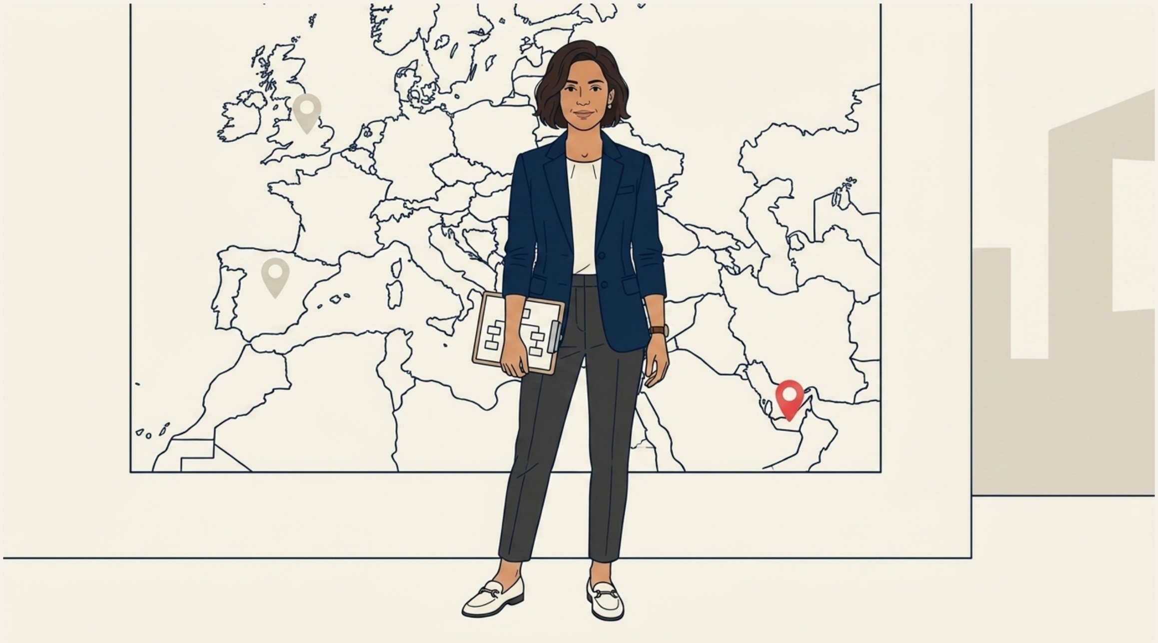
PLAYBOOK · TRAVEL AGENCY OPERATING

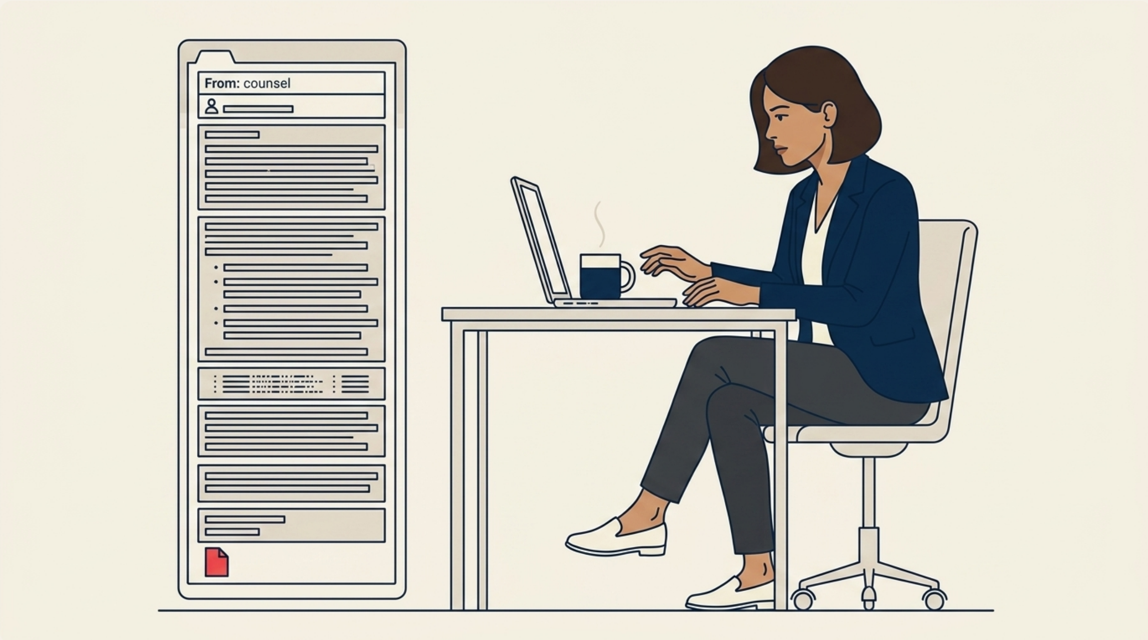
Multi-Country HR for Travel Agencies Operating in 3+ Countries



Maya's agency opened its first non-home-country office in the UK in 2024, then Spain six months later, then the UAE the following year. By month four of operating across three jurisdictions, she'd already had one termination go sideways and was carrying a quiet anxiety about which country's labor law she didn't know enough about yet.

This is the playbook her HR function runs on now: which functions stay centralized, which ones go local, and the specific rolodex she keeps for the moments when the answer needs a lawyer.

The Termination That Went Sideways

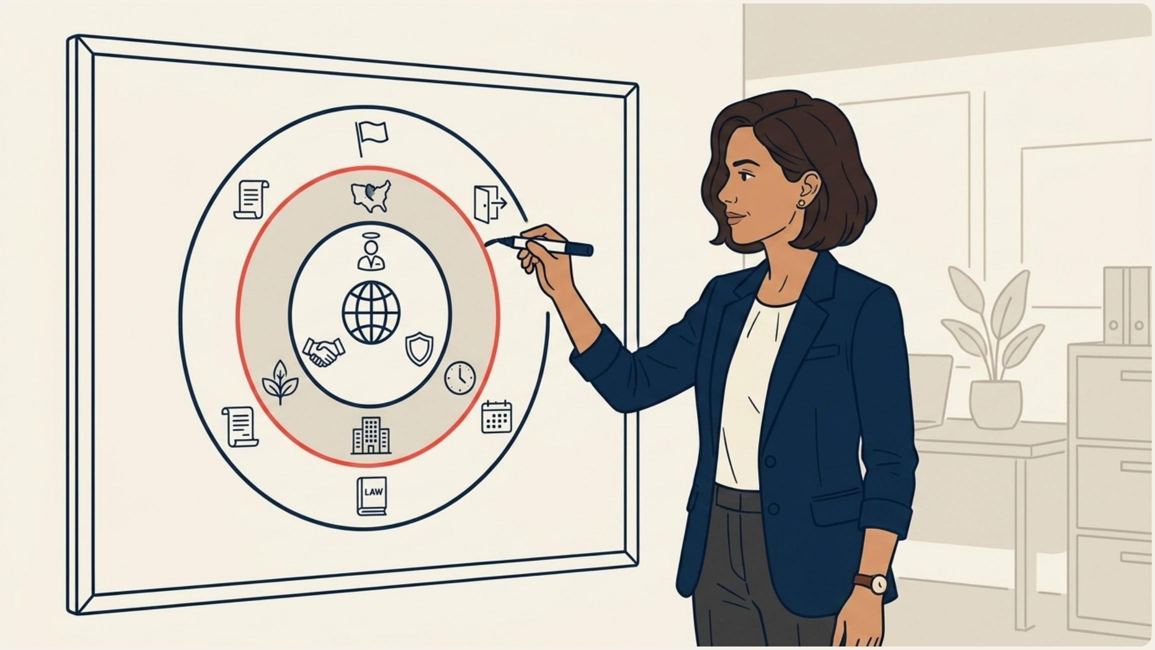


Six months after opening the UK office, an underperforming agent's termination went forward on what she thought was a clean process. Documented performance issues, two formal warnings, a termination letter, severance offered.

A month later the agency was facing a wrongful dismissal claim. The UK process required specific consultation steps that Maya's home-country playbook hadn't covered. The settlement cost more than a year of the agent's salary. The lesson was concrete: each country's HR isn't a localized version of the home country. It's its own legal system that punishes assumptions.

After that, Maya stopped pretending the home country playbook was a universal default.

What "Global HR" Actually Splits Into



The structure that ended up working has three concentric layers.

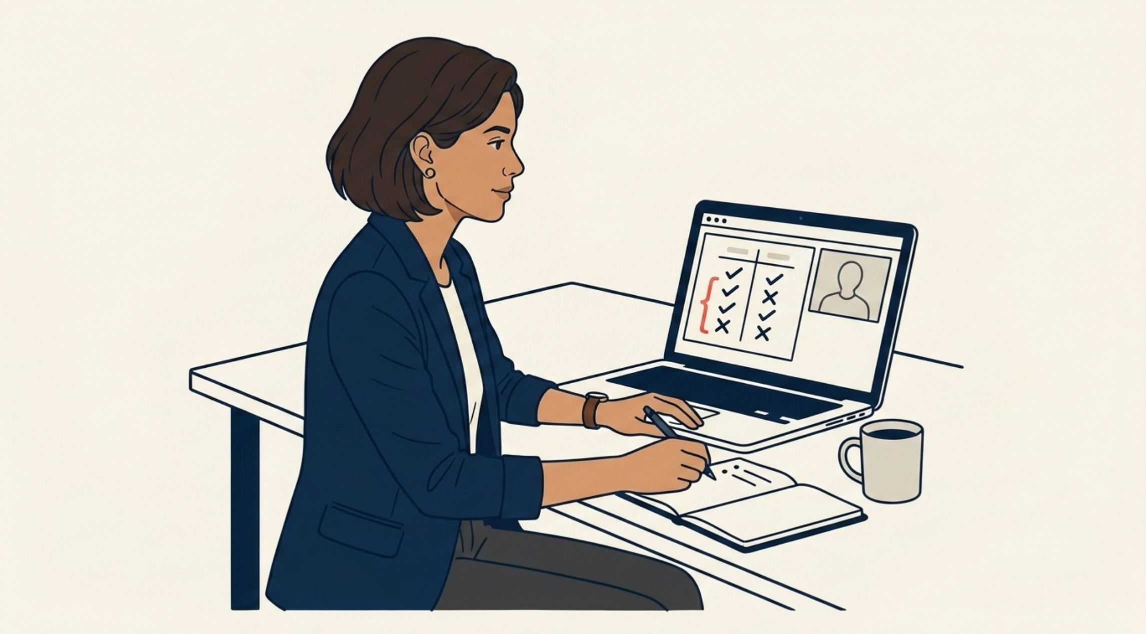
Centralized: anything that needs to be the same everywhere. Compensation philosophy. Performance review cadence. Promotion bands. Code of conduct. Brand voice in HR communications. These get set at HQ and replicated.

Regional: anything that varies by region but doesn't vary by country within a region. Benefits frameworks for Europe vs. Middle East. Office-policy norms (hybrid, in-office, remote-eligible roles). Annual leave bands. These get set per region with local input.

Local: anything that's actually country-specific. Employment contracts. Termination procedures. Statutory benefits and pensions. Compliance reporting. Tax registration. These need a local expert who lives in the jurisdiction.

The mistake most agencies make is treating everything as either centralized or local. The middle ring is where most of the operational HR work actually lives.

The PEO Question



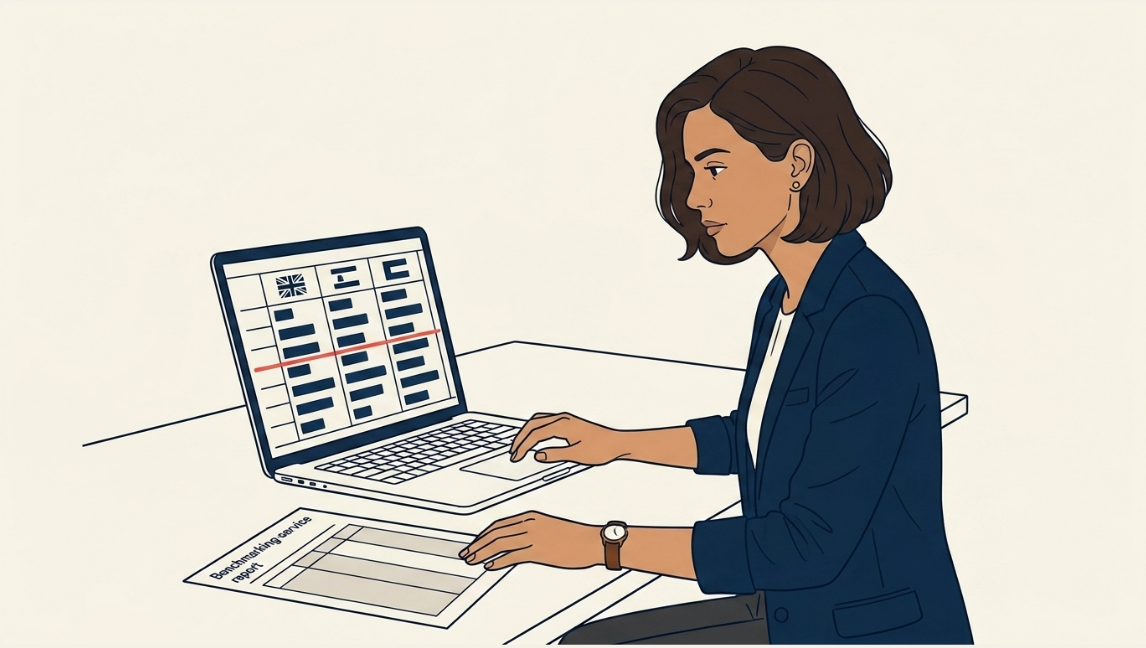
A Professional Employer Organization handles the legal employment of your in-country staff while you direct their work. You pay the PEO; they pay the staff under their own legal entity in the country.

The PEO question comes up early. The pitch sounds good, no setting up local entities, no local payroll, faster country expansion. The reality is more nuanced.

PEOs make sense for the first 1-3 hires in a new country, where setting up your own entity isn't justified by the headcount. They stop making sense when you cross 5-10 in-country staff, because the per-employee fees compound past the cost of running your own entity. They stop making sense earlier than that if you need an entity for non-HR reasons (tax structure, supplier contracts, local licensing).

Maya's structure today: PEO in the UAE (where the agency has 4 staff and the entity setup is bureaucratically heavy). Own entities in the UK and Spain (where headcount is 18 and 14 respectively).

Pay Equity Across Markets



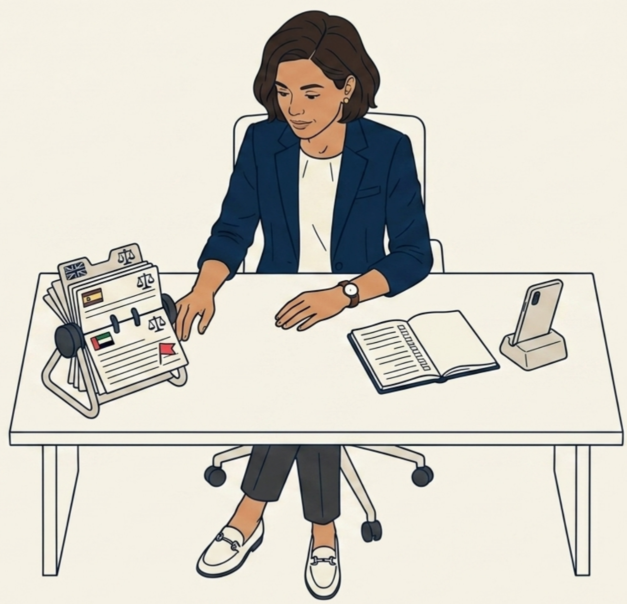
The pay-equity conversation across countries is where Maya's leadership team spent the most time, and where most agencies get it wrong.

The bad approach: pay everyone the same. This either bankrupts you (paying London salaries in Madrid) or makes you uncompetitive in expensive markets (paying Madrid salaries in London).

The defensible approach: pay each role at the same percentile of its local market. A senior agent in London is at the 70th percentile of London salaries; a senior agent in Madrid is at the 70th percentile of Madrid salaries. The numbers are different; the relative position is identical. This requires real local benchmarks (Maya pays for a benchmarking service in each market) and an annual review against them.

The conversation with staff is a different one. Some staff move between countries and notice the headline difference. The honest answer is that the agency pays each location competitively for that location, not that staff are valued differently. Most people accept this when it's said openly.

The Legal-Counsel Rolodex

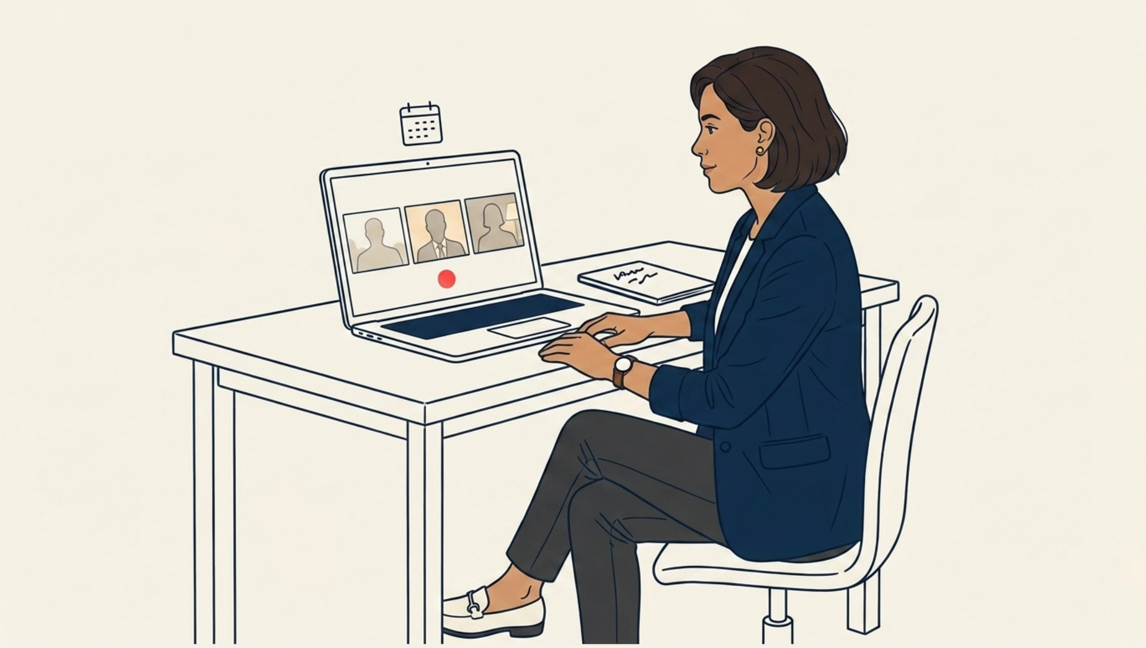


The single best investment Maya made after the UK termination issue was a per-country employment-law counsel on retainer. Not a global firm. A local boutique in each country who answers calls within a business day.

Each country gets a $X,000-per-year retainer that covers a defined number of consultation hours. Beyond the retainer, hourly rates apply. The retainer's purpose isn't to pay for everything; it's to ensure the lawyer answers the phone when you call.

The counsel handles three things. They review every employment contract before it's signed. They walk the HR lead through any termination before the conversation happens. They handle any disputed claim that arises. The cost is meaningful. The cost of not having them is much bigger when you discover it after the fact.

The Cultural Calibration Problem



Performance reviews are where cultural assumptions silently break the system.

In Maya's home country, candid direct feedback is normal in a review. In the UK office, the same delivery reads as harsh; in Spain, it reads as inappropriate; in the UAE, it can read as a loss of face for the manager. The same review template, applied identically, produces three different employee experiences.

The fix isn't writing three different templates. It's training each country's manager to deliver the same evaluation in a culturally appropriate register, with the same calibrated outcome. Maya invested in a one-day-a-quarter manager-training session run by a cross-cultural HR consultant for the first two years. By year three the managers were calibrating without external help.

The signal it's working: roughly equal performance distributions across all three offices and similar attrition rates. Year one had wildly different distributions; year three was within five percentage points across markets.

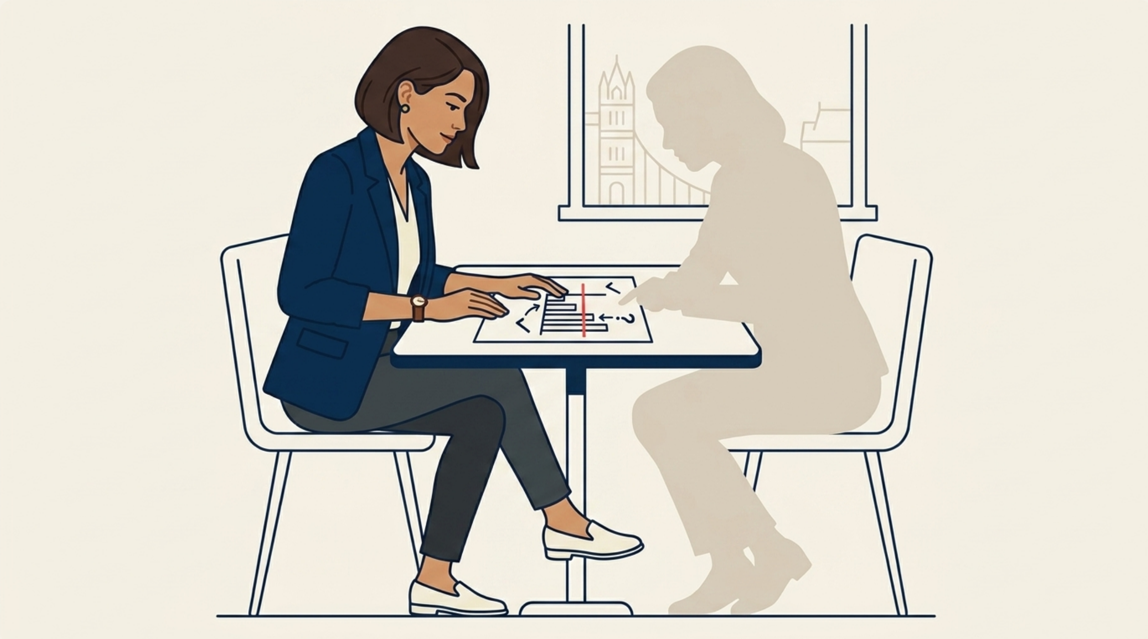
The Handbook Question

A single global handbook is a tempting solution that creates more problems than it solves. Some sections genuinely apply globally (code of conduct, anti-harassment policy, IP assignment). Others are country-specific (notice periods, statutory holidays, disciplinary procedures, parental leave entitlements).

The structure that worked was a global handbook for the global sections, with country-specific addenda that override the global rules where local law requires it. The country addenda are the responsibility of the local HR contact (or PEO) to maintain. They get reviewed annually as part of the legal-counsel retainer hours.

What you don't want is one document that tries to be all things to all jurisdictions. You end up with paragraphs hedged with "where applicable in your jurisdiction" that nobody actually reads or trusts.

When the HR Function Itself Goes Country-Specific



At some point, central HR can't carry the load. The trigger Maya used was: when any single country office passes 25 staff, that country gets a dedicated HR person who reports to the central HR head but lives in the local market.

The 25-headcount trigger isn't arbitrary. Below 25, the central HR lead can manage the relationship by visiting once a quarter and using PEO or local counsel for the day-to-day. Above 25, the local rhythm of HR work, performance issues, recruiting, onboarding, culture, needs someone present in the market.

Maya's agency now has a regional HR lead in the UK office (which serves the UK and an adjacent staff in Ireland). Spain and UAE are still served by the central HR lead with monthly travel and local counsel on retainer. The structure flexes as headcount grows; the principle holds.