

Do expatriates want THIS new normal? Covid, flexible work and embeddedness

Michael Dickmann

Emilija Oleškevičiūtė

The coronavirus pandemic has led to a major upsets in terms of working patterns and locations. Since the spring of 2020 working from home has become largely mandatory for many office workers and, therefore, for many global assignees. For those assignees who are cohabiting it has meant a number of challenges to their work and life patterns and has triggered changes to their embeddedness abroad.

Distinguishing ability and willingness to work from home

Before the pandemic it was customary that working from home was agreed upon and planned by the organization (involving the line manager and the team) and the individual. The imposition of national lockdowns in many countries – for instance the UK government imposed the first one in March 2020 – meant that a large part of the population suddenly had to work from home. In many instances people were not prepared for this and lacked access to means that would enable them to work effectively. However, over the last months we have seen that the fundamental shift in paradigm has been mastered reasonably successfully: many individuals are able to work effectively from home. While this obviously depends on the type of work people undertake – working in front-line hospitality encounters more barriers in terms of working from home than many administrative and managerial occupations – individuals have encountered manifold family challenges when trying to balance work, household, child-care and educational duties. Especially at times when schools were closed to physical attendance many parents have reported stress, helplessness and worries about burn-out. While many like some of the positive aspects of working from home – no commuting times, home atmosphere designed by families themselves, sometimes the joy of having more family times – it seems likely that for many individuals hybrid patterns of work where some time is spent in offices enabling a stronger bonding with work colleagues is preferable. Thus, it seems that many people are able to be flexible but might not be completely willing to be flexible. This situation has substantial implications on global assignees.

Working from Home and the Embeddedness of Global Assignees

Company-sponsored and self-initiated global workers have multiple allegiances and are embedded to some degree in the communities where they live, their organizations and, of course, still feel some connection to their home countries or other contexts they have lived in. A current project for GLOMO – a major multinational research initiative to investigate Global Mobility – explores the many individual, situational, organizational and institutional factors that can shape expatriates' embeddedness abroad. The pandemic has had some major effects on these factors and the likely career success and well-being of global assignees. Social isolation measures and work-from-home edicts have meant that assignees' integration into organizations and their local communities was substantially affected. Many new employees around the world have now worked for more than a year in their organizations without actually ever having met their teams face-to-face. For those assignees who moved to a new country just before lock-down and social isolation measures were

implemented, it has meant that some of the key cultural learning opportunities have been restricted. Given that many organizations want their global talent to acquire cultural and business understanding, the lack of social contact is likely to hamper expatriates. In addition, in terms of embeddedness it is more difficult to deepen community contacts if you are never able to go to (or invite) local people's homes, to not meet your line manager and work team on social occasions (face-to-face) or to learn by observing other workers' actual occupational behaviours. In addition, family and educational duties have been shown to take up further time leaving less space for activities geared to help assignee embeddedness in the local context. While there might be some compensatory effects due to being in a difficult situation together, it is more likely that the COVID times are less successful for assignees' embeddedness in their host country and organization.

Quo Vadis?

In terms of the current working patterns, most assignees do not really appreciate the heightened demands on their work and family lives nor their lesser ability to meet and bond with other. But there is a silver lining on the horizon due to the successful vaccination programmes in several countries. This means that interaction and getting to know each other socially is becoming more likely. In addition, companies have responded and are working on an array of workplace flexibility initiatives that allow more choice to individuals. Thus, global assignees might be in a situation where they can select whether and for how long they want to work from home or in the office. In fact, where assignees choose a hybrid working pattern that suits them they have the opportunity to shape their working and private lives in a way that is more fulfilling and motivating with manifold possibilities to build connections and allegiances to their host countries.

About the Authors

Michael Dickmann is Professor of International Human Resource Management (HRM) at Cranfield University and the Director of the Cranfield Masters in Management. His research focuses on human resource strategies, structures and processes of multinational organisations, cross-cultural management, international mobility and global careers. Michael has published in a broad range of academic journals and he is the lead author of several books on international HRM and global careers. Since 2017 he is the Senior Editor-in-Chief of *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*.

Emilija Oleškevičiūtė holds a degree in Work and Organisational Psychology, is a fellow of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network and researcher of the EU Horizon 2020 GLOMO programme. She is a specialist in Global Mobility and is currently pursuing PhD on the topic of International Transfer of Career Capital possessed by Self-initiated Repatriates at Cranfield School of Management, UK.



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