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The Complexity of International Assignments and its Impact on IHRM Strategies and Corporate HR Role

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Abstract

International assignments are a critical component of the IHRM strategy and critical in shaping it. All the issues considered in the following sections have, on one hand, dramatically changed and are continuing to change the way in which HR is done, and its particular roles, while, on the other hand, have brought many companies to the point of finding alternatives to traditional expatriation, in order to solve the staff immobility issue, and save money and time spent on managing the overall complexity of traditional expatriation. In this respect, we will firstly identify the four HR roles that have been acknowledged by the literature as new responsibilities of HRM operating on a global scale, and then we will define the four major forms of alternative international assignments, identifying in which circumstances they are used by MNCs and critically analyzing them, in order to clarify their advantages, understanding in what way they are a direct response to the complexity of the traditional assignments, and their disadvantages.

Keywords: IHRM strategy, MNCs, traditional expatriation

Introduction

With the advent of globalization, and the consequent growth of MNCs, international careers are a rising trend. In the last decades, research has focused on this topic, recognizing the positive outcomes that international assignments have provided to MNCs and studying their complexity. Therefore, to understand better what has been written on this topic so far, the first part of the paper will be dedicated to defining the first, and principal, form of international assignments, traditional expatriate assignments, and to review part of the literature on this subject, to better identify the reasons that lead MNCs to use them, and to understand the challenges that each phase of such assignments present.

The aim of this analysis is to shed light on how international assignments are a critical component of the IHRM strategy, and therefore to comprehend how they are shaping it. In other words, all the issues considered in the following sections have, on one hand, dramatically changed and are continuing to change the way in which HR is done, and its particular roles, while, on the other hand, have brought many companies to the point of finding alternatives to traditional expatriation, in order to solve the staff immobility issue, and save money and time spent on managing the overall complexity of traditional expatriation.

In this respect, we will firstly identify the four HR roles that have been acknowledged by the literature as new responsibilities of HRM operating on a global scale, and then we will define the four major forms of alternative international assignments, identifying in which circumstances they are used by MNCs and critically analyzing them, in order to clarify their advantages, understanding in what way they are a direct response to the complexity of the traditional assignments, and their disadvantages.

Key strategic reasons for expatriate assignments: why do MNCs use expatriates?

In the past, the notion of careers was synonymous with linear advancements within hierarchical and highly structured organizations. Hierarchical organizations were conceived as ladders to climb on through a series of promotions (Baruch, 2003). In contrast, recent decades have witnessed a change in the notion of careers due to the advent of both multinational and organic organizations. In particular, within multinational companies (MNCs), which are companies that are operating in multiple countries, "boundary-less careers" have increasingly emerged (Baruch, 2003). Indeed, globalization, defined by Reilly and Campbell (1990, p. 63) as the "integration of business activities across geographical and organizational boundaries, ... the freedom to conceive, design, buy, produce, distribute and sell products and services", together with advancements in technology, have enhanced careers that are more open, flexible, less structured, and, above all, *international* (Baruch, 2003).

Definition and purposes of traditional expatriate assignments

Given the increasing number of international careers, it is therefore important to understand what traditional international assignments are and the key strategic reasons that lead MNCs to use expatriates. With traditional expatriate assignments, or long-term assignments, it is intended assignments that "may vary between one and four years and where the expatriate has a clear role in the foreign subsidiary operation" (Scullion & Collings, 2006, p. 160).

The landmark study in the field of international staffing, Edström and Galbraith's (1977) work, proposes three key motives for using expatriates. Firstly, as *position fillers*, when qualified local, host country nationals (HCNs) are not available. Secondly, as a means of *management development*, of which the purpose is to develop global talents, namely managers with a global mindset. Finally, as a means of *organizational development, control and coordination*, in order to increase knowledge transfer within multinational organizations, or to modify or support organizational structure and decision processes.

3

Even though this classification could sound too simplistic, since "the nature of expatriation in the current business environment is far more complex and varied" (Edström & Collings, 2006 p. 41) than it was previously, nevertheless their study provides an important starting point for our discussion on why MNCs use expatriates, in that it is the basis of almost all research on international assignments.

More recently, research by Sparrow et al. (2004) have tried to expand Edström and Galbraith's work, by suggesting six key organizational reasons for sending expatriates on international assignments. In their empirical study, they found out that 57.8 per cent of the respondents used expatriations for carrier development, "37.5 per cent for creating international cadre of management, 56.3 per cent for local expertise not available, 53.1 per cent for transferring of expertise, 20.3 per cent for controlling local operations, and 7.8 per cent for the coordination of global policy" (Sparrow et al., 2004, p. 138). These results do not add up to 100 per cent. One of the main findings of this study is indeed that there are few cases where there is only a single reason for using expatriate assignments. The vast majority of international assignments have multiple objectives. Moreover, based on this study, "it could be also argued that the reasons expatriates are used differs depending on the strategy pursued by a given organization" (Scullion & Collings, 2006, p. 41). In other words, since international assignments fit in the overall organizational strategy, it makes sense to consider their different aims in relation to what the company wants to achieve, rather than decontextualized transfers.

In the attempt to develop Edström and Galbraith's (1977) typology, first Pucik (1992), and then Evans et al. (2002), identified two macro categories, *demand driven* and *learning driven* expatriations, developing in this way a useful framework for classifying the key organizational reasons for international assignments. Demand driven assignments are used when there is a shortage of qualified HCNs and they are teaching driven. Originally, expatriate assignments were predominantly of this kind, and the expatriates were considered either as position fillers, or problem solvers. In contrast, learning driven assignments focus on absorbing rather than teaching, and could either have the purpose of increasing individuals' competences or facilitating career enhancement.

A significant body of research has focused on the role of expatriate employees in transferring knowledge within MNCs. In contrast with the study that reflects on the distinction between demand driven and learning driven assignments, the literature on knowledge transfer has recognized "the potential for knowledge to be created in subsidiaries as well as in the headquarters" (Scullion & Collings, 2006, p. 43). According to this stream of research, the flow of knowledge during international assignments should be considered bidirectional (both parties are involved with teaching and learning), rather than unidirectional (one teaches and the other one learns). This sharing of knowledge happens not only during the time of expatriation, but also once the expatriate repatriates (Blakeney et al., 2006).

Lastly, it is important to consider also Harzing's (2002) study, since it questions whether expatriates' roles are equally important in different situations, rather than trying to identify general and universal reasons that consider the cultural context of the country in which the expatriation is grounded. Harzing's (2002) research identifies three different control specific roles of expatriates: the bear, the bumble bee, and the spider. Managers fall under the *bear* category when they act as a means to replace the HQ decision-making process and enhance direct supervision over subsidiary operations. When instead managers enhance the expansion of informal networks, they can be defined as *bumble bees*. These insects, indeed, fly from plant to plant and create cross-pollination (Harzing, 2002), exactly as the managers do going overseas and building new relationships with the local people working in the organization's subsidiary. Finally, "*spiders*, as the name suggests, control through the weaving of informal communication networks within MNCs" (Scullion & Collings, 2006, p. 44).

Purposes of expatriate assignments: empirical evidence

4

While the above studies are significant, in that they help to identify a number of key strategic reasons why MNCs use expatriates, some of them lack empirical evidence while others were written many years ago. Therefore, before moving forward, it is important to verify whether all the key strategic reasons we have considered so far can be considered as empirically valid in the last decade.

For this reason, it is particularly useful to consider a survey about relocation trends, conducted in 2014, called The Brookfield Global Relocation Trends Survey (GMTS). Among the range of questions related to this topic that have been asked in this survey to 159 corporate mobility professionals worldwide, representing around 8.5 million employees, there is one that is particularly important for our current analysis: organizations had to rank the five most important objectives for international assignments. The survey reports how the top response to this question was "filling a managerial skills gap", followed by "filling a technical skills gap, building international management expertise/career development, launching new endeavors, developing local business relationships and technology transfer, and transfer corporate culture" (GMTS, 2014, p. 41). If we consider Table 1, which reports the GMTS answers to this same question over time, we can easily observe how, besides small variations, international assignments objectives have been fairly consistent throughout the last five years.

Table 1: International Assignment Objectives from 2009 to 2012

	2009	2010	2011	2012
1	Filling a managerial skills gap (25%)	Filling a managerial skills gap (22%)	Filling a technical skills gap (24%)	Filling a technical skills gap (32%)
2	Filling a technical skills gap (22%)	Filling a technical skills gap (21%)	Filling a managerial skills gap (22%)	Filling a managerial skills gap (23%)
3	Building international management expertise/career development (17%)	Building international management expertise/career development (17%)	Building international management expertise/career development (17%)	Building international management expertise/career development (17%)
4	Launching new endeavors (12%)	Technology transfer (16%),	Launching new endeavors (14%)	Launching new endeavors (11%),
5	Technology transfer (12%), transferring corporate culture (7%) and developing local business relationships (5%)	Launching new endeavors (13%), transferring corporate culture (5%) and developing local business relationships (6%)	Technology transfer (12%), transferring corporate culture (6%) and developing local business relationships (5%)	Technology transfer (9%) and developing local business relationships (7%)

*2013 data not available

These results appear to be fully in line with the literature review's findings, and therefore it seems reasonable to say that they empirically support the key strategic reasons we have considered so far, with the exception of three particular variables, that are important to mention: "filling a technical skill gap", which highlights that, when we speak about expatriation, we are not considering exclusively managerial assignments; "launching new endeavors", which indicates a link between expatriation and

the companies' expansions; and "transferring corporate culture", which shows how important it is for MNCs that there is a certain consistency throughout the organization and how expatriates can have the key role of enforcing corporate values.

Having stated the importance of expatriates within MNCs, there is a growing debate "related to the utility and viability of the conventional expatriate assignments" (Collings et al., 2007, p. 6), especially in the face of historical high failure rates, which we will consider in the following section. From an HR standpoint, these assignments need to be managed with specific strategies in order to be successful. In the following paragraphs, I will identify some key aspects of this debate and how these aspects directly impact the HR work.

The impact of expatriation on IHRM strategies

So far, we have considered the advantages of expatriation deployment. However, what we have not yet contemplated is the fact that managing traditional expatriate assignments might be very complex. There are indeed a considerable number of factors that might easily lead to these assignments' failure. According to the GMTS (2014), the factors most responsible for international assignment failures are: the employee leaves to work for another company (19%), or s/he is unable to adapt to the new circumstance (15%), the spouse/partner is dissatisfied (13%), his/her job performance is inadequate (12%), and the selection of the candidate is poor (11%). The corresponding percentages for these responses in the 2013 report were 18%, 11% 17%, 10%, and 9%. Since failure is a significant issue for MNCs, due to the fact that they invest a considerable amount of money to support expatriation, organizations have to think strategically to successful ways for managing their talents.

Five major areas of the "international assignment cycle" (Brewster, Sparrow, Vernon, & Houldsworth, 2007) have been identified and discussed as particularly critical while managing expatriates: supply side and selection/recruitment, preparation and adjustment, performance appraisal and retention, repatriation, and finally, costs. We will deal with each of these areas in turn in the following sections.

As Collings et al. specify in their work (2007, p. 6), some of these issues might be considered "*older challenges*", because they have been mentioned in the field since the early studies on this topic emerged. Others, however, can be considered "*newer challenges*", since their importance has increased recently. In this respect, throughout the following analysis, I will refer to the GMTS reports, which display current trends and show which are the up-to-date strategies that companies are adopting in trying to overcome expatriation issues, to highlight the issues that have been ongoing and the ones that might be instead considered fairly new.

Overall, the aim of this analysis is to shed light on how international assignments are a critical component of the IHRM strategy, and how they are shaping it. In other words, all the issues considered closely in the following sections have, on one hand, dramatically changed and are continuing to change the way in which HR is done, while, on the other hand, have brought many companies to the point of finding an alternative to traditional expatriation, in order to avoid the risk of failures, and save money and time spent on managing the complexity of this kind of assignment.

Supply and selection/recruitment issues

The first key challenge to the traditional expatriate assignment is the supply issue (Collings et al., 2007). In other terms, MNCs have to verify whether there is an employee *available* and *able* to perform the international task. Both the availability and the possibility to find the "right" person for international assignment should not be taken for granted (Collings et al., 2007).

Supply side issues. Regarding the availability of skilled expatriate employees, MNCs have recently assisted to an overall shortage of candidates willing to available to work abroad (Farndale, 2010). Two key trends need to be considered to explain the overall deficiency of candidates who possess the right skills and are willing to work in another country: the increasing emergence of dual career couples and the minimal participation rate of women in international assignments. Due to the increasing female participation rates in the labor force, especially in developed countries, it has become more difficult to find people willing to work abroad. In dual career couples indeed, spouses might not be disposed or able to follow their partners abroad (Collings et al., 2007).

Moreover, to make the situation worse, even though studies indicate a significant growth in female expatriates, still their participation in international assignments remains relatively low. The GMTS reports how, in 2014, only 20% of the expatriates were women. This data has been pretty consistent over the last decade, if we consider that in the year 2013 the women enrolled in international assignments were 23%, in 2012 were 20%, in 2011 were 19%, in 2010 were 17% and in 2009 again 20%.

Harris (2002) has highlighted some of the key reasons why women are generally not selected for international assignments. According to her research results, women are likely to not be considered as expatriates due to the general belief that their personal characteristics (women might not be able to tolerate the stress and tensions associated with living abroad) might compromise the success of the operation; other factors that might prevent them from being selected are the general assumptions that women might be unwilling to undertake these kind of assignments, and it might be harder for a female with a spouse/partner and dependents to work and live abroad than for a man. Finally, lack of organizational support and possible host country nationals' contrasting attitudes (certain host countries' masculine orientation, using one the Hofstede categories, might be not receptive to women expatriates) do not help the whole situation.

However, these considerations appear to be particularly paradoxical if we consider the increasing demand for international talents (Farndale et al., 2010), and the fact that recent research has indicated how female expatriates are generally successful in their global assignments. For example, Tung's (2004) study, *Female Expatriates: The Model Global Manager* (2004), shows how the general considerations Harris (2002) reported are in most of the cases simply myths. The findings demonstrate how "women are willing to undertake international assignments, including postings to hardship locations" (Tung, 2004, p. 250) as long as they can engage in business activities.

Moreover, since, in the samples Tung (2004) considered, women appeared very good in coping with stress and loneliness experienced abroad, together with their capability of building relationship with locals, showing how well they fit in international assignments. A third finding considered in Tung's research is that "females appear better able to cope with conflict-mediating stress than males" (Tung, 2004, p. 251). Finally, women's performance abroad is not different from the male's performance (Caligiuri & Tung, 1999). Therefore, contrary to public opinion, certain so-called feminine characteristics and traits can make them even more appropriate for international assignments. Certainly, barriers might exist, but this can happen abroad as well as at home (Tung, 2004). This is to say that, in the face of an increase in demand for skilled expatriates and shortages in the pool of qualified candidates (Farndale et al., 2010), these data can have positive managerial implications. It could be a win-win situation considering women for international assignments: on one hand, women can acquire a global orientation, while on the other hand, the company can enlarge the pool of competent candidates available for expatriations (Tung, 2004).

Recruitment and Selection Issues. Not only are there problems related to the pool of skilled people willing to work abroad, but also it is important to identify the right person for this particular kind of assignment (Collings et al., 2007). Not everyone, indeed, is ready or has the right competences to live

and work in other country. According to Farndale et al. (2010, p. 163): "to deliver effective global business processes, products and services, global managers need several forms of capitals" which are: cognitive capital, social capital, and political capital.

In this respect, HR professionals in charge of recruiting expatriates have tried to list competences that might help with identifying the right people. Some of these key competences required to be a successful expat are: having work experience in the company (selecting people outside the company might be too risky, since the organization does not know the person and the person does not know enough the company), having the right technical skills, demonstrating openness to experience, tolerance of ambiguity, extroversion, being proactive information-seeking, and generally able to adapt to new situations and a new cultures (Brewster, Sparrow, Vernon, & Houldsworth, 2007). Finally, it is important to verify the family situation. According to the GMTS, in 2014 around 78% of the expatriates were accompanied by a spouse or a partner, and one of the top reasons for international assignment failure was the lack of the family's successful adjustment to the new situation (GMTS, 2014). Therefore, attesting the spouse and family's adaptability and supportiveness to the whole operation, not only before the candidate's departure but also throughout the assignment, might be a key element for the success of the operation (Brewster, Sparrow, Vernon, & Houldsworth, 2007).

These considerations inevitably shrink the pool of candidates even more, if we consider how small the number of global managers who possess such complex capital might be, and increase the competition between MNCs for them (Farndale et al., 2010), leading even more to the necessity to have a IHRM strategy in place. This necessity is aggravated by the fact that Harris and Brewster have shown in their empirical study (1999) how the selection processes are not always formal and rational. They refer to the coffee-machine system as the informal process through which organizations select employees from a small pool known to senior managers, encompassing in this way the formal expatriate selection. This process is particularly unfair and risky, in that it easily leads leading to discrimination and higher risk of failure (Harris & Brewster, 1999).

Preparation and adjustment considerations

One of the key ways in which organizations can support individuals undertaking international assignments is through the provision of pre-departure preparation and adjustment support. There are a considerable number of challenges that expatriates have to face while relocating in another country, such as changing their job and their house, living in a new country that might have a different culture and a diverse political, legal and economic context. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous section, most expatriation involves changes not just for the individual but also for the whole family. It is not just the expatriate that has to adjust to the new situation but all the members of his or her family. Given all these considerations, Harris and Brewster (1999) argue that MNCs should take a more comprehensive approach to pre-departure preparations for expatriates.

Preparation. The challenges that certain countries present characterize one of the major reasons of expatriation failure. According to the GMTS (2014, p. 22), "China has always been cited as the most challenging destination, followed by Brazil and India". For this reason, companies have tried to identify successful ways to support their expatriates.

Cross-cultural training has been recognized as one of the most effective tools to prepare people for cross-cultural assignments (Brislin, 1986). According to the GMTS report, 84% of the companies interviewed responded that they provided it, either for all (39%) or for some (45%) of the international assignments. Such training courses are very important because they offer information about cultural norms, values and beliefs, which are essential for working in a different cultural environment. Dickmann and Baruch (2011), in their study, have identified some of the key benefits of receiving such training,

8

which are: being physiologically prepared for the change, "removing some of the unknown", improving self-awareness and cross-cultural understanding, having the opportunity for asking questions and addressing anxieties in a supportive environment, reducing the stress, providing coping strategies, and easing the settling-in process (Dickmann & Baruch, 2011).

Even if MNCs might benefit from these training courses by reducing the chance of relocation failures, nevertheless still a consistent number of them do not use intercultural training. This is due to the fact that some of these companies simply do not believe in the effectiveness of such training (Black & Mendenhall, 1990). Unfortunately, this concern is not that far from the reality. Mervosh and McClenahen (1997) have shown how cross-cultural training often appears to have a low level of complexity and be relatively short in length, thus having limited effectiveness and impact. Moreover, another major problem that discourages the proposal of such training is the substantial cost.

To address to these two particular issues, companies have started to think strategically about this phase of expatriation. After reviewing previous approaches, Harris and Brewster (2002) propose an integrative framework for building comprehensive cross-cultural training that takes into account job variables at the home-country and host-country level, such as the nature of the operation, the size of the home-country organization, the host-country location (degree of cultural difference and local business culture), the objective of the assignment (career development or technical), the nature of the job (job novelty, degree of interactions with host nationals) and the level of organization support (at HQ and in the host-country), together with individual variables, such as the expatriate profile (education level and career objectives) and partner considerations (dual-career couples). Therefore, according to them, in order to establish appropriate preparation, all these aspects should be considered together with the individual's competencies (Harris & Brewster, 2002).

Moreover, the same two authors list some of the alternatives to this cross-cultural training that might be considered more practical and more cost-effective solutions. Their list includes a variety of approaches, such as informal briefings (discussing the host country context with people who know it well is very cheap and one of the best forms of preparation), look-see visits (the candidate, with the family, has the opportunity to get to know something of the host-country), overlaps (handovers from one expatriate to another), and shadowing the country, which means being responsible for reports, communications and results of the country concerned.

Finally, apart from training the future expatriate, companies have started to consider also the benefits of including the partner in this type of training. The risk of not doing so, and ignoring the partner's needs, could end with expatriation failure. Unprepared partners might bring the expatriate to reconsider or renounce to the assignment (Dickmann & Baruch, 2011).

Adjustment. Once the right candidates have been selected and prepared, another key issue related to international assignments concerns the ability of the expatriates and their family to adjust to the new country's environment. The GMTS (2014) reports how the family adjustment and intercultural adjustment were both considered by the respondents as critical challenges.

Overall, both the expatriate and his or her partner/spouse have to leave far from their friends, their daily activities and, often, their careers. Interestingly, Hechanova et al.'s (2003) work shows how the adjustment factors might directly impact the employees' strain, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intention to leave, and work performance. Adler (1994) shows instead how the partner/spouse might have the most difficult role. While the expatriate is busy at work, the partner/spouse might have to deal with managing the household and surviving in the new environment (i.e. schools, banks, markets).

Therefore, helping the assignees with major challenges, such as immigration regulations, taxes, housing, cultural shocks, schooling, the new job role and identifying for them some trustworthy people

9

to meet, could be extremely beneficial for their adjustment (Brewster, Sparrow, Vernon, & Houldsworth, 2007). Once expatriates, and their families, are finally adjusted, the issue becomes measuring their performance and retaining them.

Expatriate Performance and Retention

Expatriation can be considered one of the most expensive assignments of an organization. Therefore, besides trying to select the right candidates and prepare them for these kinds of assignments, HR professionals should assess expatriates' performance and contribution, while making sure that they stay with the company. Indeed, on one hand, it is extremely important to verify that these international employees are contributing positively to the company business while working abroad; on the other hand, since companies invest so much money to support expatriation, losing them while they are abroad, or right after the repatriation, represents a huge waste of money. Research to date, however, shows how appraisal processes and retention are far from being rigorous and universal procedures (Brewster, Sparrow, Vernon, & Houldsworth, 2007). This is mainly due to the HQ's physical distance from its expatriates.

Expatriate performance. Expatriation failure represents a significant issue for MNCs due to its direct and indirect costs (Dowling & Welch, 2004). Salaries, and training, travel and relocation expenses fit under the group of the direct costs that MNCs have to sustain in order to support their international assignments, while for indirect costs represent "damaged relations with the host country organizations and the general loss of market share" (Collings et al., 2007). According to the GMTS (2014), 12% of the assignment failures were due to inadequate job performance. This percentage clearly suggests how important it might be to monitor the expatriates' performance adequately throughout their assignment.

However, "an objective appraisal of expatriate performance is likely to be highly complex" (Brewster, Sparrow, Vernon, & Houldsworth, 2007, p. 341). This situation is due to HQ's lack of knowledge of the local situation. Moreover, as Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) highlight in their research, expatriates must often meet conflicting expectations: on one hand, there are the objectives dictated by the HQ, while on the other hand they are influenced by all the contextual local pressures (such as technical knowledge, personal and family adjustment to the new environment, environmental factors, and local goals). In other words, performance measurement fits within the broader debate that involves MNCs' attempts to reconcile the need for universal appraisal standards with specific objectives in local units.

There is no a clear and easy answer to all these issues. According to Collings et al. (2007, p. 13), HR professionals should take into account the following key factors, while designing performance management systems: identifying "the persons best placed to evaluate the performance of the assignee considering environmental factors (such as cultural distance, political, economic and labor force stability, and the foreign exchange fluctuation and its impact on the subsidiary's business), and ensuring that the appraisal measure are the same in different countries".

Moreover, MNCs might want to use a variety of different appraisal methods, to ensure more objective measurement, and try to combine them with visits from the HQ, visits back to the HQ, assessment of results in the area in which the expatriate is working, and finally reports and emails, in order to have as many elements as possible to judge the expatriate's performance (Brewster, Sparrow, Vernon, & Houldsworth, 2007).

Retention. The issue of expatriate turnover continues to be a challenge for many MNCs. According to the GMTS, in 2014 the top reason of assignment failure is related to the employee's choice to leave for another company (19%). This data becomes particularly significant considering the fact that, as mentioned above, MNCs are witnessing a shortage of the right candidates for international

assignments and there is an ongoing "war for talent", where organizations are competing for these top talents, who have a global mindset and experience. Given the fact that retention of expatriates has been identified as the major talent management challenge for MNCs (Scullion & Collings, 2006), MNCs should not only monitor the performance of their employees while they work abroad, but also check their level of satisfaction with their jobs and their lives in a new country, in order to be sure to retain some of the people in whom they are investing the most.

Previous studies on expatriation failure have suggested that various factors might be considered as predictors of the expatriate's willingness to leave or stay with the company. Some of these factors include: being placed in non-challenging jobs, lack of promotions, lack of career planning, lack of support on behalf of managers and colleagues, and slow-moving career advancements (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2002). Among these many factors the most important one can be identified in the expatriates' perceptions about the company's supportiveness during their assignments (Feldman & Thomas, 1992). In other words, the more they feel supported by the organization, especially on the factors listed, the more they feel committed to it and more inclined to not leave it.

For this reason, Shen and Hall (2009) introduce the concept of job embeddedness as central to the success of an international assignment. According to them, "the stronger employees' ties are to their job, the people, the organization, the community, and other factors associated with it - that is, the greater is the job embeddedness - the more likely they are to remain in that job" (Shen & Hall, 2009, p. 794). Building upon the work by Feldman and Thomas (1992), which provides a good conceptual base for studying expatriation issues, in which they demonstrate seven career development strategies that might strengthen the relationship ties between the expat and the organization, Shen and Hall (2009) identify some key aspects that might positively reinforce this relationship. They argue that the company's perceived investment in the international assignment might be positively related to the perceived cost of leaving the company. Moreover, providing a mentor program making sure that the international assignment is part of an overall career plan, providing a competitive reward package and maintaining periodic communication with the assignee throughout his or her experience abroad, are some of the key strategies that the company may adopt to strengthen the relationship between the expatriate and his or her company (Shen & Hall, 2009).

Repatriation

Repatriation represents the final stage of the global assignment cycle. As in any other phase of this cycle that we have analyzed so far, repatriation presents some major issues too. According to the GMTS, in 2014 around 24% of international assignees left the company within 12 months of repatriation. The major issue, again, pertains to being able to retain these valuable employees. Indeed, according to Lazarova and Caligiuri (2002, p. 389), repatriates "who have completed a global assignment can help establish and expand an MNCs international business", since they possess a direct knowledge of the host country's culture and market. Moreover, they know how the company is perceived in that country and they have built a valuable global social network that can help the company. Given the fact that when an employer loses an employee, it loses what the employee has learned during his or experience abroad, along with the investment in money and management for that particular assignment, it is extremely important to understand why 24% employees leave their companies once they get back in the home country.

According to the GMTS (2014, p. 57), "84% of companies responded that they did not have a formal repatriation strategy linked with career management and retention". Moreover, most organizations did not provide post-assignment guarantees, relying on informal networks within the company as the best way to find them a job when they return. Finally, previous academic studies on

repatriate turnover have tried to identify the specific factors that might be considered as predictors of this phenomenon. According to Brewster et al. (2007, p. 342), expatriates encounter difficulties in "re-integrating themselves in the home country, due to a loss of status, loss of autonomy, loss of career direction, and a general feeling that the international experience is under-valued by the company". Along with that, there might be also "a loss of salary and life style, and family readjustment problems" (Brewster, Sparrow, Vernon & Houldsworth, 2007, p. 342).

According to Lazarova and Caligiuri (2002), it seems clear that repatriation practices offered by organizations positively affect repatriates' willingness to remain with their companies. Specifically, they argue that some of the most successful strategies in retaining candidates are: working on their expectations before their departure and throughout their experience abroad, valuing their experience abroad and supporting them and their families once they get back, planning career-focused sessions, and writing coherent repatriation policies. Finally they highlight how expatriation and repatriation are not two separate processes. Indeed, most of the activities that help with retaining expatriates happen during rather than after the expatriation assignment (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2002).

In general, planning has been recognized as a fundamental part of successful repatriation. For this reason, according to the GMTS (2014, p. 60), an increasing number of companies have tried in the last decade to develop initiatives to retain their employees, such as: "guaranteeing a position upon completion of an international assignment (18%), offering repatriation career support for international assignees (11%), offering greater choices of positions upon return (11%), greater recognition during/after an international assignment (9%), offering repatriation support for the family (9%), and responding immediately to security/safety issues (9%)".

In this section of the paper we have considered the major challenges related to every phase of the global assignment cycle. Before evaluating some of the current most important alternatives to traditional expatriations, however, it is important to look at one last major key challenge that affect the whole traditional global assignment: its cost.

Costs

A major challenge for continuing to use traditional forms of expatriation is represented by the cost associated with them (Collings, Scullion & Morley, 2007). According to Selmer (2001), the cost of a global assignment is between three to five times an assignee's home income per annum. Moreover, Sparrow et al. (2004) showed in their empirical study how few companies had a clear idea about how much they invested for global assignments and, in general, about the benefits of having supported international assignments.

These data seem to be fully supported by the results of the 2014 GMT Survey. According to this survey, "71% of respondents indicated their companies required a clear statement of international assignment objectives before obtaining funding for an international assignment, 50% of companies required a cost-benefit analysis to provide a business justification for the international assignment, 55% of respondents indicated they tracked costs during an international assignment, 36% of the respondents compared estimated international assignment costs with the actual costs of international assignments, and finally only 7% formally measured international assignment return of investment (ROI)" (GMTS, 2014, p. 64).

One of the key issues for both academics and HRM professionals is being able to measure adequately the costs and benefits of international assignments (Collings, Scullion & Morley, 2007). In the 2014 GMTS (p. 67), some of the respondents identified as key issues on this matter, "the need for a cost-conscious culture, the challenges in being able to obtain reliable information, and the challenges related to governmental measures, such as taxes, currency, and inflation. Finally, others indicated challenges in

12

the complexity of costs and of cost-tracking methods". The top reason related to why companies did not measure ROI was the fact that they were "not sure about how to do it. Other important factors were the reliability of data, the lack of technology or resources needed to complete the ROI evaluation, or an even bigger obstacle, lacking consensus around what and how to measure ROI" (GMTS, 2014, p. 68).

According to the GMT Survey, "given the predominance of the cost pressures companies are facing, it is a little surprising that many companies are not adopting increasingly formalized methods for estimating, tracking, and comparing the costs of international assignments in order to save money" (GMTS, 2014, p. 64). Program cost data, along with competitive benchmark information and industry analyses, give global mobility program leaders powerful tools for making the best-informed program decisions. Nevertheless, they appear in many cases to be very expenses and not particularly user-friendly (GMTS, 2014). Moreover, it looks like even international assignment ROI might need to be improved. Even if "64% of respondents rated their company's ROI for international assignments as good or very good, no-one rated their ROI as excellent, and 38% indicated their international assignment ROI was fair to poor" (GMTS, 2014, p. 68). According to the 2014 GMTS (p. 68), "the most commonly noted initiatives to improve ROI were to have better career path planning up-front to better utilize skills after return, followed by improved candidate selection".

Two responses

Having defined what traditional international assignments are, identified why organizations use expatriates, and analyzed the key issues that such assignments present and the relevant strategies MNCs are adopting to overcome these issues, it is now important to focus on what appear to be the two major responses to the complexity and considerable risk of failure of traditional international assignments.

On one hand, Farndale et al. (2010) have pointed out how the role of HR working in MNC HQs has dramatically changed in the last few decades due to the complexity that such assignments present. On the other hand, alternatives to the traditional long-term expatriate assignments have emerged as a consequence of their high costs, their considerable high rate of failure, the substantial time spent managing expatriates, and the overall advancement in technology.

Roles of corporate HR in MNCs

The importance assigned to global talent in the past few decades, the related talent shortage pressure, the highly competitive environment, and the general complexity in managing global careers, have considerably affected the role of HR Management (HRM) in MNCs (Sparrow et al., 2010). As MNCs have changed and keep changing their organization design and structure to be successful on a global scale, international HRM has changed accordingly, in order to manage their international staff efficaciously. As a consequence of this broader, global, focus that HR professionals have acquired recently in MNCs, their work in this new area has started to be defined as "Global Talent Management" (GTM).

Overall, only recently has research begun to focus on this topic in order to identify what are the key roles that HR plays in strategically managing candidates overseas. One of the most relevant studies related to this subject was conducted by Farndale et al. (2010), who have identified four roles that help to define better the GTM key functions: "champions of processes", "guardians of culture", "network leadership and intelligence", and finally "managers of internal receptivity". Although Farndale et al. (2010) remark how in general "there is still confusion regarding the specific role that HR professionals should play in GMT processes" (Farndale et al, 2010, p. 166), nevertheless the authors provide an in-depth insight on international HR key responsibilities.

The first role, champion of processes, refers to the HR professionals' responsibility to monitor

13

talent management processes (Sparrow et al., 2004). Previously, I noted how organizations seek high skilled talents for their assignments abroad, and how it might be difficult for them to find the right people and retain them while they are in another country and when they repatriate. These considerations have consequently given rise to the necessity within MNCs "to create strategic workforce plans, map the market and brand the employer" (Farndale et al., 2009, p. 165). In other words, HR people need to think strategically about how attracting, training, and retaining employees who possess a high level of determinate skills, such as being able to adapt to different circumstances. Making sure to build and publicize the organization brand effectively, so that everyone knows the strengths of such company, is an example of such strategies.

The importance of the second HR role identified by Farndale et al. (2010), guardians of culture, becomes particularly evident when we think about the fact that international assignments involve talents working in a different country, which has a different culture, and political and economic context. Generally, by company culture we mean the collective values, beliefs and systems of an organization. These values, beliefs and systems work as guidelines for employee behavior. HR has the duty to supervise the implementation of the company culture across the world, while encouraging a culture of trust and motivation among employees in the HQ and between expatriates and people working in other countries (Farndale et al., 2010, p. 165). As it might appear evident, this role is key within MNCs not only to promote the organization's positive values, continuing in this way its strategy to attract and retain key talents, but also to promote a climate of global collaboration within the company, where people feel more encouraged to be mobile (Farndale et al., 2010). These two aspects are particularly important if we think of the fact that expatriation implicates people working with new colleagues and of the difficulty in finding employees willing to work abroad.

Moreover, HR should be well-networked to be successful. Indeed, this feature not only facilitates the collaboration across the organization, but also it increases their awareness about what is going on inside and outside the organization. In addition, having strong networks facilitates the process of knowledge sharing, which is very important for the success of the organization (Farndale et al., 2010). This in particularly important if we think again about the difficulty of successfully measuring the expatriates' job performance. The more corporate HR people have connections with subsidiaries, the more they can obtain comprehensive information about their international assignees. Finally, a well-networked HR can better support people working abroad, facilitating their stay in another country (Farndale et al., 2010).

Lastly, research has showed that "CHR can play an active role in the career management of international employees - encouraging mobility but also ensuring individuals are looked after in the process (in terms of receptivity of the receiving units to manage diversity, career management, integration and work-like issues)" (Farndale et al., 2010, p. 165). In this sense, HR professionals should also be managers of internal receptivity. HR policies and practices cannot be rigid systems, but rather they have to adapt to the different and evolving situations. For example, given the shortage of talents willing to work abroad, it is important to start thinking strategically how to best support each candidate, in order to increase his or her motivation to work abroad, or to start thinking about the pool of eventual candidates for international assignments in a broader way, considering more female candidates or adopting a selection process that considers all the applicants (not like the exclusive coffee-machine system).

This last point leads on to the next section of the paper. Global assignments do not have just one single form. There are multiple alternatives to long-term traditional assignments that have grown in popularity recently. Therefore, HR people should manage these forms of global assignments in a different way, adopting strategies that adjust better to their particular features.

Alternative Forms of International Assignments

The discussion reported in the previous section of this paper, regarding all the issues related to traditional international assignments, might make you expect a decline in the use of expatriates. Surprisingly, this is not the case. According to the 2014 GMTS (p. 15), "47% of respondents reported an increase in the number of international assignees in 2013 over the prior year, 25% cited a decrease, and 28% reported that the growth rate stayed the same. The historical averages were 47%, 23%, and 29%, respectively".

Even though the usage of long-term assignments appears to be stable, nevertheless fairly recent research has highlighted a new trend related to the topic of global careers: the growing use of alternative forms of international assignments, frequently called "flex expatriations". This trend "has been driven in large part by the problems associated with the traditional expatriate assignment" (Collings et al., 2007, p. 15). Moreover, Mayerhofer et al. (2004) have pointed out how this growth might be also attributed to changing business circumstances on a global scale. Some of the circumstances they have identified are: new forms of international organizations (i.e. joint ventures), superior technology, more efficient air transport, the increasing attention to work-life balance, and finally the access to a "more globally competent workforce", that is able to deal not just with one, but with many different cultures (Scullion & Collings, 2006, p. 161).

Trying to address the question related to the differences between traditional international assignments and flexpatriate assignments, Mayerhofer et al. (2004) have come to the following conclusions: first, an increasing number of international assignments are not as long-term as traditional ones, but rather short and frequent; moreover, these new forms of global staffing appear to be more flexible in contrast to the rigid structure that traditional expatriation presents. Interestingly, the authors also noticed a general deficiency of HR support for flexpatriate assignments, which are generally managed by the expatriates and their families, and therefore they also pointed out how the strategic support of HR professionals might make them more successful; this lack of attention is directly related, according to Mayerhofer and colleagues (2004), to the fact that traditional expatriate assignments are still seen as more important to MNCs, since they provide a long-term presence in a particular country. Finally, they noticed that there are some factors that directly impact the success of flexpatriation, such as individual inventiveness at work, individual inclination to deal positively with cultural issues, and the family support systems. These findings will be discussed in greater detail when analyzing the different forms of flexpatriation.

The different forms of international assignments can be categorized according to their length, which usually depends upon the purpose of the assignment, and the type of task (Scullion & Collings, 2006). The 2014 GMTS reports the types of international assignments that the respondents used in 2013. 98% of them adopted long-term assignments, 92% short-term assignments, 61% one-way permanent transfers, 55% localization, 35% extended business travel, 30% commuter assignments, 26% developmental assignments, 19% rotational assignments, 17% graduate assignments, 7% fly-in fly-out assignments, and 11% other types of flexpatriation (GMTS, 2014, p. 30).

In the following sections, I will analyze some of these emerging alternatives in detail. In particular, I will examine four macro categories of non-traditional assignments: short-term international assignments, frequent flyer assignments, virtual assignments, and inpatriate assignments. Specifically, I will specify what they are, I will identify the circumstances under which MNCs use them, and finally I will consider their advantages, showing how these features respond to one or more issues of traditional international assignments, together with their disadvantages.

Short-term International Assignments. Tahvanainen et al. (2005) identified short-term assignments as the most popular alternative to traditional long-term international assignments. To understand which assignments fit under this category, different factors have to be considered. First of all, the duration of the assignment is a decisive factor. PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2002, p. 22) defines short-term assignments as "longer than a business trip, yet shorter than the typical expatriate assignment. Short-term international assignments are always classified as assignments between one to twelve months". Moreover, the employee's family often does not relocate with the assignee. Finally, "salary, pension and social security benefits are handled in the home country" (Collings et al., 2007, p. 16).

Building upon previous studies, Tahvanainen et al. (2005) report three reasons why companies generally adopt short-term assignments. First, MNCs use short term-assignments to transfer particular skills and to solve specific problems (i.e. implementing a new project, establishing a new process); second, for managerial control reasons, such as managing a specific process; and third, for managerial development, to help managers gain international capability.

It seems particularly evident that these reasons seem to be fully in line with the reasons that cause MNCs to use long-term expatriation, showing how they might be valuable alternatives to traditional international assignments. Besides this fact, Tahvanainen et al. (2005) have identified major advantages related to the use of short-term international assignments. First of all, they are cost effective; these assignments need monetary support for a relatively short period of time; moreover, MNCs do not have to pay for the family's relocation, or for the children's schools. Second, short-term assignments can be also considered more flexible and simple to manage, compared to traditional expatriation. An employee might be more willing to accept a short assignment than a long one; moreover, the whole family does not need to relocate, which means that the spouse/partner does not need to give up to his or her job, and children do not have to interrupt schooling (Tahvanainen et al.*,* 2005).

These considerations are particularly relevant considering how difficult it is to find employees willing to work abroad for a long period of time, how the dual career issue is increasingly growing as a key challenge to expatriation, and how it might be difficult to relocate the whole family. In addition, it is a faster process to send an employee abroad, and it might be easier to obtain a visa for a limited period of time, and manage the assignment from an administrative standpoint. Furthermore, the employee's performance can be evaluated more easily and precisely, since they work in another country for a shorter period of time (Tahvanainen et al.*,* 2005). Finally, if we consider how difficult is to retain expatriates, shortening the period in which a key employee works far from the HQ might diminish the risk of losing him or her; also, relocating him or her once he or she is back in the home country, might be less complicated. Since short-term international assignments last up to twelve months, there is less risk for employees to lose their status and connection with the home-country HQ.

Even though this kind of international assignment seems to easily solve many issues that commonly arise with traditional assignments, nevertheless problems may exist also for short-term international assignments. Tahvanainen et al. (2005, p. 667) report as common challenges taxation problems, especially for assignments that last more than six months, potential family problems due to the distance (work-life issues), and the difficulty of building successful relationships with local people, due to the short period spent in the new country.

International Business Travelers. International business travelers (IBT), known also as frequent flyers, "are persons for whom a part - generally a major part - of their roles involves international visits to foreign markets, units, projects, and the like. In other words, business travel is an essential part of their work" (Welch & Worm, 2006, p. 174). Commuter assignments and rotational assignments can fit

16

under this category. The former indicates assignments during which "assignees travel from their home country to a post in another country, generally on a weekly or be-weekly basis" (Collings, et al., 2007, p. 18). The latter is an assignment "where the staff commute from their home country to another workplace in another country for a short, set period, followed by a period of time off in the home country" (Welch & Worm, 2006, p. 283). Even though these types of assignments do not involve the relocation to another country of the assignees and their families, nevertheless they are considered as another valuable alternative to traditional expatriation (Collings et al., 2007).

Generally, IBTs are adopted by MNCs to conduct business transactions where relocation is not a requisite. Moreover, they might be particularly appropriate to use to deal with countries that traditionally have presented substantial challenges to expatriates, such as China. Finally, they are also useful in countries across Europe, where flying is very cheap and easy, or in situations in which the subsidiaries are collocated in different parts of the same country (Welch, & Worm, 2006).

Welch and Worm (2006) have identified a considerable number of advantages that IBTs offer to MNCs and individuals. First, they represent another cost effective alternative to long-term international assignments, which is very positive if we consider how organizations are striving to contain the costs and save money. Second, they allow personal interactions, without however requiring a physical relocation; moreover, IBTs are people used to travel, and therefore they might become experts in quickly dealing with different cultures and people. Third, these particular types of assignments do not involve interruptions to employees' careers. In additions, they represent a good compromise to the increasing issue of "staff immobility", principally due to dual-career relationships or family needs (Welch & Worm, 2006, p. 174); furthermore, these assignments do not present any particular risk to employee retention, and they do not compromise effective performance appraisal. Finally, from an administrative point of view, they are very easy to manage (Welch & Worm, 2006).

Even though IBTs present all these advantages, they present also many disadvantages. Indeed, it is particularly difficult to find people willing to travel very often. Moreover, health issues related to frequent business travel, such as stress, might arise (Welch & Worm, 2006). In addition, continuous travel might negatively affect private or family life. It has been documented how continuous separation due travel can increase irritation and stress among family's members, more than long absences. Finally, if the trips are one after another, it becomes very difficult to catch up with the work required in the office (Welch & Worm, 2006).

Virtual Global Assignments. Maznevsky et al. (2005, p. 364) define global virtual teams as "groups of people who work together using communications technology more often than face to face, are distributed across space, are responsible for a joint outcome, usually work on strategic or technically advanced tasks and are multifunctional and/or multicultural". Therefore, unlike the other two assignments mentioned above, virtual assignments do not require physical relocation or intense travelling. Virtual workers can work from their offices, or even from their homes, and successfully collaborate with a global team. What has made these operations possible is the advent of Internet, the vast use of electronic information and the growth of new communication technologies, such as emails or video-conferencing (Scullion & Collings, 2006).

In the last decade, companies have considerably and consistently increased their use of virtual assignments (PriceWaterhouseCooper, 2000) for routine activities (Collings et al., 2007). The shortage of staff willing to accept traditional international assignments and the continuous strive to reduce costs can be consider the two main reasons that better explain this growth (Scullion & Collings, 2006). Indeed, global virtual employees can stay in their home country, and still work on a global scale, and the company can save the money that is typically invested in travel, relocation, and new offices. Moreover, other particular advantages exist that make virtual assignments a good alternative to long-term

17

international assignments. First, they are very easy and flexible. Neither the assignees nor their families have to travel or relocate, employees can work from home, and for these two reasons there are no particular work-life balance issues. In other words, people with handicaps, families, or family care duties can still have global assignments. Moreover, personal opinions might be expressed more freely. Since the employees do not leave, it is easier to measure their performance. All the issues related to global assignment administration (salaries, visas, work permits, and oversea support), career interruptions due to travel and relocation, and repatriation, do not exist.

However, in practice, creating successful virtual teams might be very challenging. There are a number of considerable difficulties that make virtual global assignments highly subject to failure. Firstly, Maznevsky et al. (2005) highlight how it might be difficult to communicate effectively. There is high risk of misunderstandings and misinterpretations, as well as a difficulty in receiving immediate answers: "companies have witnessed a time lag between the message sent and the reply" (Scullion & Collings, 2006, p. 166). Plus, body language, which may help in the communication process, is totally lacking. Secondly, it is very difficult to keep the members of the team fully engaged, since the communication in many cases is not face-to-face (Scullion & Collings, 2006, p. 166). The third disadvantage regards the ability of the team members to build solid relationships. It is more difficult to trust someone who you "can't supervise directly" (Scullion & Collings, 2006, p. 168), and it is more challenging to understand the cultural and socio-economic context of the other people. In this sense, the possibility to develop a global mindset is more challenging, since the employees do not directly experience the culture and context of other countries. Furthermore, leadership is a central challenge considering how it might be difficult to manage people who work in dispersed locations. Finally, global virtual employees have a hard time with identifying themselves with the organization, since they are more involved with people they never see in person rather than with the people who work next to them (Scullion & Collings, 2006, p. 166).

Inpatriates. Harvey et al. (2000, p. 154) have defined this fourth emerging type of international assignees as "host or third country managers who are transferred into the home organization on a semi-permanent to permanent basis to enhance globalization of business activities". In this case, therefore, subsidiary employees are those who expatriate and spend a period of time in the MNC's HQ.

This growth in the use of this particular kind of assignment is due to several different factors. First, although it is not cost-effective, since the money to support inpatriation comes from the same company, it is a great solution if the organization wants to expose the HQ employees to different cultures and contexts, without sending them overseas. Plus, inpatriates help with the HQ shortage of people willing to relocate in another country for a period of time. Third, the assignees can act as a link between the subsidiary where they come from, and the organization's HQ, enhancing global networks and simplifying collaboration between these two entities. Finally, inpatriate assignees can help with "implementing specific processes in the host country", once they repatriate (Scullion & Collings, 2006, p. 172).

Even though inpatriation presents all these benefits, it is not free from challenges. According to the literature, they present the same traditional expatriation challenges (selection, adjustment, performance appraisal and retention, repatriation, and costs), just in reverse, and overall seem to be more complex processes (Scullion & Collings, 2006, p. 173). First, as in the expatriation scenario, inpatriates have to adjust to a different culture and context, as well as becoming familiar with the organization's core culture. Moreover, the integration with the HQ employees may not be as easy as it could be. Indeed, inpatriates do not benefit from the label associated with coming from the HQ; furthermore, HQ employees might feel that their power or status might be compromised by the presence of successful inpatriates (Scullion & Collings, 2006, p. 172), plus they might not be prepared to be sensitive to other ways to behave and operate.

18

Conclusion

For many years, the main focus of the research related to international assignments has focused on traditional long-term expatriate assignments, which generally involve the relocation of the assignees and their families to another country for one or more years. The abundance of research related to this topic is due to two different, but equally important, reasons. On one hand, expatriation has been recognized as very useful to MNCs. In the first part of this paper, I explained how MNCs use these assignments for many valid reasons, such as filling vacancies or developing management. On the other hand, the novelty, complexity and high chance of failure of such assignments have pushed research further in an attempt to report the most effective strategies companies have used to overcome these challenges. Over the years, HR professionals have focused their attention on each phase of the expatriation cycle in order to identify the best strategies to manage strategically this type of assignment.

Nonetheless, fewer articles have been written on the different forms of international assignment as reviewed in the previous section. This is mainly due to the fact that MNCs have started to use them more recently. These new forms have developed as a response to the traditional expatriate assignment's complexity. Their growth has however posed a considerable number of challenges to HR. First, MNCs now have to administer and manage not just one type of international assignment, but many different ones. Moreover, even though these assignments are shorter, cheaper, more simple and flexible, nevertheless, they present a long list of disadvantages that, once again, involve HRM strategic consideration. Unfortunately, the research on this topic is still in its early stages, and therefore at this moment it is difficult to obtain a comprehensive picture about how effectively MNCs' HR are dealing with these challenges. Finally, research (Mayerhofer et al., 2004) has highlighted how, so far, MNCs have left the organizational burden of such assignments directly for the employees. This means that IHRM has not been particularly involved in managing these new forms.

The analysis of these two different international assignments, the traditional form and the new forms, therefore leads to two similar and very linked, related conclusions. First, even though international assignments are very useful and necessary, we have seen how both forms are not perfect. Even the alternatives present many challenges. This leads to the second point, that is: the complexity of international assignments has shaped and it is continuing to shape HR' tasks and roles. On one hand, their complexity directly impact IHRM strategies, while on the other hand, corporate HR has assumed new key roles in MNCs: "champions of processes", "guardians of culture", "network leadership and intelligence", and finally "managers of internal receptivity" (Farndale et al., 2010). Finally, Farndale et al.'s (2010, p. 166) remark about how in general "there is still confusion regarding the specific role that HR professionals should play in GMT processes", and the overall absence of research on HR strategies related to how to manage international assignments alternative forms effectively, makes clear how there is still work to do to better understand HR roles in GTM management processes and their strategies in dealing with flexpatriation.

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