disadvantages include not always having a direct line of contact resulting in a delayed response or multiple layers to go through in the event of an escalation.

Giving transferees a lump sum works for some companies, but not for others. From an employee experience perspective, there are tiered approaches. There is also the option to provide a managed lump sum. Some people would rather control everything on their own, including the packing and moving process. At the same time, many do not realize the complexities of this process, and with a lump sum, may not have anyone to go to when they need help. There is also the possibility that transferees misuse funds, not recognizing the cost of the bigger ticket items. It is advised to give employees a list of what they should consider as well as a list of vetted vendors.

INDUSTRY EXPERT INSIGHTS

Speaker

Ryan Bowley, Executive Director, American Trucking Associations Moving & Storage Conference (ATA MSC)

In this session, Ryan Bowley shared expert insights into how the state of play in Washington, D.C. and ATA's policy and advocacy priorities will impact the transportation industry and relocation professionals.

Today, politics are dominated by an environment that brings together a narrow set of majorities in the House and Senate. Rapid partisanship means there is very little productivity, with only 40 bills having been signed into law since 2023. With Congress in knots, the Biden Administration is advancing key priorities ahead of the election, including funding projects from the CHIPS Act and Infrastructure Act,

implementing Inflation Reduction Act programs, using tools to fight corporate price gouging, and setting impactful environmental and labor rules, which directly impact the trucking industry.

ATA Advocacy is focused on moving business priorities such as fighting moving fraud, supporting broker registration, setting pro-mobility tax policy, and ensuring quality moves for military families. Recent industry wins include standardizing Department of Defense (DOD) Base Access policies and protecting repatriating Americans from identity theft. As an organization, ATA's priorities include protecting the independent contractor model; addressing the driver shortage; supporting national, achievable, and technology-neutral emissions standards; urging repeal of the federal excise tax on heavy-duty vehicles; and combatting lawsuit abuse through common-sense reforms.

With the upcoming 2024 election, ATA will continue to share how the outcome impacts the industry through agile advocacy during the "lame duck" session in November and December, focused on moving expense tax deduction and immigration reform.

Speaker

Tejas Shah, Partner, Barnes & Thornburg LLP

A Partner with Barnes & Thornburg LLP, Tejas Shah provided an update on U.S. immigration law in 2024 and what to expect in the months to come. He emphasized two key facts at the start of his presentation. First, there has been no significant immigration legislation in three decades. That legislative space has been filled with executive actions, leading to the second key fact: Since 2021, there have been more than 500 executive actions on immigration. Despite the high number, there are boundaries on what executive actions are able to accomplish, leading to the state of immigration law today.

Legal immigration has rebounded in the last two years from significant pandemic-caused dips. Traditional family-based immigration and border crossings from Ukraine have also increased, as has the wide use of parole authority programs for Venezuelans, Haitians, and Cubans. Immigration application fee schedules have recently changed. Asylum applications tended to be the least expensive applications to submit, accounting for a high volume. New asylum fees on certain types of legal immigration applications are balancing that volume but face legal challenges. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has adopted a greater use of technology by allowing for more applications to be filed online and leading to a reduction in application backlogs.

Shah also shared an update on immigration enforcement: The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has been conducting more audits, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) remains active, and the Immigrant and Employee Rights Section (IER) of the Department of Justice has been very active.

In this election year, border crossings will continue to dominate political discourse while legislation is unlikely to pass. Many employers are exploring options for sponsoring their employees instead of waiting for legislation, and while visa issuance has rebounded since the pandemic, some U.S. consulates

remain severely backlogged. Green card quotas also remain low, and there is just a 20-25% selection rate for H1B Visas. Pilots of domestic visa renewal programs for select consulates are in great demand and may impact employee relocations moving forward. Immigration uncertainty remains in 2024, but recent changes and those on the horizon may make an impact.

Speaker

Anupam Singhal, President & CEO, WERC

As recently appointed President & CEO of WERC (formerly known as Worldwide ERC), Anupam Singhal introduced himself to Forum attendees, sharing more about his background, the challenges and opportunities for the industry, and his goals and focus areas for WERC moving forward.

Singhal's background as a private equity professional and tech entrepreneur required him to move around the world as an expat and business traveler. He had many unpleasant experiences, including tax and immigration trouble, inspiring him to serve on the board of WERC in the hopes of improving the corporate mobility experience for others. Now as CEO, he plans to uphold WERC's mission by serving as the global authority and convening platform for organizations seeking to improve business outcomes through talent mobility.

He recognized that there is a lot of change and uncertainty right now in the industry. There are major forces at play all at once, including an evolving definition of mobility, unique interest rate environment, buyer/broker commission issues and the evolving impacts of the NAR settlement, evolution of technology and AI, and gridlock in Washington, D.C.

In his experience, these really intense moments of crises, with a number of factors colliding at once, become golden moments where opportunity exists to create long-lasting, sustainable business models across industries. Having lived through the ".com boom," financial crisis, and pandemic, every time one of these crises happens, the biggest, most successful companies emerge. Now is the time to look wide, far, and deep to find where you can catapult your business to another level. This is what excites him about working with the talented individuals in the global mobility industry.

Moving forward, WERC is helping the industry collaborate better than it has in the past through community, business, and professional development. Its advocacy focus areas include the H1B visa revalidation program and Canadian law prohibiting real estate purchases by foreigners. His goal is to drive innovation in education, networking, and advocacy for global mobility professionals so they can understand what is happening and its impact on their roles and the industry.