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Segmenting international assignments: theorising expatriate reward

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Introduction

When designed and implemented effectively, international assignment reward policies support the acceptance of expatriation, employee satisfaction and motivation outcomes (Shortland and Perkins, 2016). But when poorly constructed, costs can increase and barriers to current and future mobility can be created (Air Inc., 2016). The role of theory is to help Human Resource (HR) and Global Mobility professionals predict how expatriate reward policy design can best support and deliver organisational goals in relation to international mobility. However, there is relatively little theory to guide effective design of expatriate rewards (Harvey and Moeller, 2009). As multinational companies (MNCs) increasingly segment their international assignment policy portfolio (Air Inc., 2016, 2017) unintended consequences can result in potentially detrimental assignee perceptions of inequity and organisational justice. These can lead to unwelcome return on investment outcomes such as assignment refusal, poor performance or early return.

This chapter begins by briefly examining the typical content of expatriate reward policy. Following on from this, it addresses the trend to segment international assignment policies to reflect different assignment types and provide flexibility to organisations, while simultaneously attempting to reduce costs and maximise expatriate return on investment. It then takes as its focus theoretical frameworks that can help expatriate reward professionals to predict outcomes of their policy design choices. In so doing, it first examines the role of equalising differences or compensating differentials theory (Rosen, 1986) as a basis to justify

differential treatment in expatriate reward within a segmented international assignment policy suite. Next, it reviews the impact of equity (and perceived inequity) (Adams, 1963) within a segmented policy approach on assignees' potential willingness to accept assignments and remain satisfied with - and motivated by - reward policy while on assignment.

Finally, the chapter draws upon the organisational justice literature to consider the reasonableness of procedures, the context surrounding these and the (unintended?) consequences of policy outcomes (Byrne and Cropanzano, 2001; Colquitt, Greenberg and Zapata-Phelan, 2005; Hansen, Byrne and Kiersch, 2013). 'Distributive' justice (Chory and Kingsley Westerman, 2009; Homans, 1961) is proposed as an appropriate theoretical framework to help predict assignees' evaluation of what they receive compared to others; 'procedural' justice is set out as a frame to assist policy implementers to determine how outcomes are allocated (Palaiologos, Papazekos and Panayotopoulou, 2011); and 'interactional' justice is presented to address how decisions are communicated and implemented (Brown, Bemmels and Barclay, 2010; Gilliland, Gross and Hogler, 2014).

Expatriate reward policy content and segmentation

Expatriate reward policy is most usually linked to home-based pay with additional elements included as allowances and benefits to ensure that expatriates are no worse off (and, theoretically, no better off) by undertaking an international assignment. Known as the 'balance sheet', this home-based pay approach creates equity between those individuals from the same sending home country (Perkins, White and Jones, 2016). The additions to basic salary paid to keep assignees 'whole' include housing and utilities, cost of living, and education allowances, their aim being to ensure that the assignee and family are not disadvantaged financially. In addition, compensatory payments to address issues such as disruption to family life include foreign service, mobility, relocation, disturbance, hardship and danger premiums, and spousal allowances. Rest and relaxation leave from designated

hardship/danger areas, home leave flights, transport costs to and from the host location, emergency assistance, medical insurance, pension continuity, temporary accommodation, household goods shipments, tax and visa advice/support and an array of other benefits are also typically included in the package (Kroeck and Von Glinow, 2016). While the aim is to ensure there is no financial detriment, the outcome is usually highly financially beneficial to assignees (Perkins and Shortland, 2006).

Cost control has become increasingly significant to organisations, and thus the use of the balance sheet is giving way to international assignment reward policy alternatives (Brookfield, 2016). These include approaches such as host-based pay (the assignees receive local terms and conditions in the host country) or host-plus arrangements (local terms but with some recognition of the additional costs faced by assignees). Under such arrangements, reward equity lies within the host country, with expatriates being treated similarly to local nationals (Perkins and Shortland, 2006). Globalist reward systems are also in evidence, although these are less commonly applied (Air Inc., 2017), whereby equity in relation to other individuals rests within the globally mobile assignee population (Perkins and Shortland, 2006).

To design and implement an expatriate reward policy requires taking into account that international assignments are not all the same. Thus, reward policies need to address differing situations but ensure cost effectiveness and equity as far as possible (Kroeck and Von Glinow, 2016). Indeed, according to current practitioner research, 17% of organisations segment their policy by business reason, 7% by employee level, and 4% by region/geography (Brookfield, 2016). Air Inc. (2017) reports that HR and Global Mobility professionals manage an average of 4.5 different international assignment policies in their organisations (4.9 in North America; 4.4 in Europe; and 3.0 in Asia Pacific). And the trend is for greater differentiation between policy types (for example, by length and/or purpose) as organisations

strive to contain expatriate costs and reduce assignment administration. Thus, while the majority of organisations operate long-term and short-term assignment policies, additional policy types are increasingly being developed and implemented. These include: commuter assignments, developmental/graduate assignments, globally mobile cadres, rotators, and volunteer assignments. In addition, policies are being designed specifically for locally hired non-nationals, business travellers and international one-way transfers (Air Inc., 2016, 2017). As these forms of international mobility become used more frequently, so the need for a segmented international assignment policy to address expatriate reward by assignment type becomes ever more desirable or necessary. To determine the appropriate reward elements and their emphasis in policy and practice therefore requires consideration of necessary differentials and justification of their emphasis for particular assignment types. This leads us to review relevant theory in this regard.

Equalising differences/compensating differentials

Rosen's (1986) theory of equalising differences or compensating differentials provides a relevant framework for analysis of both the content of expatriate reward policies and the differences in compensation and benefits applied to different purposes, lengths and patterns of international mobility. He argues that favourable employment and working conditions are attractive to workers and thus individuals are willing to undertake these jobs at wages lower than average. In contrast, jobs with unfavourable working conditions require the payment of differentials or premiums to provide additional compensation so as to be attractive to workers. Rosen (1986: 641) states that compensating differentials aim to equalise "the total monetary and nonmonetary advantages or disadvantages among work activities and among workers themselves". At first glance, the offer of expatriate employment appears an attractive proposition; particularly given the literature that highlights its role in providing career advantage (Dickmann and Baruch, 2011; Orser and Leck, 2010). The provision of additional

monetary and non-monetary rewards therefore seems unnecessary to support an expatriate workforce. Yet we know that unless the reward package is enhanced to be considered suitable by prospective expatriates, especially in regard to particular elements such as salary, housing, cost of living payments, and healthcare, the assignment is likely to be refused (Sims and Schraeder, 2005; Warneke and Schneider, 2011).

Rosen (1986) draws attention to a variety of factors which he proposes require compensating differentials. These include: working conditions that pose a risk to life and health, such as pollution exposure; differences in the weather/climate, crime and crowding; working hours and the scheduling of working time; and job insecurity. In addition, he suggests that jobs that might lead to potential failure linked to unpredictable outcomes from the work environment and/or alternative career choices will need to be addressed in terms of equalising differences. Work that requires investment in on- and/or off-the-job training also might lead to the requirement for compensating differentials. These factors all have a bearing on expatriate reward. For example, hardship or location premiums are designed to address geographical differences that present a challenge to employees living outside of their home countries (Perkins and Shortland, 2006). Expatriates are typically reported as working long hours with a high degree of encroachment of working time into their family lives, particularly as their roles can involve significant business travel and communications across time zones (Fischmayr and Kollinger, 2010; Shortland, 2015; Shortland and Cummins, 2007). While expatriation is considered to provide career growth, this is by no means certain and insecurity and uncertainty in regard to job opportunities on repatriation have been well-documented throughout the decades (Forster, 1992; Kroeck and Von Glinow, 2016; Tung, 1988).

Working in a different culture and language requires adjustment to overcome culture shock before full productivity can be achieved and even then there is no guarantee of assignment success. Although employers typically provide necessary training to address

cultural and language differences so that expatriates can manage effectively in the foreign environment, personal investment in time spent undertaking training programmes (such as culture and language training) is needed to reduce the risk of assignment failure (Perkins and Shortland, 2006).

Given these factors, it is typical to see the application of premiums, allowances and non-cash benefits to address the specifics that differentiate an organisationally-assigned expatriate worker from a home-country based employee. Expatriate reward policies do not, however, apply a one-size fits all approach in relation to the provision of compensating differentials. Different types of assignments are typically rewarded differentially, i.e. a suite of reward policies will contain specific components reflecting the nature of the differences between assignments (Perkins *et al.*, 2016). Thus, developmental assignments such as those designed for graduate trainees and trainee executives are expected to be less 'rich' in content as the 'reward' for the individual from undertaking them comes from the employer investment in their training and development (Perkins and Shortland, 2006). Commuter assignments can be relatively poorly supported in reward policy (often aligned to business travel rather than expatriate assignments); short-term assignments are typically less well-provisioned in policy compared to long-term assignments (Kroeck and Von Glinow, 2016; Perkins *et al.*, 2016). Yet although short-term, commuter and other types of 'flexpatriate' assignments, such as rotational working, all involve relatively limited periods of time abroad, they are usually unaccompanied and thus involve family separation, and are disruptive to the individual in terms of travel requirements (Shortland, 2015).

Long-term assignments (typically accompanied) are usually the best rewarded financially. The most common approach used to determining reward components is the home-based balance sheet under which a comprehensive range of allowances and fringe benefits are provided to the employee to equalise or compensate for various factors involved

in expatriation. The design of the balance sheet, underpinned by tax equalisation, aims to expedite mobility between and among high and low cost destinations (Perkins *et al.*, 2016).

Host-based pay may not achieve the same outcomes in relation to the facilitation of geographic mobility, but it is regarded as a less expensive method of expatriate reward and it does provide equity in the host country regardless of expatriates' home country origin. However, the use of this approach may serve to increase total remuneration for those expatriates moving from countries where lower salaries and benefits apply, or provide broadly equivalent remuneration for those moving from higher salary/benefit home countries. A pay supplement may be required if the assignee is asked to move from a high paying to a lower paying country under the host-based approach (Kroeck and Von Glinow, 2016).

Different approaches to expatriate reward with adjustments to pay made as necessary to achieve the desired end point might seem logical to employers, but to assignees undertaking expatriation, the rationale for different groups receiving different levels of compensation and benefits and/or additions or deductions to pay for working in similar environments with common challenges can seem inequitable. Thus, perceived inequities can flow from the use of home- or host-based or other pay systems, as well as from different approaches used to managing different lengths and patterns of mobility even if a single home- or host-based philosophy is held for all assignment types. As organisations increasingly apply segmented or tiered arrangements to provide appropriate compensation from an organisational viewpoint, this results in further differences in levels of support, benefits, premiums and so on linked to assignment purpose, pattern, length, etc. (Air Inc., 2017), suggesting that perceptions of equity/inequity require theoretical examination.

Equity theory

In determining the content of expatriate policies and especially in applying a segmented approach, employers need to consider assignee perceptions of inequity. Equity theory

(Adams, 1963) is therefore of particular value to employers in helping to regulate the outcomes of expatriate reward policy design and its implementation. Equity theory predicts that reward will only result in assignee satisfaction if it is considered to be equitable and fair. However, perceptions of equity are related to imperfectly correlated inputs and outcomes within the effort-reward exchange relationship.

Assignees invest their contribution to the exchange, bringing as inputs their skills, knowledge and behaviours to the expatriate position. Competencies, as inputs to the exchange relationship, may be recognised and valued in terms of their relevance differently by the individual and the employing organisation. If this is the case then this can lead to a source of perceived inequity. Outcomes, such as pay and benefits, provided to the assignee in exchange for their inputs may or may not be delivered and/or valued as expected, again potentially contributing to perceived inequity. Adams (1963) also indicates that individuals make comparisons between themselves and their colleagues in respect of inputs and outcomes in the exchange relationship. These too can lead to perceptions of inequity. For example, single expatriates may have no requirement for allowances that address children's education, spousal support or provide larger family-sized accommodation. If all (singles and accompanied) perform the same duties, then rewards that reflect family status may be viewed by solo assignees as privileging their colleagues with accompanying family members. Solo assignees may thus seek alternative, additional rewards to boost their package, such that its monetary equivalent equals that given to their accompanied assignee colleagues, thereby matching perceived equity in job inputs to a common level of monetary outcome commensurate with the expatriate role.

As employers increasingly segment international reward policy and introduce approaches that relate ever more closely to the host location's reward philosophy, typically in order to reduce costs, so the potential for an even greater variety of referents occurs. Policies

that specify different reward components for expatriates on host-based or host-plus arrangements, for volunteer assignees and for locally hired non-nationals, and differentiate these from those terms given to local national hires present a case in point: any variation from local terms applied to these different groups could suggest favourable treatment for some and less favourable for others. As Bonache (2006) suggests, with so many referents, there is inevitability of inequity and reward package dissatisfaction flowing from this perception.

The aim of theory is to predict and, as a consequence, we use it to determine the most appropriate course of action. In relation to international assignment reward policy design, we need to understand when and how assignees will perceive inequity in relation to a mix of inputs and outcomes. Clearly this is very difficult as each individual will have different values, referents and perceptions of inequity. Nonetheless, HR and Global Mobility professionals do need to consider how international assignment reward policy design can influence assignees' perceptions of fair treatment and set out to avoid negative effects as these can result in assignment refusal, poor performance or early return. In addition, they need to consider the influence of the compensation packages offered to expatriates in relation to the effect that these can have on local employees and, in turn, how locals will respond in terms of their working relationships with expatriates. This is particularly notable in newly emerging economies where expatriate compensation can significantly exceed that of locals. This can lead to negative attitudes by locals towards expatriates with consequent adverse effects on the support that they provide, such as willingness to share knowledge (Leung, Lin and Lu, 2017). How locals support expatriates is, of course, crucial for assignees' successful assignment outcomes (Kang and Shen, 2014). Explanation of compensating differentials is necessary to build trust, and demonstrate equity and fair management practices to local employees (Leung *et al.*, 2017).

Guzzo, Noonan and Elron (1994) point out that the application of assignment policy to expatriates is a sensitive matter. International mobility affects not only workers, but also their families. Hence, employee satisfaction and productive employment relationships may be jeopardised if assignees believe that they have not received appropriate policy application in return for their efforts (and family sacrifices) in undertaking expatriation (Bonache, 2006). Thus, besides the determination of policy content, HR and Global Mobility professionals also need to understand how assignees might evaluate what they receive, the effects of how assignment rewards are allocated, and how reward policy outcomes are communicated as all of these factors influence assignees' views of organisational justice.

Organisational justice

Organisational justice considerations help HR and Global Mobility professionals to consider the impact of the 'how' – rather than simply the 'what' – of designing and applying international assignment policies, in the context of employee segmentation decisions.

Applying organisational justice theory places attention on socio-economic interactions in determining expatriate assignment terms and conditions: how will an individual's socially informed reflections on the distribution of rewards, on the organisational processes leading to such distributions, and related inter-personal experiences, impact on perceived equity or inequity when comparing themselves with other employees? How can we gain a sense of how reasonable individuals consider expatriate reward management to be as an interactive experience in particular contexts? These conclusions may impact directly and/or indirectly on the degree to which expatriates choose to cooperate with MNC managerial intentions; a material consideration given the indeterminacy of the employment relationship (Marsden, 1999). Organisational justice theorists highlight three interconnected elements: distributional justice, procedural justice and interpersonal justice.

‘Distributive’ justice (Chory and Kingsley Westerman, 2009; Homans, 1961) is proposed as an appropriate theoretical framework to help predict assignees’ evaluation of what they receive compared to others. Gilliland *et al.* (2014) argue that this means three elements need to be satisfied. First, that individuals in an employment relationship secure their ‘fair share’ when being hired, developed, promoted, and rewarded. Referents are selected not by management but by the individual employees – so in the case of expatriates, attention needs to focus on the segment of the population an individual may choose to identify with. This does not mean offering that individual the same terms and conditions as their chosen comparator (whether a fellow international assignee or a local peer). It does require management to offer a credible rationale for their expatriation offer by reference to the context (e.g. the capabilities an individual brings matched to the organisation’s needs at the time and the outcomes from applying these capabilities matched to performance expectations and achievement levels by comparable others). Explanations drawing upon distributive justice can thus aid trust building between locals and expatriates (Leung *et al.*, 2017) and among expatriates. Second, and this may form part of the explanation for the reward distribution, Gilliland *et al.* (2014) argue that organisationally just outcomes enable an individual to feel valued as more than a collective mass ‘labourer’. Instead, individuals see themselves as recognised as having value to the organisation within the group to which they belong, thus satisfying a sense of being a repository of human capital invested in a particular organisational setting, and hence in turn, securing a commensurate return on that investment. Third, the authors point to a moral imperative: rather than being the butt of instrumental compliance, as social beings, individuals need to be treated with dignity and respect – reflected in a just distribution of reward among all ‘organisational citizens’. While this may encourage employees to behave reciprocally above and beyond the status of ‘hired hands’, the argument is that employees themselves may judge managerial actions towards them not

only narrowly in making a personal gain, but also by offering or withholding trust in management to ‘do the right thing’ more broadly (Cugueró-Escofet and Fortin, 2014).

The core notion of procedural justice (Palaiologos et al., 2011) refers to conditions within the organisation that ensure all members have a ‘voice’ and are enabled to exercise it, with scope to reflect within that exercising of their voice their own particular characteristics. This means that individuals are not merely regarded as indistinct atoms within a homogeneous group, rather their diversity and demographic status (including age, gender, disabilities, sexual orientation, ethnicity, etc.) are taken into account and, in the case of expatriation processes, being mindful that there are consequences more directly salient than in the course of regular employment. In addition, factors such as the individual’s family and wider social interconnections must be considered. Relatedly, organisational communications – how policies and their application are explained – and their timing become important in establishing the sense in which organisational management are treating justly those they employ and deploy. Within this conceptualisation, just procedures tend to reference consistency of treatment, ability/willingness to rectify mistakes, absence of bias, and a sense that the manager acted in the only way they reasonably could in the circumstances (Cugueró-Escofet and Fortin, 2014).

Interpersonal justice considerations reflect on the ways an organisational member is treated as they interact with formal organisational agents who control decision making processes when policies are being implemented, such as determining expatriation terms and conditions. Here one may engage with aspects of the employment relationship that go beyond the purely contractual, involving social exchange, which in turn give rise to perceptions of the extent to which the parties are acting in good faith (Wang, Liao, Xia and Chang, 2010). In particular consideration is required when arriving at managerial judgments about how an employee has performed relative to others, and the possible recognition of that performance.

As Brown *et al.* (2010) point out in this context, a policy and related procedures may be – and be viewed as – just; but if the actions of those interpreting the policy in action are inappropriate, then the risk for the organisation is that the target of the policy application may regard the outcome as unjust. For example, remarks made by a manager when dealing with an expatriate that might appear to overlook or denigrate the circumstances of the performance they are required to give, or the explanation they give is sensed as falling short of a full appreciation of the individual's circumstances when called on to perform in culturally and institutionally unfamiliar settings.

Finally, in considering questions around organisational justice as this applies to expatriation management within MNCs, policy makers and implementation decision makers face potential risks when considering the social interaction between expatriates and locally employed members of the organisation. Here again, attention is necessary to understand the implications of the context for those interactions and the consequences flowing in terms of organisational commitment in the sense of supporting enactment of managerial priorities and in respect of intention to quit the firm. Space considerations prohibit a detailed discussion of this matter but, if it is assumed that local capabilities are valuable to an employer, perhaps specific knowledge of local market conditions will be needed (for example, working alongside and/or under the direction of assignees from the MNC's parent organisation). Managers would be wise to be informed by organisational justice theory to reflect on the effects of any degree of starkness in compensating differentials between expatriate and local workforce members. Corporate managements may be well advised to think carefully through the ways in which local employees interpret and act on their perceptions of the justice between the comparative distribution of rewards. Will they regard scope for apparently enhanced lifestyles on the part of expatriates and their families as justified in terms of the capacity to enhance the operation to which they belong with consequential positive

implications for their own ongoing employment and scope to be recognised? In what ways can procedures for determining reward outcomes between expatriates and locals be demonstrated as reasonable, and what role is there for transparency of how reward is managed comparatively? How too can organisations ensure that the interactions between expatriates and locals are successful in a specific geographical setting – including when expatriates are accountable themselves for applying corporate reward policy through interactions with the locals on whom they may depend to secure cultural and institutional engagement? Some evidence for the importance of attention by corporate policy makers to this aspect of MNC reward management is supplied in a study of a China-based international joint venture – findings from which suggested that local employees attribute disparities between expatriate and local reward allocations entirely to their employer’s overall (i.e. corporate) reward management framework (Choi and Chen, 2007). While the policies and their application may be wholly legitimate, it behoves MNC managements to demonstrate that all employees are treated with dignity and respect. In addition, it must be shown that the reward management policy will operate so as to be judged by all as consistent, unbiased, corrected as necessary and with reasonable actions taken by decision makers appropriate to circumstances (Cugueró-Escofet and Fortin, 2014).

Concluding remarks

Expatriates are typically well-rewarded. Compensating differentials are applied to address aspects of international mobility that are usually considered to be unfavourable – either in relation to working conditions or from being disruptive to family life. Organisations are mindful of cost constraints and, as a result, are engaging in policy segmentation such that a range of different policy content applies to different assignment types. By tailoring international reward policy content to different assignment lengths, patterns and purposes,

some elements can be reduced and unnecessary payments and benefits stripped out to the employer's advantage. As the plethora of differing expatriate reward policy types increases, so variations in reward outcomes experienced by the assignee population becomes greater. This opens the way for comparison between and among different assignee groups with the potential for perceived inequity. Organisations will require very clear communication approaches to explain the variance in base pay and compensatory additions if employees are to fully understand why their rewards differ from those of others in seemingly similar expatriate circumstances. To assist with this, relevant theory can help to guide approaches to policy development and its communication. Under that rubric, organisational justice considerations provide a series of checks and balances that MNC managers may draw on when establishing expatriate rewards, mindful that individuals may be expected to calibrate their cooperation with organisational priorities related not only to the sense of fairness in reward distribution outcomes, but also by reference to the procedures via which these are enacted. Taking account of the specific circumstances in which expatriates are expected to operate, as well as their demographic characteristics, and the quality of social interaction between the expatriate and formal organisational agents who specifically determine policy and procedural application to them by reference to others, it is important to remember that referents are not necessarily mandated organisationally but are selected subjectively by the expatriates themselves.

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