



Evolving and enduring challenges in global mobility



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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the past 50 years of the science and practice of global mobility in organizations, highlighting the continuum of issues – from those that have endured throughout the decades to those that have changed as a function of economic, competitive, and demographic trends. At this latter end of the continuum, the field of global mobility has seen dramatic changes in the strategic deployment of expatriates, changes in assignment types, and demographic changes in the profile of expatriates. These are discussed in the first part of the article. In the second part of the article we review the issues which have been impervious to change over the years. We draw upon recent evidence from the fields of neuroscience and human development to examine two of the more enduring issues of global mobility: the change in individuals' competencies as a function of living and working in another country and the personality characteristics and motivation related to expatriates' success abroad. Taken together, these enduring and evolving issues in global mobility have implications for future research and practice.

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Global mobility, in the most simplistic sense, is when individuals and oftentimes their families, are relocated from one country to another by an employer, generally from a context of familiarity (a home country) to one of greater novelty (a host country) for a fixed period of time. These globally mobile employees, also known as expatriates or international assignees, have grown in importance as firms expand their global reach; as the number of a firm's foreign subsidiaries grows so do, in many companies, the number of expatriates working in them. Research has recognized the importance of global mobility with the number of peer reviewed journal articles on expatriation increasing over the past 50 years since the *Columbia Journal of World Business* published some of the first articles on this topic.

While the definition of global mobility has not changed, there are many aspects of expatriation that have, reflected in both science and practice of the field. From the 1960s through the late-1980s, researchers studying expatriates were studying a relatively homogeneous group within organizations: senior executives from developed-country headquarters of large multinational corporations (MNCs) sent abroad for a period of two to four years (Brewster, Bonache, Cerdin, & Suutari, 2014). They were mostly married men, senior in their organizations, who were sent to be “in charge” of a host country subsidiary. This prototypical expatriate of

the past brought his non-working wife and the company's way of doing things. He would enjoy a generous compensation and benefits package for the “hardship” of living in another country. This homogenous group enabled numerous macro-level and micro-level studies from a common set of reasons for and experience of expatriates.

At the macro level, early global mobility research focused on *when* and *how* expatriates foster a firm's strategic growth globally. At the micro level, researchers tried to understand the expatriates' challenges and responses along the international assignment cycle from selection and training (Fiedler, Mitchel, & Triandis, 1971; Harvey, 1983; Hays, 1974; Tung, 1981), adjustment (Church, 1982; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985, 1986), compensation (Reynolds, 1972; Vivian, 1968) and repatriation (Harvey, 1982; Murray, 1973). This macro and micro, research introduced before 1990, provided a solid foundation for the field of expatriation by revealing the high-level issues (e.g., strategy, selection) in the field of global mobility.

While the key issues have not changed over the decades, the context has changed dramatically as the commonalities among expatriates have gradually ceased to describe the bulk of international assignments. In contrast to the earlier decades' uniformity, today's picture of expatriation is one of diversity. The 2015 Brookfield Global Relocations Survey of global organizations sending expatriates found that almost half (43%) of all company expatriates are coming from non-headquarters locations and that the second most frequently cited reason for sending expatriates is to “build international management experience/

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career development”, only slightly behind the first which is the “to fill a managerial skills gap”. Married men comprise only 59% of expatriates. Most of the current expatriates are under 50 years of age (82%) and 19% of them are female. Taken together, the picture of the current expatriate profile is a diverse one: individuals from all countries (not just headquarters) are being relocated for a variety of reasons (not just to lead subsidiaries). These individuals are from all levels in the organization and can be married or single, male or female, young or more seasoned.

The most salient differences between the earlier and current reality emerged due to geopolitical and economic changes, advances in technology, communication, and global travel and organizational and demographic trends in the business population (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008). These trends have affected the way expatriates are managed, valued, and supported. While the number of changes over time have been numerous in the field of expatriation, there are also some enduring issues stemming from the natural human response to relocation – from familiar (home country) to novel (host country) – and the predictable patterns that result because of this change. In this sense, some expatriation issues are today as they were decades, if not centuries, ago.

This article starts by comparing the picture of global mobility in early research to the picture emerging today. Specifically, we highlight how broader contextual factors have produced evolving issues of expatriation, namely: (1) changes in the strategic deployment of expatriates, (2) changes in assignment types, and (3) changes in the profile of expatriates. We then integrate recent evidence from neuroscience and human development to underscore how some issues, despite the major differences in context, have been impervious to change over time. They are: (1) the change in individuals’ competencies as a function of living and working in another country and (2) the importance of personality characteristics and motivation for success abroad. We consider these issues of global mobility, both evolving and enduring, below. At the onset, however, we would like to recognize that capturing every significant contribution in the field of global mobility is well beyond the scope of this paper. Our goal, rather than being a comprehensive review of every article, was to share our perception of global mobility over the past 50 years.

1. Evolving challenges of global mobility

The domain of human resource management (HRM) is always affected by the context (Baron & Kreps, 1999), and the area of global mobility is no exception. A number of economic, technological, organizational, and demographic changes in the business population over the last 50 years have had significant influence on the research and practice in global mobility. The key features of the evolution of the field of global mobility are summarized in Table 1 and explored in greater detail in this section.

1.1. Changes in the strategic deployment of expatriates

In one of his last works before he passed away in 2009, the British economist John Harry Dunning (2009) summarized the four major transformations that, from the 1990s onward, have led to greater globalization. First, the fall of the Berlin Wall led to a *transition to a market economy* in many former Soviet-bloc countries. While still retaining a single-party state government, that same model would also be followed by China, with the ensuing impact this has had on the global economy. Second, the *liberalization of cross-border markets* encouraged regional economic integration (e.g., NAFTA, AFTA, APEC, and the European Union) and stimulated economic growth and accelerated international commercial transactions among businesses and private individuals. Third, the *digital revolution* and the advances made in information technology and computing systems paved the way for all firms (large and small) to embark upon greater innovation, and launch into markets that had, in prior years, been inaccessible. And, fourth, a *dynamic increase in the international operations* of firms from every part of the world. Large MNCs, which not only reinforced their international transactions, also increased their direct investment abroad, either through joint-ventures or with wholly owned subsidiaries. New players also appeared on the economic scene, such as new MNCs from developing countries, particularly in Asia, and small and medium-sized enterprises, some being “born global”.

These four historically concurrent changes ultimately ushered in a much more competitive and globalized business reality. In the post 1990 reality, products and services, capital, technology, trade and knowledge became interconnected. This new business reality

Table 1
Evolution of trends in global mobility.

	Traditional approach (1960s to the late-1980s)	Modern approach (1990s to Present)
Changes in the strategic deployment of expatriates		
Reasons for expatriation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control of subsidiaries • Fill skill gaps unavailable in host countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge transfer around MNC • Professional development of global leaders
Typical mobility flow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One directional flow from headquarters to subsidiaries • Mostly from large US, European, and Japanese headquarters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobility in all directions (e.g., lateral moves, reverse expatriations)
Dominant perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headquarters' perspective was dominant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MNCs from emerging market and developing countries • Multiple perspectives (headquarters, regional, local) are considered
Changes in assignment types		
Duration of assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively long assignments (two to four-year period) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More traveling and short-term assignments
Employment modes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational contracts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational and transactional contracts
Initiating the global experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The company requests employees to relocate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The company posts open requisitions for international assignments • The employees request opportunities for international assignments
Changes in the profile of expatriates		
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male executives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More female expatriates
Age and level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Middle-aged • Senior level managers and executives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All ages • From all levels in the organization
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single-income families • Non-working spouse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dual career couples • Elderly parents • Non-traditional families

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