



# Short-term international assignments. Military perspectives and implications for international human resource management



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## ABSTRACT

Short-term international assignments have been under-explored in international human resource management (IHRM) literature and research. Equally, there is a dearth of studies on international mobility beyond multinational corporations. Drawing on an exploratory study of short-term international assignments in the Irish Defence Forces, this paper considers the implications for IHRM.

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## Introduction

Short-term international assignments have received limited attention in international human resource management. As a category of international staffing alternatives (Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007), the mention is typically a paragraph differentiating short-term international assignments from other international staffing options (e.g., Dickmann & Baruch, 2011; Doherty & Dickmann, 2008; Hayton, Biron, Christiansen, & Kuvaas, 2012).

This paper examines what is currently known about short-term international assignments (STIAs) in international human resource management (IHRM). Drawing on an exploratory study of STIAs in the Irish military, it suggests a more detailed consideration of STIAs in IHRM is warranted. In certain organizations and for certain professions, STIAs are an integral component of the organizational career of employees. This is the case for those employed in military forces. Deployed personnel in the Irish Defence Forces embark on STIAs as an integral and routine facet of a military career. Since 1958, the Irish Defence Forces have had a continuous involvement in overseas peacekeeping missions, allied to the intention of the UN Security Council to “sub-contract” the military sections of mandates to regional organisations the deployment of Irish Defence Forces personnel overseas is set to continue.

The research objective of this paper is to initiate a re-examination of STIAs in IHRM. Firstly, in the literature review, we set out

what is currently known about STIAs in the context of international mobility from the IHRM lens. Then we introduce the deployment cycle, a framework which is used in the specific context of military STIAs. Next, we provide information on the context and content of the exploratory research, where a limited number of qualitative interviews were conducted with short-term international assignees in the Irish Defence Forces. Finally, we consider the implications of our research for IHRM. The research contributes to IHRM as follows. Firstly, our paper focuses exclusively on STIAs where a dearth of research currently exists. Starr (2009) and Starr and Currie (2009) have explored the expectations of short-term international assignees in multinational corporations (MNCs) on repatriation. Tahvanainen, Welch, and Worm (2005) explored STIAs in eleven Finnish MNCs. However, our paper examines employees beyond the domain of the MNC, which is our second contribution. Thirdly, we suggest the implications of our study for IHRM.

## Short-term international assignments and the assignment cycle

### *Interest in short-term international assignments within IHRM Field*

This paper is concerned with short-term international assignments (STIAs), which is when the employees of an organization are assigned internationally for a temporary period of time not extending one year (Vance & Paik, 2011). Short-term international assignments have been under-explored in IHRM theory and research to date. Rather, the focus in international human resource management has been on expatriates that are assigned overseas

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by their employing organization (usually a multinational corporation/MNC) for periods of more than one year (e.g., Brewster & Scullion, 1997; Doherty, Dickmann, & Mills, 2011; Dowling, Festing, Engle, 2008; Stahl & Björkman, 2006; Yan, Zhu, & Hall, 2002).

More recently this focus has been increasingly supplemented by a growing interest in self-initiated expatriates (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Crowley-Henry, 2012; Doherty, Thorn, & Richardson, 2013; Doherty et al., 2011; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010), skilled migrants (Al Ariss, 2010; Al Ariss, Koall, Özbilgin, & Suutari, 2012) and transnationals (Banai & Harry, 2004; Beaverstock, 2005), where the international mobility is sustained over a long, potentially permanent duration.

However, other forms of international mobility remain on the periphery of empirical research. Frequent business travellers or flexpatriates (Demel & Mayerhofer, 2010; Mayerhofer, Hartmann, & Herbert, 2004a; Mayerhofer, Hartmann, Michelitsch-Riedl, & Kolinger, 2004b) and those on short-term assignments (Starr, 2009; Starr & Currie, 2009; Tahvanainen et al., 2005) are two categories of international assignments which have received less academic attention to date. This is surprising given that some researchers (Tahvanainen et al., 2005) position short-term assignments as the most popular form of non-standard international assignments in practice. Additionally it is suggested that short-term international assignments are an increasingly used international staffing alternative for organizations due to the increased pressures on organizations to be cost efficient and the lack of host country talent (Vance & Paik, 2011, p. 138).

#### *Current knowledge on short-term international assignments (STIAs)*

Both STIAs and expatriate assignments have in common that the international mobility is an initiative which is required by the employing organization. This characteristic distinguishes short-term and organization-assigned expatriate assignments from other international mobility forms such as self-initiated expatriation, migration and transnational mobility. Both also differ from flexpatriation (frequent business trips) in that the *duration spent in the host country environment is more than one month at any given time*.

STIAs are defined as being less than a year in duration (Vance & Paik, 2011), with expatriate assignments generally between a year and five years in length (Collings et al., 2007; Doherty et al., 2011). Harris, Brewster, and Sparrow (2003) qualify STIAs as being between three months and one year in duration, while Collings et al. (2007, p. 205) define 'a short-term international assignment as a temporary internal transfer to a foreign subsidiary of between one and twelve months duration'. For the purpose of this paper, we refer to short-term international assignments as temporary foreign assignments of less than one year duration, in keeping with Vance and Paik (2011).

Variations to the term 'short-term international assignment' exist, even though they all refer to the same situation of a temporary short-term (less than one year) international assignment. These terms include 'short-term foreign postings' and 'extended business traveller' (Briscoe & Schuler, 2004, p. 216), 'secondments', 'short-term assignments abroad', 'short-term foreign assignments', or 'short-term foreign work assignments' (Vance & Paik 2011, p. 138). In this paper we refer to the phenomenon as short-term assignments and to those that embark on such assignments as short-term assignees.

Despite terminology variations, it is clear from the literature that STIAs are required by the employing organizations, are temporary in nature, and do not exceed one year. Tahvanainen et al. (2005, p. 670) found that STIAs are used in the same way as expatriate assignments: 'for position filling, skill transfer or management control', as well as 'to simultaneously facilitate management development' (2005, p. 670). Short-term assignments

are considered beneficial for the employee in that the 'foreign assignments can provide an interesting break, challenge, and professional development opportunity for employees who have worked in the same domestic location for a long period of time' (Vance & Paik, 2011, p. 138). However, one of the challenges of assignments (short-term and longer-term) is if the assignee will have a job in the home country on return from the assignment (Tahvanainen et al., 2005), what that position may be, and if it takes the international learning into consideration. A further disadvantage is reflected in personal health issues (including alcoholism and stress) and strain on family relationships due to separation (Tahvanainen et al., 2005).

With regards to the advantages of STIAs to the organization, it is the consensus that STIAs are more cost efficient for organizations since they do not include the relocation of the assignee's family (Briscoe & Schuler, 2004; Vance & Paik, 2011). This is in comparison with those expatriates on long term assignments that move with their families for the duration of the assignment (Collings et al., 2007). While organizational support is expected for the families of organization-assigned expatriates that are accompanied internationally, for short-term assignees' families that do not relocate, the need for such organizational support is not explored. Festing and Perkins (2008, pp. 154–155) categorize short-term assignees as generally less expensive for the organization and less well compensated. They qualify this in differentiating between assignments of less than six months and those assigned for between six months and one year who generally receive rewards in line with the long-term expatriate assignments. Overall the cost efficiency and lack of complexity associated with short-term international assignments when compared to long term expatriate assignments is accepted in the conceptualization of STIAs in IHRM literature.

#### *The assignment cycle and the deployment cycle*

In international human resource management literature, the organization-assigned expatriation cycle (Harzing & Christensen, 2004; Sparrow, Brewster, & Harris, 2004) consists of three stages: pre-departure, assignment and post-assignment phase (Borg & Harzing, 1995). For each of these stages the organization is encouraged to offer training and support to prepare the expatriate for the international assignment, to mentor them during the assignment, and to provide career opportunities after the assignment (Linehan & Scullion, 2001).

Military organisations, similar to commercial organisations, require personnel to serve overseas as a routine part of their service. The military are well versed in deploying personnel overseas (Defence Forces HRM Report, 2011). Examining literature on the deployment of military forces, the Pincus, House, Christenson, and Adler (2007) deployment framework considers a comprehensive five stage process. They identify the period of deployment as being a minimum of six months, which dovetails well with the situation pertaining to the Irish Defence Forces, where deployments are generally of four to six months, and can in some cases extend to 12 months. They divide the experience into five distinct stages, namely pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment, re-deployment and post-deployment.

The pre-deployment stage begins when the soldier is warned of his tour of duty, and ends on deployment. This involves preparation administration requirements/training and advance warning for the family. This stage can be elastic and can be almost nonexistent or can last for up to a year. It is characterised by feelings of loss and denial, with the deploying family member spending time away in preparatory training. There can be emotional conflict as the soldier begins the bonding and relationship forming

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