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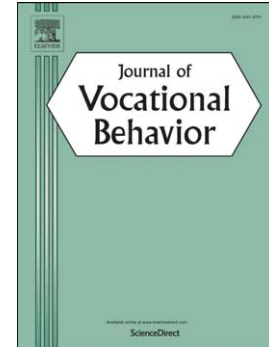
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Understanding and supporting the career implications of international assignments*.

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Abstract

International assignments represent an important form of migration in the global economy. In contrast to most other migrants, international assignees enjoy a relatively privileged position in the labor market. Authored by a diverse team of academics and practitioners, this paper draws on insights from empirical research and unpublished examples from practice to explore how international assignees can be supported before, during and after the international assignment. We move beyond the traditional expatriate cycle as a frame of reference, arguing that many of the challenges from the individual perspective are continuous, often pertinent well before and well after the assignment. We call for a reframing of career support for international assignees to reflect the reality of the experience. We propose that future studies of the impact of international assignments on career use more sophisticated methods including longitudinal studies of career trajectories and experiences of support practices. (138)

Key words: International assignments, career support, expatriates, careers, MNE

Introduction

International assignments, which involve the transfer of employees internationally within a multinational enterprise, represent a key form of international migration in the global economy. This form of migration differs from other forms in a number of important respects. First, the international assignment (IA) is typically supported by the organization. This support can range from assistance with taxation and visas, to support with the physical move, to help with job search or finding schools for the spouse and family, to generous reward packages when on assignment. Second, the international move is generally premised on the expectation that the IA will return to their home country on completion of their assignment. Finally in contrast to most other forms of migration, expatriates enjoy a relatively privileged position in the labor market. They are normally moving to a guaranteed position within the organization and hence compare rather favorably to international migrants who may be motivated by social or political factors and may move to another location without the guarantee of a job or without organizational support (c.f. Gammage, 2008; Marfleet, 2006). While the term “international assignee” sometimes is deployed in ethnocentric terms to refer to parent country national expatriates, we use it to indicate international flows of staff more generally. We are primarily concerned with traditional long term assignments (3 to 5 years) as opposed to alternative forms of international assignments (see Collings et al, 2007). For the purposes of this paper, we utilize the terms expatriate and international assignee interchangeably.

This paper brings together a diverse authorial team (two academics and two practitioners), with distinct perspectives and experiences and different interests in the international assignment experience. As academics, Collings and Doherty have researched extensively the nature of IAs. Collings has taken a largely organizational focus in much of his work and has sought to understand the use and management of the international assignment in the contemporary MNE. Doherty with a background in psychology has focused on unpacking and understanding the career implications of IAs both from individual and organizational perspectives. Complementing the academic angle, Luethy and Osborn add significant practical experience of managing international staff transfers. In her role as dual career advisor at a

leading Swiss university, Luethy works closely with faculty recruited internationally to facilitate their transition to the Swiss culture and maximize the likelihood of their continued engagement with the organization. Osborn brings diverse experience from a number of different roles including working for a large organization that sends individuals and teams on short and longer term IAs and as a business and career coach working with individuals who are contemplating or in the process of accepting and undertaking an IA. Thus, in this paper we aim to accentuate how combining insights from the academic literature and currently unpublished examples of practice can illuminate some of the issues faced by individuals working in an international context. We provide some specific examples of how these people can be supported.

Our intention is not to provide a comprehensive review of all relevant themes within the international assignment literature (for recent reviews see Collings et al, 2009; Harvey & Moeller, 2009). Rather, in contrast with much of the literature on IAs which tends to be premised on organizational objectives, we take an individual focus, highlighting the utility of this complementary view and analysis. However, as Schein (1971), has long since argued, careers represent the reciprocal interface of the individual on the organization and the organization on the individual. Therefore, we consider the background of the corporate context as important in framing our focus on expatriate career experiences, considering in particular how people pursuing expatriate careers (or at least, expatriate career episodes) can be supported before, during and after an international assignment. We see our engagement with the literature as informed not only by conceptual analysis, but significantly by our practical experience. We explore the support and help needed and what is available to assist international assignees in addressing the challenges they face. In some instances our different perspectives demonstrate the tensions between the rhetoric of proposed good practice and the reality of this complex experience. We conclude the article with some directions for future study, where the review of current literature and practice has highlighted important gaps.

Much extant literature on the international assignment has been framed around the global assignment cycle, an established frame of reference for organizational practices in the management of

IAs. This model has considerable currency as an organizing frame from the corporate perspective, providing a sound basis for organizational planning and management, while facilitating the design and implementation of organizationally driven interventions and support systems linked to how corporate entities disaggregate the expatriation process. It separates the temporal frame into three key stages: pre, during and post assignment, and takes a disjointed approach to the expatriation event, emphasizing either individual or organizational views in isolation. We contend that individual career concerns, subjective career needs and changing ambitions frame career support needs over the entire timescale. Therefore it is important to acknowledge these needs, to provide support where possible or at least fund it and allow time for it.

Without doubt, undertaking an international assignment involves significant transitions (Nicholson, 1984). Discontinuity and change are driven by the requirements of the role, the psychological dispositions and character of the individual, and the organizational induction or socialization practices in place. The theoretical foundation for practice to address the need for support throughout an international assignment episode have been built on the potential personal disruption and conflict prompted by moving to a foreign location and the adjustments necessary to overcome the issues surfaced by such a move for both the individual and their family.

There are several key transition points which prompt perceptions of high uncertainty and risk for international assignees. These include the point at which the person decides to accept an assignment, the time of the move to the new context, and on repatriation (Haslberger & Brewster, 2009). Uncertainties on the individual's behalf may be exacerbated by perceptions of the support (or lack thereof) on offer from the organization, highlighting the importance of the temporal positioning of career support mechanisms in the assignment. Many of the challenges from the individual perspective are continuous, often pertinent well before and well after the assignment. Further, the transitions implied can potentially extend far beyond the organizational horizons of change and also impact at a much deeper level, in particular on individual expectations. This has implications for the need for support, the type of support and how support can help at the individual level. Thus, arguably theoretical perspectives at the

individual level may shed some useful light on the processes at play which would have an impact on the utility of any support provided.

For example based on extensive experience of managing global mobility the UK's Royal Mail Consulting (an internal consultancy arm of the United Kingdom Royal Mail, with around 1000 consultants, with up to 30-40 on IAs at any one time), argued that the time frame over which support and subsequent career impact are tracked, should ideally extend from up to one year before taking the assignment, right through to at least five years after the assignment and, in many cases, for the remainder of that individual's career. Interventions such as pre-departure training and home country mentors can assist the assignee in preparing for the assignment and provide a sense of anticipatory adjustment. However, the support required may alter once the actual move takes place. This is illustrated in the 'guidelines' which were prepared by the Royal Mail Consulting, which identified the kind of support necessary at each stage of the international assignment process (see table 1). This check list can be used by all those involved in the process, and while not guaranteeing the quality of support provided, it does signal to individuals and managers what is required and should be available.

The Assignment Deal

We begin by considering the initial decision to undertake an assignment. The IA is often endorsed as a mutually beneficial episode, fulfilling both the organizational need to gain competitive advantage and as an important mechanism for individual development (Larsen, 2004). From an organizational perspective, Edstrom & Galbraith (1977) identified three key motives for the deployment of international assignees. Firstly, as position fillers where the skills required of a position are not available in the host country. Secondly, as a form of organizational development, this motive has strong resonance with control and coordination objectives (Harzing, 2001). Thirdly, as a means of management development, focused on developing the skill set of the individual assignee. The first two types can broadly be classified as demand driven, while the third could more squarely be considered learning driven. We argue that the distinction between demand driven and learning driven assignments is significant and has heretofore been underutilized in the context of expatriate careers research. It also has significant

implications for the type of support required. For example, an assignee deployed for demand purposes may justifiably be selected on the basis of their technical competence, however they may require significant support in the softer skills required to adjust to the host country and to transfer their knowledge to the host employees as there is often a strong teaching focus in these roles (Evans et al., 2011). In contrast, those selected for learning driven assignments may require a greater degree of support in assimilating learning opportunities from the host country and facilitating the application of this knowledge when they repatriate.

The Assignment Offer

The assignment offer is the first stage at which the requirement for support of the international assignee emerges. The decision to accept an international assignment deal can be framed as a trade off, an attempt by the individual to optimize between risk and career success in the context of their life choices (Nicholson, 2007). However, empirical evidence (Kraimer et al, 2009: 42; Stahl et al, 2009) confirms that developmental assignments appear to have greater career enhancing effects than other forms of assignment and may be a significant area where individual and organizational goals can potentially overlap (Dickmann & Doherty, 2010). Thus, we argue that career counseling and coaching represent effective supports in assisting individuals in weighing up the potential costs and benefits to them and the likely career outcomes of accepting the assignment (Yan et al, 2002).

The stage of offer and acceptance is significant to the development of the psychological contract between the assignee and the organization. Indeed, there is often a discord between organizational and individual goals in expatriation which may explain some of the recently highlighted paradoxes of international working where the anticipated benefits for individuals and organizations often remain unmet (Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Dickmann & Doherty 2008; Doherty et al, 2008). Realistic framing of the psychological contract is key (Yan et al, 2002).

Whatever the motivation for the assignment, it is important that it is congruent with the individual's personal values, career drivers and medium and longer term career goals. This personal career

symmetry should facilitate their continued motivation and commitment in the face of difficulties and challenges because they are clear about their part of 'the deal'. For some assignees the psychological contract may be perceived as solely transactional. In return for completing an assignment for a number of years, they expect to gain increased rewards and an excellent quality of life while on assignment. For example, there are many who have taken 3-5 year IAs, typically in the Middle East, simply to earn as much as they can with little or no tax, so that they can complete the assignment and return with a lump sum of cash. However, for others, the contract may be perceived as more relational, where there is an expectation that the assignment is the basis of a longer term employment relationship with career progression within the organization on completion (Yan et al, 2002). Although the expectation of career advancement on repatriation is often more implied than explicit (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009), it has been argued that career development is the key long term concern of the assignee in formulating their psychological contract in the context of an international assignment (Yan et al, 2002: 377). However, a failure to achieve subsequent career advancement within the organization can lead to a breach and ultimately a violation of the assignee's psychological contract (Yan et al, 2002).

In practice, there are different organizational approaches to assignment management. For example, UK headquartered Reckitt Benckiser has developed a cadre of global managers who have not held jobs in their countries of origins for years. Their top 400 managers represent 53 different nationalities and HR practices are developed to facilitate the international transfer of these managers on a regular basis (Becht, 2010). Individually, some who enjoy the challenge of living and working in different places and also enjoy the extra perks that often go with an expatriate assignment, may become expat 'junkies' as they go from one assignment to another. These individuals are wholly suited to living abroad but then find the adjustment to coming back difficult or virtually impossible. These nomads make a career out of successive IAs, where the international episode is not a career enhancing move but a career in itself. For others it is not about career at all, but the personal development. This is where the congruence with individual values and alignment with personal goals is important. It is therefore crucial for the individual, and so by implication for the organization, to ensure that on both sides of the deal

there is clarity of medium and long term goals, stretching beyond the assignment. It is good practice to have open and honest career conversations as early as possible with potential candidates about the extent to which expectations for the assignment can be matched, in order to position the deal. An explicit, detailed statement of organizational expectations helps the individual to compare their own expectations and assess the extent to which the opportunity will provide what they are looking for (in terms of career or professional development and for personal/family life).

In practice, the level of “choice” varies. For example, one multinational oil company is very explicit about the requirement for its field engineers to be globally mobile. As part of the recruitment process, employees are made aware that the company’s motto with regard to this cohort of employees is “Any place, any time, any why”. Although this seems quite a blunt statement, at least it constitutes a realistic job preview (see Morse & Popovich, 2009) for potential employees, who quickly realize that such global mobility is a prerequisite for their role in the organization. In a global bank, selection for the ‘global talent pool’ reflects confirmation of ability and ambition, but for many creates anxieties about the requirement to take any posting chosen by the organization. When the talent pool is reviewed, some report relief at being cut from the list because this immediately removes the ‘threat’ of an IA that didn’t suit them or their current family circumstances or worse a very difficult IA that would force them to decide whether to stay or leave the organization. This kind of ‘constant worry’ or career dilemma for individuals is almost inevitable in those organizations for which a succession of IAs is integral to career development paths and deemed necessary for career progression. Indeed, Feldman and Thomas (1992) found a positive relationship between perceived free choice as to whether to accept an overseas assignment and success on assignment. Similarly, Kraimer and Wayne (2004) found a negative relationship between lack of free choice and expatriate adjustment and commitment to the foreign subsidiary. In these cases, extra career support for the individual is extremely important to help with difficult personal decision making and to avoid creating unnecessary stress, trauma or anxiety. This underlines the need for organizations, wherever possible to provide appropriate support, as outlined in Table 1, to ensure that

individuals can make regular re-assessments of the value, risks and opportunities of any given international assignment options.

Other factors which emerge as significant in the decision to undertake an international assignment include marital status, with spouse willingness to relocate being identified as a significant factor in explaining the decision to relocate (Brett et al, 1993; Harvey, 1995). This issue is particularly important in the context of dual careers (Harvey, 1995). For the individual assignee the levels of support afforded to spouse and family are fundamental in framing the decision to undertake an assignment and the transition while on assignment. Standard corporate support packages for international assignees have long since provided for children's education and support for the running of the household in the foreign location which certainly facilitates the IA and their family (Festing & Perkins, 2008). Direct support for the spousal career has in recent decades emerged as increasingly pertinent and the level of support provided for the spousal career by the organization can also have a significant impact on the expatriation event (van der Velde et al, 2005). Harvey (1995: 325-6) summarizes the types of support which can be provided to trailing spouses. These include; counseling to address the career issues which dual-career couples face; assistance in preparation for overseas career opportunities; job support within the MNC or with international counterparts; provision of a realistic 'preview' of international relocation; retention of professional international placement assistance; flexibility in housing/domicile for expatriate and spouse and provision of advanced educational opportunities.

The issue of dual career support has also emerged as a significant challenge for universities in recent years, and examples from this sector provide useful insights into the types of support requested in more traditional corporate settings. In the context of continental Europe, successful academic careers generally require a number of international moves. These moves may coincide with the transition from masters to PhD, to post doc, to assistant/associate professor and eventually to full professor. Significantly, this mobility is required by researchers at a relatively young age, which often coincides with starting a family. Furthermore our experience tells us that researchers often choose a partner who is also working in research or has a high achieving career outside academia. The challenge of combining

two professional careers is of course extremely difficult. To address this issue, ETH Zurich offers dual career and relocation advice to its new faculty members. Such support is considered critical to the successful recruitment of international faculty in a highly competitive market place. These support activities range from technical and logistical issues (e.g. housing, schooling and child care, insurances, pension plan and social security, taxes and language barriers), to support for the partner's career in finding or even creating adequate job opportunities.

At ETH Zurich, no written rules are established in order to facilitate flexibility and this is seen as a key advantage of the system. No standardized support package or approach works satisfactorily to find or create a position for a spouse/partner. The needs of each individual family are too varied to allow this. The career support, which starts during the negotiation phase, that is before the family has actually decided to move, ranges from adapting the CV (resume) to the national standards, making contacts within their field, introducing the spouse to potential employers, and help with the application process. Support may also be offered in the recognition process of a foreign diploma or help in finding suitable further education courses or studies which allow longer term integration. As a majority of spouses/partners of faculty members are themselves academics, professional integration within the institution or another university or research institution is crucial. Where appropriate, a new position within ETH is created and equipped with start-up money to facilitate the initial phase of about one year. The hiring institution then helps the spouse/partner find alternative sources of funding to finance their research.

Apart from the focus on the professional integration of the spouse/partner, ETH Zurich also offers support in the integration of the family, which includes finding solutions to housing, school and childcare issues, social security, pension and tax aspects as well as other social integration measures. Experience shows that a new hire who was successfully supported in the transition phase and whose spouse and family consequently are well integrated, has lower intention to leave for another employer.

Preparing for the Assignment

Once an individual has committed to undertaking an international assignment, the requirement for organizational support becomes even more apparent. Preparation for assignment often includes pre-departure training, briefings, visits to the host location and shadowing. In particular preparation focuses on the softer skills and cross-cultural competencies required of an IA. This support is often premised on the importance of the IA's adjustment when on assignment in determining their performance during the assignment (see Thomas & Lazarova, 2006). In this regard, factors such as tolerance for stress, relational skills, communication skills, and language skills have been identified as important requirements of cross cultural adjustment which can be developed through pre-departure training (see Ehnert & Brewster, 2008; Parkinson & Morley, 2006 for useful summaries). Much of this pre-departure training is geared to providing a greater understanding of the cultural norms of the host country and facilitating the development of appropriate behaviors to utilize in cross-cultural interactions. The nature and degree of the IA's interaction with host nationals, and the level of difference between the IA's home culture and the culture in the host are also significant in determining the nature of the training required (Tung, 1982). In ideal circumstances this training should begin well in advance of the assignment: for example Royal Mail suggested up to six months in advance. However, in practice assignees are often deployed on a short-term reactive basis, rather than in a planned strategic way and such foresight is not always possible, so pre-departure preparation is not always borne out in reality, with few companies applying good practice fully or consistently (Harris & Brewster, 1999). Thus, the type and extent of provision of career support for individuals who are contemplating an international assignment and also for those who actually take up assignments is quite variable. Indeed, given that the most prominent criterion utilized in the selection of international assignees is technical competence, which tends to be a poor predictor of suitability for and performance on international assignment, the requirement for appropriate pre-departure training is amplified. Where there is a lack of support for the softer skills, the impact of culture shock for the person and often their accompanying family can profoundly color their experience and their career outcomes.

From a corporate perspective, offering support to new hires and their families is therefore a key recruiting element which can encourage the candidate to accept an offer. Any investment, whether time or money, will help to attract the best hires and keep them within the organization. It is therefore advisable for support to continue once the family relocates and indeed for them to be allowed to draw on the support services for a minimum of a year, and ideally throughout the assignment. Over time, the support and coaching shifts from offering practical support with housing, schooling, childcare and professional integration issues of the spouse/partner to supporting social integration. This can include language and intercultural courses, the organization of events and outings, or networking events which introduce the expatriates to the new culture and country and allows them to build new networks and find new friends. This is reflective of the fact that pre-departure training in itself is unlikely to be sufficient in addressing all of the issues that may emerge while on assignment. Thus, in-country training can provide ongoing support for the assignee while on assignment (Mendenhall & Stahl, 2000).

More generally, while mentoring is typically associated with maintaining links with the HQ during assignment, it also emerges as significant in supporting the assignee prior to undertaking the assignment. The role of a home country mentor has been linked to providing the expatriate with valuable insights into the host country, while reducing unrealistic expectations around the upcoming assignment, during the anticipatory adjustment stage prior to departure (Feldman & Thomas, 1992; Mezas & Scandura, 2005). Empirically, Carraher, Sullivan and Crocitto (2008) demonstrated the significant and positive correlation between having a home country mentor and organizational knowledge, job performance on assignment and promotion potential of the assignee, highlighting the positive role which such mentoring relationships can provide before the assignment begins.

Support During Assignment

Our focus now turns to the international assignee's experience while on assignment. Traditionally the expatriation literature has differentiated between three types of adjustment which expatriates face while on assignment. These are (i) general adjustment relating to the overall non-work environment,

including issues such as food and transport; (ii) environmental adjustment, which concerns interactions with locals or host country nationals, relating to cultural differences and norms; and (iii) work adjustment, which relates directly to the work role (see Black, 1988). Although these distinctions are not without their critics (see Thomas & Lazarova, 2006), they do provide a frame within which to consider the challenges faced by international assignees and how they can be supported while on assignment. Haslberger and Brewster (2009) recommend that company support for expatriates should resemble that for circus acrobats on a high wire act. Assignees should be helped to develop the skills to adjust and perform in the new context. Corporate support should be distanced enough to let the individual get on with the job but be a safety net if needed.

On balance, organizations with a history of international working tend to be better at providing support than those without. However, smaller organizations that suddenly have a need to send their employees on an assignment can do a very good job through providing a personalized and tailored approach, owing to the small numbers involved. Therefore, the type of organization and its experience of international working are just two of the variables that determine practice. Another is the type of assignment, for example, disaster relief work for a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) is quite different from a large construction project or a country manager role. Specifically, organizations that regularly send people to provide disaster relief have to provide excellent support as the assignments can be very demanding, traumatic and even dangerous. In addition, the first stages frequently have to be collapsed into less than 24 hours, regular support can be hard to provide, and the length of the assignment is often not known at the outset.

Ideally a programme of support would be tailored specifically to these kinds of situations, with special attention given to trauma and stress support during and after. In many cases, immediate de-briefing on return needs to include specialist counseling or even therapy if the individual has been exposed to particularly difficult experiences. Here there are some similarities with tours of military service where de-briefing, decompression and rest and recuperation are fundamental parts of the deployment process. However, there is a paradox in which a 'core' group of those who regularly respond

to disasters get to a point where they 'need' the adrenalin from the danger that is inherent in these kinds of IA, almost like a drug, so much so that they are restless and do not settle when back at base.

As noted above, modes of employment such as expatriation can put pressure on family life. Insights from contexts outside the corporate business setting such as seafarers and the military (Thomas & Bailey, 2009; Malcolmson et al, 2007) reinforce the fundamental impact of the family context on the individual, their commitment, focus and ability to perform, and suggest support mechanisms to mitigate the potential negative impacts. The family can encounter significant difficulties in adapting to the foreign location (Haslberger, 2005) which has often been quoted as a major reason for expatriate failure (Tung, 1982; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985), 'premature return', 'high costs' (Black et al, 1999) and 'poor adjustment' (Black et al, 1992) generally hampering the success of an expatriation event. Such work-family balance issues have been found to underpin intention to withdraw from the assignment or organization (Shaffer et al, 2001). As Haslberger (2005) succinctly points out, every individual experiences the adjustment to expatriation in their own way. This requires organizational support that is flexible and which goes beyond standard provision to include more extensive training, mentoring and buddy systems both on location and at home base. Support for partners he suggests, should include job placement assistance, employee assistance programs, and the encouragement at the host location of a deeper understanding of the adjustment process.

A further key contextual factor is the location of the assignment. As noted earlier, the cultural distance between the assignee's home country and the host impact significantly on the nature of the pre-departure training required. It will also impact significantly on the assignee and their family's experience while on assignment and the nature of support required. Indeed, recent practitioner reports have identified China, India and Russia as the most challenging destinations for expatriates (98 per cent of respondents in the study were from the Americas, Europe, Middle East and Africa) (Brookfield GMAC, 2010). The challenge of operating in a host context that is substantially culturally distinct is an issue amplified by the fact that China is identified as the top emerging destination of international assignees, while India is fourth in the same survey.

The importance of non-work or off-the-job support is also significant. Specifically, the organization can provide logistical support to assignees in relation to housing, transportation, and education for children. Such support helps to reduce the uncertainties surrounding general non-work adjustment (Black et al, 1991). Takeuchi, Wang, Marinova and Yao (2009) also identify home leaves, where expatriates can visit their home country on a regular basis to keep in touch with relatives and friends as an important off the job support which assists assignees while on assignment. Empirically, these off-the-job supports were found to be significantly related to general adjustment (Takeuchi et al, 2009: 631). Indeed, Takeuchi et al (2009) call for greater attention to supporting expatriates off the job, arguing that increasing investment in supporting expatriates may increase the return on investment for organizations.

Similarly, at ETH Zurich it was observed that social integration should not be neglected and should, at least initially, be fostered by the employer. Global recruitment means encouraging families to leave their home countries and to become migrants in a foreign environment. Even if the international hires in the corporate and academic worlds are generally highly privileged, they still become foreigners in a country and face potential discrimination and problems. Thus the organization places significant emphasis on introducing international hires to local networks to ease their interaction in the local community. For example at ETH Zurich the dual career advisor facilitates the interaction of parents with local schools and other authorities. Additionally advisors help families to explore local sports or musical facilities, act as community interpreters and accompany and introduce family members to people and events.

We also note the importance of the role context. For example, the nature of the assignment may fundamentally impact on the type of support required by the assignee. Shay and Baack (2004) applied Nicholson's (1984) work role transition theory to develop a causal model of relationships among MNCs' reasons for assignment, modes of adjustment and measures of managerial effectiveness (self and subordinate reported). This research indicated that the reason for the assignment influences expatriate modes of adjustment, which, in turn, influence both the expatriate's self-reports of performance and subordinate ratings of managerial effectiveness. Also type of assignment has a significant influence on

the extent to which expatriate managers engage in both personal change and role innovation behaviors. This work highlights the complex interaction between expatriate personal change, the antecedents to expatriate modes of adjustment and outcome data relating to performance ratings both by the expatriates themselves and by those who work for them on assignment.

The degree to which an employee believes their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (perceived organizational support, Eisenberger et al, 1986), and provides organizational support for career development more generally have been empirically linked to international assignees' commitment to their employing organization (Feldman & Thomas, 1992; Kraimer et al, 2001; Kraimer & Wayne, 2004; Lazarova & Caliguiri, 2001). This, in turn, is likely to impact on the IA's vision of a future career and intention to remain within the organization (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). At Royal Mail, this is facilitated through regular updates in both directions to review career opportunities and check career orientation prior to repatriation (see table 1). A further issue which can emerge for international assignees is a feeling that whilst on assignment, they may have weakened their links with their home country. While, IAs offers great potential to expand global contacts and develop social capital (Makela, 2007), one of the key challenges which international assignees report while on assignment is the "out of sight- out of mind" syndrome and there is a significant risk of the individual losing touch with important networks within headquarters while on assignment (Dickmann & Doherty, 2008; Makela, 2007). This impact can be exacerbated where an international assignee is seconded to a less visible subsidiary, and risks being distanced from the core of the organization, reducing their knowing-whom career capital and promotion prospects. It appears that this effect is further amplified for those assignees who undertake multiple assignments, where those with between two and four assignments experience the poorest career advancement prospects (Kraimer et al, 2009).

The empirical literature points to the link between an individual's ability to maintain and develop connections with the home country and their career success (Seibert et al, 2001). In this regard the role of a home country mentor appears particularly significant (Feldman & Thomas, 1992). While on

assignment the home country mentor can provide a key link-pin for the assignee and their relationship may help to reduce the assignee's sense of isolation, while keeping them in the loop on developments in the home country and potential opportunities which may arise there (Carragher et al, 2008). These home country mentors can also play an important role in socially supporting the expatriate. This psychosocial support may help assignees in coping with the stress they face while on assignment (Baugh, Lankau & Scandura, 1996). Such mentoring relationships may develop informally and indeed informal relationships tend to enjoy higher levels of trust and focus to a greater degree on psychosocial functions as opposed to the short-term and often goal focused nature of more formal mentoring relations (Mezias & Scandura, 2005).

Distance can sometimes make it difficult to provide consistent career support for international assignees; however technology has now made a lot of things much easier. For example, a series of career coaching sessions was held by Skype from the UK with an aid program co-coordinator in Kabul, Afghanistan. It would not otherwise have been easy, practicable or cost-effective to provide face to face support for a one or two hour session, especially for an NGO with limited resources. The individual, in an unstable war situation, was very near the end of the contract so his need for coaching support was crucial at this stage, so that he could make the right decisions for him and his family.

Host country personnel can also provide a key support to the international assignee while on assignment. Such personnel can provide social support and information, and indeed the role of host country nationals (HCNs), or local employees, in this regard has been compared to co-workers in the domestic context who play an important role in the socialization of new employees to organizations (Carragher et al, 2008). Local mentors, both formal and informal, can greatly assist the international assignee in getting up to speed with local work practices and cultural norms therefore facilitating improved performance (Carragher et al, 2008). Furthermore, higher leader-member-exchange (LMX) relationships with the host supervisor, (this signifies the employee's perception of the quality of their relationship with their supervisor) have been linked with increased levels of expatriate adjustment and intention to complete the assignment (Benson & Pattie, 2009). This indicates the important role of

support provided by the local supervisor. However, for an international assignee this role is not restricted to the workplace. HCNs can also assist the international assignee and their family in identifying day-to-day necessities such as supermarkets, dry cleaners, restaurants and other key services and indeed in understanding country-specific norms and behavioral heuristics (Mezias & Scandura, 2005).

Realizing the Benefits of an International Assignment

While repatriation has been positioned within the global assignment cycle as the end or final stage of expatriation, Doherty et al (2008) have suggested that reframing the repatriation element as more of a mid-point in the cycle may help address some of the issues which impact on readjustment and reintegration, including the development and use of acquired career capital, the alignment of expectations and career outcomes. When positioned as the middle and not the end of the expatriation episode the need for ongoing support through the repatriation element then extends to a much longer temporal horizon and as suggested in Table 1 career support can continue for anything from 2-5 years after return.

Extended support is needed due to the nature of the repatriation event. In addition to the challenges an individual may face in a domestic transition, repatriate transitions are associated with challenges of greater amplitude. The transitions tend to pose novel issues where individuals are returning to a much changed situation both at work and socially. Since repatriation is generally at the instigation of the organization rather than the individual, the experience is considered a difficult transition for individuals to make (Feldman, 1991). Repatriates have been found to be most dissatisfied with the repatriation element of an international assignment and specifically with respect to their careers. Many repatriates view the experience as a “career disaster” (Baruch & Altman, 2002) on repatriation owing to their dissatisfaction and frustration with the under-utilization of their acquired skills (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007) or the career hiatus or “wobble” which can occur (Doherty & Dickmann, 2007).

Significantly, the difficulties of repatriation are often underestimated by organizations. Repatriation tends to be viewed as easy since the individual is returning 'home'. However, the repatriation experience is quite a challenging one for the assignee and their family. Harvey and Novicevic (2006) classify the challenges of repatriation into three categories. Work issues revolve around the 'holding pattern' in which repatriates often find themselves when there is no specific role for them on their return combined with the reduced role autonomy which they face compared with whilst on assignment. Repatriates often report frustration with the lack of opportunity to utilize the international experience gained while on assignment on their return (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). Second, individual and family issues relate to the potential reduction in living standards which repatriates face when the allowances they were accustomed to on assignment are lost. The consequent reverse culture shock is a real issue in the transition. The spouse may also face difficulties in getting back into the labor market on returning. Finally, a number of social and cultural issues emerge which make the transition a challenging one (for a fuller discussion of these issues, see Doherty et al., 2008; Harvey & Novicevic, 2006).

From a work perspective, repatriates who are not promoted on return tend to view themselves as underemployed and thus overqualified for their role. They are more likely to seek a new job where they can utilize their skills effectively (Kraimer et al., 2009; Stroh et al., 1998). Indeed, this may be a significant factor in the high levels of turnover of employees on repatriation described by Lazarova and Cerdin (2007) in the 'frustrated expatriate' thesis. There is empirical support for the idea that repatriation support provided by the organization, emphasis on international experience gained when repatriated and the use of career planning all contribute to the retention of repatriates (e.g. Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). In addition, Stahl and colleagues (2009) found significant differences relating to turnover intentions on repatriation when comparing developmental assignees (learning driven) and functional assignees (demand-driven). It is suggested that, somewhat paradoxically, developmental assignees are more inclined to leave their organization (measured by turnover intentions) arguing this is related to better career opportunities available to them in the external labor market (Dickmann & Doherty, 2010).

Alternatively there is a view in the academic literature that for many expatriates the experience is premised on gaining international experience with little or no intention of remaining with the organization on repatriation (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). The notion of the 'proactive repatriate' suggests that the individual recognizes the value of their international experience in the external environment and that individual initiative and career goals take precedence over organization objectives. Many repatriates "*have a career agenda of their own, which may or may not involve the organization that repatriated them*" (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007: 417). These individuals do not limit their career ambitions to the boundaries of their employing organization and are prepared to market their improved career capital in the external labor market, where such experience carries a premium. Much of the extant literature on expatriate careers tends to focus on the experience of the repatriate in a relatively short window after returning as repatriation is often considered from an organizational perspective where retention and use of acquired skills and knowledge are the organizational pay-offs (Doherty et al., 2008). This literature rarely considers the careers of those repatriates who chose to change employers and fails to track career developments over an appropriate timeframe.

Positive career expectations as a consequence of an international assignment are common among repatriates and for many the international assignment experience is one of great personal value even when they leave the sending organization. Therefore, the experience is of career benefit to repatriates extending beyond their employing organization. The longer term impact of an IA will always be understood well by individuals, for whom it may have been pivotal in their career development track. However, it can be difficult for them to reflect the value of the international assignment in their CV (resume) or subsequent job applications, particularly as developmental benefits accrued from an assignment are often less tangible and harder to articulate than other skills or experiences. This then makes it more difficult for individuals to convince employers of the value of the earlier IA experience. When these individuals apply for jobs in the future, organizations tend to focus on much more recent and tangible skills and experience when making appointment decisions.

Conclusions

International assignees represent an important cohort of global migrants who enjoy a relatively privileged position in the labor market compared to the other forms of migrants considered in this special symposium. The enduring requirement for capable, able and willing individuals to engage in mobile behavior is both a challenge and an opportunity. In this paper we offer what we hope are important insights from the intersection of academic research and practical experience to shed light on how this group can be supported in their IA, with a particular focus on the career implications of such moves. We draw attention to empirical evidence and practice that illustrates how supporting individuals who are undertaking an IA can help achieve both positive organizational outcomes and a smoother more constructive journey for the individual. Our stance contrasts with much of the extant research and practice in the area which has been framed around the global assignment cycle. While the basic segmentation of the IA event provides a useful starting point we advocate that the temporal frame in terms of career development needs to extend well beyond the assignment since many of the career benefits materialize not just in the short term but also in the long term. This reinforces the need to provide relevant career support throughout the IA episode and critically, at appropriate temporal points.

Specifically, we highlight the key transition points which underscore perceptions of high uncertainty and risk for international assignees, particularly with respect to their career outcomes. The approach advocated in the current paper highlights the fact that many of the challenges from an individual perspective are continuous, and pertinent well before the assignment and beyond repatriation. We also build on recent calls (Nicholson, 2007) for careers theory to devote more attention to the micro level of analysis of cognition and motivation which are paramount to the IA experience. We point to the importance of realistically framing the psychological contract at the assignment offer stage. Furthermore, we highlight the importance of career counseling to help the individual consider the trade-offs between the risk and career success in the context of their life choices before, during and, after the international assignment (Nicholson, 2007). The important influence of spouse and family is also highlighted, with dual career issues emphasized. In this regard, the levels of support provided to spouse and family are

fundamental in framing the decision to undertake the assignment and the transition while on assignment.

Once the decision is made to undertake an assignment, providing assignees with the “softer” interpersonal and cross-cultural skills required during the international assignment emerge as essential. Support in developing these skills is particularly important given the fact that technical competence tends to dominate selection decisions, notwithstanding the significance of the softer skills in facilitating adjustment and performance while on assignment (Harris & Brewster, 1999). Specifically, we argue that support should be adapted to account for the nature of the assignment undertaken, providing appropriate help based on whether the purpose of the assignment is demand or learning driven. We point to the importance of preparation beginning well in advance of the assignment (up to six months in advance).

Building on the idea that the transitions associated with IA are often continuous, it may be impossible to adequately prepare assignees for all situations they may encounter while on assignment. Thus, continuing support, with a degree of flexibility to ensure it is tailored to meet the individual assignee and their family’s need is recommended (Haslberger, 2005). Insights from ETH Zurich provide a clear practical example of where the importance of social integration is recognized and efforts are made to maximize this. Support should also be provided in terms of off-the-job needs, such as home leaves, which can facilitate general adjustment (Takeuchi et al, 2009).

In general, the extent to which employees feel that the organization values their contribution, cares about their wellbeing and supports their career development is positively associated with their commitment to the organization (Feldman & Thomas, 1992; Kraimer et al, 2001; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). The importance of maintaining links to the home country through mentoring is highlighted. Ongoing mentoring can provide support to assignees in preparing for the transition to the host country as well as throughout the experience.

Positioning repatriation as more of a mid-point in the cycle (Doherty et al, 2008) highlights the ongoing need for career support. Specifically, repatriation brings many challenges for individuals and

their families and a failure to address these challenges leads to high levels of frustration and turnover of repatriates. Our review highlights the use of career planning in facilitating repatriate retention (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Stroh, 1995) and hence helping to secure the organizational value of international experience as well as helping the individual to reap the benefit of the experience. A key challenge for research in the area is to effectively chart the career implications of international assignments of both those who remain within organizations and those who leave for other roles.

Overall, we suggest that support should not be a overly standardized and should be adapted to account for *inter alia*, the individual and family needs, the host location and, the nature of the role (demand v learning driven). Furthermore, it should begin well in advance of the assignment and continue long after repatriation. Support should be as integrated as possible to ensure that individuals are equipped to face the transitions they experience.

Avenues for Future Research

In plotting a future research agenda for supporting expatriate careers we concur with Arnold and Cohen's (2008) recent assertion that careers research in general would benefit from imaginative outcome variables, more sophisticated methods, more attention to context and tighter conceptual clarity. From a careers perspective we argue that career success needs to be measured over a far longer time frame and include the distinction between objective and subjective career success. Transition theory advocates the adoption of longitudinal designs that facilitate tracking of personal change through repeated measures. These may include self-reported personal change before, during and after the experience of transition, to facilitate the tracking of modes of adjustment, which Nicholson suggests may shift over the long term as a result of experience. This approach can provide alternative perspectives on work, careers and life-span development which are particularly pertinent to the transitions experienced by international assignees. Such research has important implications for the type of support which would best facilitate performance while on assignment, and subsequent career progression. In addition, given

the substantial impact of the spouse on the IA episode, one area for future focus is that of the career implications for the trailing partner and the impact this has on the assignee.

Finally, we recognize the importance of context and conceptual clarity. We have illustrated that the nature of the assignment (demand versus learning driven) merits greater consideration as a contextual issue. Further study could usefully explore the recent trends in globalization which have led to an increase in the variability of working patterns where employees now engage in a range of alternative forms of international working such as short-term assignments, international business travel, virtual assignments etc. (Collings et al, 2007; Harvey et al, 2001). The majority of what we know about supporting assignees derives from the study of parent country nationals seconded to foreign subsidiaries (Collings et al, 2010). Empirically we know far less about the nature of inpatriate assignments (employees from subsidiaries transferred to the headquarters) and third country nationals (TCNs) (employees from one country working for a multinational headquartered in another country and transferred to a third country). Future study could explore the nature of support required in these differing conditions.

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Table 1. Adaptation of UK Royal Mail Consulting Guidelines on support for IAs.

TRANSITION POINT	SUPPORT PRACTICES
Decision to go	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weigh up possible risks and benefits for future career options • Consider the potential impact on life and family • What happens if I do/don't take this assignment?
6 months before assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equip the individual with career resilience and the ability to self-manage their career and transitions • Inter-cultural training, spouse/family programs, language and communications • Set up a mentor for them • Clarify medium and long term personal goals
1 week before leaving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deal with the emotional impact of the imminent change • Check-list for 'career life-support umbilical cord' - eg regular communications, mentoring support
Monthly, whilst away	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular updates in both directions to maintain business and organizational knowledge, including internal career opportunities • Mentoring support
6 months before returning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full new career orientation review with post-IA mapped out and support put in place
Before, during and after return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-entry support - including de-briefing and another re-orientation
3 months after return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coaching on first reflections on the IA - what can I learn from it and how can I build on it? What career capital does it give me?
2 years after return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has it changed the trajectory of my career?

5 years after return

- Reflect on the IA in the context of its longer term impact on career direction

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