



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 Authored by a diverse team of academics and practitioners, this paper draws on insights from empirical research and unpublished examples from practice to explore how international assignees can be supported before, during and after the international assignment.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)

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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, and 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, Scullion, and Morley, 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

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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, Scullion, and Dowling, 2009; Harvey and 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 has 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 and 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

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