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'Keeping the family side ticking along': An exploratory study of the work-family interface of international business travellers and rotational assignees.

Charlotte Baker and Sylwia Ciuk

Introduction

The influence of family on expatriate assignment success and failure has long been recognised in international management literature (Harzing and Christensen, 2004; Shaffer et al, 1999; Tung, 1988). In fact, spouse/partner dissatisfaction has been cited among the top three reasons behind assignment failure in the Brookfields Global Relocation Survey (2012; 2013; 2014) for the last three years running. Partly as a response to the challenges posed to traditional expatriates and their families (e.g. Shaffer et al, 2001), alternative forms of expatriate assignments, such as frequent international business travel, international business commuting or rotational assignments, have gained prominence (Dowling and Welch, 2004; Tahvanainen et al, 2005; Scullion et al, 2007). However, alternatives to the expatriate assignment do not avoid family related issues, but the problems take on new forms, the most prevalent being familial separation and work-family conflict (Mayerhofer et al, 2004; Starr and Currie, 2009; Tahvanainen et al, 2005).

While there already exists a substantial body of work on familial challenges for traditional expatriates, less is known about how exactly the work/family interface plays out for the different types of alternative assignments. The existing models which consider familial challenges in relation to traditional expatriates (e.g. Caliguiri et al, 1998; Lazarova et al, 2010; Takeuchi et al, 2002) cannot be easily applied to the context of non-traditional assignments since they are based on the assumption that the family relocates together with the expatriate, which is not the case when it comes to alternative assignments. In light of the relative scarcity of work on alternative assignment forms and the recognition that the challenges at work-family interface are a key factor affecting not only the performance of alternative assignees, but also their and their family's well-being (e.g. Westman and Etzion, 2002; Espino et al, 2002; Westman et al, 2008), we believe that more work is needed to better understand how these challenges arise. We aim to contribute to this understanding by focusing on two selected non-traditional forms of expatriation: rotational assignments (RA) and

international business travel (IBT). More specifically, we are interested in exploring work arrangements associated with these two assignment types which are experienced by the participants as weighing most heavily on their work-family interface.

Both of the selected assignments types are of considerable empirical and practical significance. The general trend in IBT, defined as frequent business trips from the home country to international destinations (Petrovic et al, 2000; Meyskens et al, 2009), is one of increasing volume and frequency (Beaverstock, et al 2012). According to the Cartus Mobility Survey 2012, sixty per cent of the organisations surveyed indicated that they expected to see an increase in their use of IBT over the next two years. Similarly, demand for rotational assignees who work internationally on a shift cycle, often in remote locations both on and off-shore (Miller and Salt, 2008), and who are key to the extractive industries, is also likely to grow considerably, especially in light of the increasing energy demands of emerging markets. The Offshore Petroleum Industry Training Organisation (OPITO), for example, has recently reported that forty-four per cent of companies in oil and gas are expecting significant growth over coming years (Ignite, 2012).

We start by reviewing the existing literature on the expatriate work-family interface, in particular in the context of alternative forms of assignments. After discussing the methodology of our study, we present our findings. We conclude by discussing our research in light of the existing literature on the topic and highlighting the implications of our study.

Work/family interface and the expatriate

It is typically argued that within the sphere of international work, balancing work and family responsibilities becomes more challenging than in the context of domestic employees as unfamiliar situations place intensified pressure on the international assignee (Shaffer et al, 2001). To illustrate the pressures facing expatriates and their families, researchers have drawn extensively on role theory (Katz and Kahn, 1978; Khan et al, 1964) which postulates that conflicting pressures arise from participation in multiple roles, which may be caused by ambiguity or conflict between the different roles (inter role conflict) and from within the roles themselves (intrarole conflict). Shaffer et al (2001), for example, demonstrated that expatriates experience higher

levels of stress as they are confronted with new responsibilities, work pressure and less time with the family.

Whilst early research considered work family conflict to be unidirectional, more recently, scholars have found this form of conflict to be bidirectional whereby work roles encroach on family roles and vice versa (Frone et al, 1992, Netemeyer et al, 1996). Both forms of this conflict have been found to correlate with psychological withdrawal, disengagement from the international assignment, absenteeism, high turnover and performance issues (Schaffer et al, 2001; Fu and Shaffer, 2001). Typically, the levels of reported work family conflict among expatriates are higher than family work conflict (Frone et al, 1992; Vallone and Ensher, 2001).

An important contribution from the literature is that work and family are not entirely separate 'domains' but should rather be understood as interrelated (Clark, 2000). It is argued that upon undertaking an international assignment, boundaries between work and family domains become increasingly blurred as the whole family becomes ensconced in the expatriate's work driven relocation (Caliguiri et al, 1998; Lazarova, 2010). Building on the points above, role stress theory (Khan et al, 1964) proposes that stress accumulated in one domain (i.e. family) may 'spill over' into the other domain (i.e. work), as illustrated for example by Leiter (1996), and can have an impact on the expatriate's performance (Caliguiri et al, 1998; Takeuchi, 2002). However, as Lazarova (2010) explains, the spillover and the bi-directionality of work and family activities do not occasion intrinsically negative outcomes. Research has shown (e.g. Caliguiri et al, 1998; Lazarova, 2010) that the family can have a positive influence on the international assignment. In fact, expatriates with accompanying families have been found to generally adjust better than their single counterparts (Thomas, 1998)

There already exist a number of models of the work family interface in the context of traditional expatriation. Such models, in the main, seek to apply existing work family theories to the expatriate situation. Caliguiri et al (1998), for example, explore the relationship between expatriates' family adjustment and their performance at work. Similarly, Lazarova et al (2010) propose a model depicting the influence of demands and resources on the adjustment and engagement of the expatriate, whereas Selmer and Fenner (2008) consider the sources of work family conflict (WFC) and family work conflict (FWC). While these models are very valuable in illuminating the work-family interface of traditional expatriates, they do not adequately describe the experiences of

non-traditional assignees whose work arrangements occasion different familial challenges. Arguably, the biggest difference between traditional expatriates and their colleagues working on non-standard international assignments can be attributed to the fact that both the expatriate and the family relocate. Therefore, we argue, more work is needed in order to understand how the work/family interface plays out in the context of non-traditional expatriation.

Work-family interface and the non-traditional international assignments

There is much debate in the literature as to whether the challenges associated with the traditional expatriate assignments can be overcome by the use of alternative forms (Collings, 2007; Richardson and McKenna, 2007). However, researchers have found that short term and other non-traditional assignment types also have the propensity to seriously impact family life (Espino, 2002; Starr and Currie, 2009). Familial separation is a key factor in differentiating the expatriate assignment from alternative assignment forms. Research into the experiences of international business travellers (e.g. De Frank et al, 2000; Mayerhofer, 2004), for example, found that separation had a significant impact on each member of the family unit. The travellers themselves felt that separation from their family was the most difficult part of business travel, and experienced sentiments of loneliness, guilt over missing family activities and concern that they would not be available in a crisis (De Frank, 2000, Espino, 2002). Spouses echoed similar concerns.

While research has shown that familial separation is a common barrier to acceptance of the international assignment for short-term assignees (Starr and Currie, 2009), international business travellers, commuters and rotators typically see international travel as an integral part of their role. The main difference between short term and international business travel and rotational assignments is that whilst short term assignments involve a defined period of separation that commonly lasts six months to one year, international business travel and rotational assignments involve on-going and often unplanned periods of separation that are shown to be particularly taxing on familial relationships (Starr and Currie, 2009; De Frank et al, 2000). This situation is not helped by the fact that the management of the alternative international assignment is often left largely to the assignee and their families (Mayerhofer et al, 2002; Starr and Currie, 2009). Tahvanainen et al (2005) therefore suggest that managerial support is key for alternative assignees, since management of non-

standard assignment tends to be the responsibility of line managers. Similarly, Beaverstock et al (2012) argue that for IBTs, their managers' beliefs and practices surrounding travel heavily influence the support available to them. Knowledgeable managers may play a more active role in making adjustments which may help to reduce stress and lead to improved adjustment and performance of the assignees (Beaverstock et al, 2010; De Frank et al, 2000,), otherwise balancing work and family demands is left to the assignee who might become the victim of an 'out of sight out of mind' organisational mentality (De Frank et al, 2000; Mayerhorfer, 2004; Star and Currie, 2009; Tahvanainen et al, 2005).

The literature on RAs, as we noted earlier, is scarce. A number of publications, however, make an important contribution to the family-work interface by adopting the spousal perspective to discuss the 'Intermittent Husband Syndrome' (IHS). Morrice and Taylor's (1978) early work on IHS, for example, found that work induced separation placed significant psychological strain on the spouses of offshore workers resulting in anxiety, depression and sexual difficulties (Sutherland, 1989).

An important strand of literature on short-term assignments has explored the topic of stress, and in particular 'travel stress'. Researchers have found that short term, commuter and international business travel assignments can be a considerable source of stress for the assignee, in some cases leading to eventual burnout (Westman and Etzion, 1995). A number of studies that have examined travel stress and burnout found them to be caused by an accumulation of a number of work and non-work 'stressors' including family conflict, cross-cultural adjustment and work overload (De Frank, 2000; Striker, 2000; Westman et al, 2004). Family has been found to contribute to all aspects of the 'travel stress', including the pre-departure time, the actual trip as well as the post-trip period (De Frank et al, 2000; Striker, 2000). Importantly, the literature shows that travel stressors contribute to anxiety and frustration not only for the traveller but also for the family members (Espino et al, 2002; Westman and Etzion, 2002).

Westman et al (2004) have found that work/family conflict (WFC) is generally higher at the pre-trip stage as a result of job preparation for the trip and the anticipation of adjusting to working in a different environment without the support of peers, manager and family. Interestingly, Westman and colleagues' work also points to international business trips as a kind of respite for the assignee and their family (Westman and Etzion, 2002; Westman et al, 2009). This occurs during the trip stage

when the assignee's detachment from their family affords them a break from family life and responsibilities and in some cases strengthens the bond between assignee and spouse (Westman et al, 2009). Westman et al (2009) suggests that whether the impact of travel is positive or negative depends upon the quality of the familial relationships, age of the children, spousal support and frequency and length of travel.

While, as discussed above, there is a gradually growing body of work on alternative assignments, more research is needed to explore in greater detail how exactly different work arrangements associated with new forms of expatriation affect the way in which work-family interface plays out for them. Rather than starting from a predefined set of factors which are likely to affect non-traditional assignees or testing models developed in the context of short business trips, we attempt to explore inductively the factors which are seen by the assignees themselves as most salient in affecting their work-family interface which can then provide a platform for future research and theorising on the topic.

Research setting

The study was undertaken in Petrochem Ltd (a pseudonym), a private sector engineering based organisation that manufactures and services turbo machinery for the oil, gas and petrochemical industries. Access was secured under the condition of production of a report of the study. Petrochem Ltd employs around 2000 people in 32 locations. Due to the nature of its services and as part of its global expansion, the company has a long tradition in using different forms of expatriate assignments, and as such was seen as a suitable research setting for our purposes. In our study we focused on assignees from the Europe, Middle East and Africa region (EMEA) within the Global Service division employing around 200 employees, approximately a quarter of which are international business travellers and a quarter rotational employees.

The numbers of IBTs have risen in recent years due to rapid territorial growth and a perceived need for increased control over subsidiary units. RAs have long formed part of the makeup of the Field Service division where technical engineers are deployed to service turbo machinery on customer plants which are located throughout the EMEA region, with a large number situated in the Middle East, often in remote desert locations. Rotators commonly undertake shift patterns and may spend

anywhere between two weeks and three months on assignment dependent upon the length of the job. In principle, following their assignment they are given some time off work to go back to their home country. However, it has been recently noted that assignments are increasingly occurring back to back, leaving very limited time between them. IBTs are also sent abroad to visit customers and subsidiary locations across the EMEA region on business trips which may last anywhere between one day and one week. IBTs can spend from five to twenty days per month on these trips.

In line with the exploratory nature of our research and our interest in gaining a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of the two selected groups of assignees, we chose to carry out a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews. Between 2012 and 2013 we interviewed twenty assignees, ten of which work as IBTs and ten as rotators. When choosing our sample, we followed the principle of maximum variation (Patton, 2005) in terms of age, tenure, position, nationality and marital and family status (see Table 1). The mean age of our sample is 40. Our sample, with one exception, is composed of men, which reflects the profile of the assignees within the petroleum industry. Eighteen of our participants were European nationals, the remaining two were Pakistani and Columbian. While we recognise that a larger proportion of non-European participants would have been preferable, our response rate among this group, which accounted for around 20% of the population, turned out to be lower than we had hoped. This lower than expected response rate among non-Europeans, we believe, might be plausibly attributed to the fact that our ability to conduct face-to-face interviews in Middle Eastern countries, where the majority of non-European participants were based, was limited.

[insert table 1 about here]

All interviews with IBTs were carried out face-to-face either in the UK office or one of the company's European sites. Access to RAs was more difficult in light of their limited availability onsite. As a result, four interviews were conducted face-to-face, one via Skype and further five by phone. In line with Sturges and Hanrahan (2004), telephone interviews were indeed slightly shorter than the standard face-to-face ones which lasted on average an hour, without, however, any noticeable compromise to the quality of the data obtained. All interviews were carried out in English and were recorded and transcribed.

Our interview schedule included questions about the role of the participants, their motivation to become an IBT or a rotational assignee, aspects of their work that they find most rewarding as well as those that they find most challenging, we also posed questions about their experiences of work-family interface, work-induced separation and organisational support available to them. In order to facilitate discussions of complex and possibly emotive experiences we built on insights from visual studies (e.g. Buckingham, 2000; Harper, 2002) which have been shown to expose meanings which might be difficult to access through the language as the sole medium of expression (Bell and Kunter, 2006). More specifically, we used participant generated photo-elicitation (Ray and Smith, 2012) which, as a form of participatory visual research methods, is seen to give research participants increased voice and authority (Packard, 2008; Shortt and Warren, 2012; Warren, 2005). Prior to the interview, respondents were encouraged to bring along some photographs that capture their experiences of working as an RA or an IBT. While in photo-elicitation the photographs produced by research participants can be seen as data (Schrat et al, 2012), for our purposes, the narrative accounts accompanying the images were the main focus of attention. As such, in this paper images, are not included in our findings nor are they subject to analysis.

We approached data analysis as an integral aspect of our research accompanied in tandem with data collection rather than a distinct phase, as recommended by Huberman and Miles (1994). We have therefore commenced with detailed readings of the transcripts and writing in-process memos. After the first four interviews, the work-family interface started to emerge as an important theme in our data. As a consequence, in the subsequent interviews we probed our participants even more carefully for their familiar experiences. In order to identify clearer patterns in our data, we open coded the interview transcripts, initially relying largely albeit not exclusively on first-order categories used by our participants (Van Maanen, 1979). Upon further readings, we started to group our initial codes into more theoretically informed categories. The work-family interface, on which we focus in this paper, was one of these categories. We then looked for factors that were discussed by our participants as central for this category. In our analysis we paid particular attention to passages in interview transcripts which explained why a given factor was seen as key for the family-work interface. For example, after having identified unpredictability of the work schedule as a key theme, we noted that this was typically discussed in

relation to aspirational nature of plans and the need for adaptability from both the assignees and their families. Further contextualisation – comparisons between the groups and within them – revealed further differentiating aspects, such as the role of experience in rotational assignees which paradoxically exacerbated the experienced challenges. Below we discussed the four main emergent themes in more detail.

Findings

In this section we present four key themes that emerged from our data in relation to the work-family interface of the two selected groups of assignees: RAs and IBTs. Interestingly, all four themes cut across the two groups indicating strong similarities between them. However, our analysis also points towards considerable differences between the experiences of rotators and IBTs, most notably with regards to the intensity of the discussed challenges. More specifically, both groups pointed out the amount of time spent on assignment, the unpredictability of their work schedule together with the perceived limited ability to exercise control over it had major implications for their work-family interface. These challenges were compounded by the high degree of uncertainty surrounding the availability of organisational support. We now discuss these in more detail.

Time spent away from home

While both rotators and IBTs admitted that a key factor affecting their work-family interface was the amount of time spent away from home, the problem was more pronounced for rotators. All of the interviewed rotators admitted that they spent considerably more time on assignments than at home:

For nine months I am working and maybe there is a week off but I travel about nine months a year. (Rotator A)

In fact, the predominant perception was that assignments were taking place increasingly more often back to back with hardly any respite in-between. One of our participants brought along a photograph of a plane in sunset suggesting that:

It's an indication of travel, onto your next job you've just finished your job and its boarding the plane, the sun is setting it's like the sun is going down on that job and you're moving on - carrying your life in your suitcase. (Rotator C)

Unsurprisingly, therefore, our participants saw the perceived disproportionately high amount of time spent away from home as affecting their work-family interface. This was particularly worrying in the case of rotators. The imagery of a struggle and sacrifice underpinned most of our interviews. Rotators explained that family life was nearly non-existent due to the amount of time spent away from home:

Probably if you were to speak to 99% of the guys in the field now this year, I would probably say, on average they would have had five maybe six weeks at home. Within six months that's all I've had anyway. So there is no work life relationship, so it's a battle a real big battle to keep the family side ticking along. (Rotator E)

Rotators and IBTs alike described the negative impact of their prolonged absence from home upon their children, who were often described as displaying sentiments of 'abandonment'. To illustrate this point, one of the IBTs showed a picture of his daughter and said:

That's my daughter, she wouldn't let me go so she got in my suitcase and went to sleep. Wherever you go, you see children everywhere and you miss your own kids and it's just not fun anymore. (IBT H)

Similarly, a number of our participants discussed their prolonged absence from home as leading to strained relationships with their children. For the rotational assignees in particular, continued time away from home eventually meant that they were treated as strangers in their own house:

The relationship between me and my daughter is very bad, I'm like a stranger to her – a complete stranger – because I'm out of house for 70/80% of the year and I'm coming home and I think I'm the boss here and telling her to do this and this and she gets mad – I think she's very happy when I'm not at home. This is bad, I mean, it hurts a bit. (Rotator D).

On a related note, long absence from home was typically discussed with references to the imagery of sacrifice and loss. Rotational and business travel assignments often mean lengthy periods of time alone. One IBT described his loneliness and a sense of loss even when surrounded by colleagues travelling with him. He presented a dark, image of an empty hotel room:

I think it's really lonely travelling and it doesn't matter where I am or who I'm with, even when we went away doing all of the road shows and I know I really enjoyed that and learning how to work together a bit more, but I'm still lonely because I'm not where I want to be. And you go back to your hotel room and your wife is not there. (IBT C)

Due to the duration of their assignments and the often limited access to communications technologies in remote locations, rotators experienced considerably stronger sentiments of loneliness than business travellers which some reported as a contributing to serious health issues:

Lots of my friends and co-workers, they died – heart attacks, different cancers. None of them died because of work or all of the other poisonous things in the gas – cancer was because they smoke too much, because they drank too much and heart attack – too fat. I don't think it affects your health but the side-effect is, of course, that you have a very hard job and people tend to drink too much or smoke too much and this kills you.' (Rotator D)

The problem of missing out on important family events while being away was seen by our participants as problematic not only for them personally but also for their family and partners. Consequently, a commonly discussed response was an attempt to make up for the absence. As one rotator explained showing a picture of his girlfriend's birthday parties:

I was away for my partner's birthday and Valentine's Day this year so they all had a big get together at hers and got cake and celebrated and I was offshore. I would have liked to have been there and give her a gift but obviously I was away so I had to make up for it by running around and getting flowers delivered to her work. I took her away and we went up to Loch Ness, it was

more expensive because of it, it cost me a lot of money. She was gutted, if she'd told me she wasn't going to be there for my birthday I would have been gutted. (Rotator B)

Similarly, rotators with young children often discussed their attempts to restore some form of balance at home if they felt that they had not been able to commit to their duties as much as they would like to:

It's Thursday morning and you think actually I'm not going to start until 10am today, I was working all of the weekend and I'm going to take my kids to school for once. (IBT B)

The challenges associated with prolonged absence from home, as described above, were compounded by the unpredictability of the work schedule.

Unpredictability of the work schedule

Similarly to prolonged absence from home, unpredictability of the work schedule affected both groups of participants. It is, however, important to note that with rotators who worked onshore rather than on oil rigs, this challenge was the most pronounced:

The guys that work offshore on the platforms and the core crew for the oil and gas companies, you would think they would be away all the time but in actual fact they have more time at home than the guys that work for us do. They have two weeks offshore and they're guaranteed three weeks at home with their family and they know from the start of year until the end of the year exactly when they will be at home. (Rotator B).

At times, the extent of the unpredictability was quite staggering, with the expected length of absence changing from two weeks to three months while still on assignment. In fact, we have been told a number of stories illustrating precisely this aspect of the assignees' experiences, we one such story which is quite typical of the ones recounted to us by others:

'Once I was planned for assignment this way in the end of November for two weeks approximately and I came back in end of January. To the middle of

February, so I spend three months in Saudi Arabia. I missed the Christmas, the New Year I spent it alone in a camp. This [picture of a Christmas tree] should represent the feelings now during Christmas, I spent two years in a row over Christmas and New Year in Saudi Arabia so this was a real low point and once there, my ex-girlfriend I said to her yes I am going for two week to an assignment and we booked our vacation and everything then I came back three months later. I think this was the main reason we split up.’ (Rotator J)

The unpredictability of the work schedule was typically linked to the need to respond quickly to customer demands and needs which were themselves beyond organisational control:

One of the roles is to build the business and to do this we need to service the customer and therefore the customer pulls on us in lots of different ways. We have to react to the customers. Half of our business is planned. The other half isn’t planned. This in itself causes lots of lots of problems – it’s not a manufacturing environment, the very nature of it changes. (IBT B)

As result of the constantly changing work schedules, participants discussed their plans as aspirational rather than fixed and saw themselves as at the beck and call of their organisation. In the accounts of both IBTs and rotators, it was the company that had to take priority over other commitments. Annual leave could be easily cancelled if a need arose for yet another assignment. Interestingly, a number of participants suggested that it was the most experienced engineers who had the most frequently changing work schedules since their expertise was highly sought after.

I’ve heard stories of more experienced guys who are in high demand who basically come in the door with their bags still in their hands and the phone goes, just because of the high demand for their services and they do, they sacrifice a lot for this job. (Rotator I)

The often expressed sentiment was that the better you are at your job, the more likely you are to be requested to go on back to back assignments. In fact, a number of the interviewed managers expressed the view that there was not enough consideration in the organisation for the most experienced assignees whose expertise was exploited:

It's all about how much money can we make today, but the end of the month we don't look at the bigger picture, therefore we are pushing the guys as much as we can rather than saying well if we looked after them better we would get twice as much out of them. So we're being pushed as managers ourselves and our managers are on their bonuses. So nobody is planning and nobody is looking after the guys. Great for short term business but there's no sustainability. (IBT B)

Both rotators and IBTs were in agreement that adaptability was a key trait required not only from the assignees but also from their partners:

They need a very supportive family. [There are] a lot of broken marriages. ... It's not so bad now, but in the old days there were a lot of suicides. (IBT, Rotator in previous roles)

Consequently, a number of rotators suggested that the lifestyle of rotators was more suitable for a single, preferably young person without any family commitments:

I would say start it when you are single, basically the younger you can get into it, the better. (Rotator E).

The difficulties with reconciling the lifestyle of a rotator and IBT, as described above, were also closely linked to the perceived limited ability to exercise control over one's work schedule.

Limited ability to exercise control over the work schedule

When drawing comparisons between the rotators' and IBTs' accounts, the extent of control that they were able to exercise over their travel schedule was a clear differentiating factor. While rotators indicated that they had very little control over their travel schedules due to customer demands, IBTs were in a better position to do so. The common belief, however, was that one had to treat this volatility as part and parcel of the experience. In fact some participants admitted that they feared that lack of flexibility could in fact end in termination of their contract:

Its part of the business, it's the life you choose. You have two options, you either do it or that's the door. (IBT B)

Nonetheless, a number of participants revealed that they attempted to regain some control over their work schedule. Again, this was more realistic for IBTs than for the rotators. In particular more senior IBTs were afforded more flexibility to manage their travel. As one participant explained to us:

I made a specific decision not to travel in the four weeks before [daughters name] was due ... and I made another specific decision not to go anywhere for about four or five weeks after she was born other than very short trips. I have put quite specific effort into that, I do recognise that I have got a lot responsibility, I'm relatively well paid and I have to go and do what I have to go and do. And [my partner] understands that as well. ... if it screws up a weekend, you know I have to travel on a Sunday morning or something like that, I will maybe not come into the office the following Friday or Friday before, something like that just to try and balance it off a little bit'. (IBT C)

Notwithstanding the challenges described above with regards to the considerable amount of time spent on assignments, unpredictability of their work schedule as well as limited ability to exercise control over it and the associated challenges at the work-family interface, participants admitted that they could not rely on organisational support mechanisms.

Limited organisational support

As we have shown above, familial issues have emerged as a key challenge for the international assignees. However, our participants reported that they were not aware of any formal organisational support mechanisms that may help them in dealing with these:

You will probably understand from what I am saying that I'm going through some challenges. So I don't know what's there is as a company and what sort of support I would have from the company and what sort of understanding I would have from the company going through those difficulties ... Nobody has ever discussed this support. (Rotator E)

I'm lucky that I have a boss like [name] who helps me. But I mean that what about the other people? In field service that are on the jobs and they don't get much support. So there should be uniform scheme for everybody when you join the company (Rotator G).

Informal support mechanisms seem to dominate and managerial support is voiced as something which is highly valued by both assignee groups. Again, IBTs seem to benefit from this support more than their rotational colleagues. Managerial understanding and collaborative solution finding are common themes in the IBT accounts, examples including 'working from home', 'rescheduling jobs' or 'time off to deal with personal issues'.

It is important to note that we also noticed quite a worrying theme in our data. It pertained to a number of rotators who appeared to be fearful and at times also quite distrustful and sceptical of organisational support. They reported some anxiety that admitting to experiencing familiar challenges would put their position at risk:

There are probably many people out there that have difficulties and maybe think well I can't ring up work and tell them the troubles I am having, financial, emotional, something wrong with the children, the fathers, the mothers, whatever it may be. What sort of support network is there from the company? Because if I turn round and tell them this, they are going to think that I'm not capable of doing my job, am I going to lose work, but on the other hand, are they going to be sympathetic? (Rotator E)

Every organisation is at pains to tell you how well they will look after you. You know, Human Resources, it's standard. But when it comes to actually doing it, it's a different matter. A lot of them pay lip service to what they purvey they are supposed to do but others do as they say. (Rotator C)

Conclusions and implications

This study examines the experiences of two groups of alternative assignees, IBTs and rotators in relation to the work-family interface. In particular, we were interested in identifying and exploring specific work arrangements associated with

these two assignment types which were experienced by the participants as weighing most heavily on their work-family interface. In the broadest terms, our study adds weight to the earlier observations that non-traditional assignments have the propensity to seriously impact family life, especially with regards to familial separation (Starr and Currie, 2009; Espino, 2002) and the related family-work conflict (Frone et al, 1992; Vallone and Ensher, 2001).

More specifically, our study has revealed four major work arrangements which were experienced by the assignees as most profoundly affecting their work-family interface, namely time spent away, unpredictability of work schedules, limited ability to exercise control over it and finally the perceptions of limited availability of organisational support.

While time spent away does not feature in models discussing traditional assignments (e.g. Caliguri et al, 1998, Lazarova et al, 2010, Takeuchi et al, 2002), it has been considered as an important variable in previous studies on frequent business travellers. For example, Westman et al (2009a), in whose study the average length of trips was 8.9 days, noted that short business trips can have a positive impact on travellers and their spouses. Similarly, Westman et al (2009b) concluded that short business trips can be regarded as offering a special form of respite for travellers. However, the impact of longer and more frequent business trips has been found to have the propensity to impact negatively on the assignee and their families (Espino et al, 2002). Our findings corroborate this latter observation. In particular, the impact appears to intensify when it is examined over a period of time, since, as Westman et al (2009) observe, each trip can affect the subsequent ones. Therefore, we argue future research should examine more closely the role of time spent away from home, both as an outcome of longer trips as well as high frequency of shorter trips, over a period of time. In light of our findings, as well as earlier research on the topic, we propose the following:

Proposition 1: Implications of frequent business travels as well as rotational assignments might vary depending on the investigated period of time.

Proposition 2: Implications of frequent business travels as well as rotational assignments will be of an aggregate nature.

Based on the insights from our study, unpredictability of work schedules is another important factor that needs to be considered in relation to non-standard assignments. Similar to the 'time spent away', unpredictability of work schedules does not typically apply to traditional assignments. However, as our findings illustrate, it emerges as one of the key aspects of IBTs' and rotators' work arrangements which affect their work-family interface. While the literature on frequent business travellers has already alluded to changes in travel schedules as one of the stressors (e.g. Espino et al, 2002) and described executive lifestyles as unpredictable (De Frank et al, 2000), the current models do not make an explicit reference to it, nor does the scarce literature on rotational assignees discuss in any detail the unpredictability of work schedules. Our findings as well as the often reported observations that non-traditional assignments are favoured due to their flexibility (e.g. Mayerhofer et al, 2004), lead us to suggest that:

Proposition 3: Unpredictability of work schedules will have an adverse effect on the work-family interface of non-traditional assignees.

According to Westman et al (2009a: 278) 'control is a key resource for business travellers', yet it rarely features in work-family interface models of non-traditional assignees. Also, it might be important to clarify how control is understood in this context. Westman et al (2009a) and Espino et al (2002), for example, measure control using two items: control over the trip schedule and the ability to refuse travel due to personal reasons. It is not clear, however, whether control refers here to the ability to book preferred flights, decisions about the duration of the trip, changes to the trip while away or ability to refuse an unscheduled trip. Our findings suggest that the issue of control over work schedules in the context of IBTs and rotators is quite complex. Consequently, it might be necessary to develop more sensitive scales to measure it. Additionally, in our study the ability to exercise control over work schedules was linked to assignees' position in organisational hierarchy. Similarly, IBTs generally were in a better position than rotators to take control of their work schedule and thus to reduce its negative effect on the family domain than the studied rotators. Therefore:

Proposition 4: Limited ability to exercise control over work schedule will have a negative effect on the work-family interface of IBTs and rotators.

Proposition 5: Ability to exercise control over work schedules will change depending on the position in the organisation.

Proposition 6: Ability to exercise control over work schedules is likely to differ among the different types of assignments.

The final aspect of work arrangements that emerged from our findings as most heavily impacting the work-family interface was the perceived limited availability of organisational support. Our case study adds weight to the earlier observations of Suutari et al (2013) and Mayerhofer et al (2002) that official support mechanisms might be currently largely reserved for traditional assignments despite the potential importance of the alternative forms for the core activities of the organisations in question. However, as our findings show, availability of organisational support mechanisms might not be enough to help mitigate the negative influence of non-standard assignments on the assignees' work-family interface. The evidence gathered in our study points to the importance of assignees perception of support mechanisms and the related issues of trust. While we only have limited evidence to make firm predictions, future studies could explore under which conditions and among which groups of assignees perceptions of organisational support differ.

Practical implications

Our findings also point to a number of practical implications. With the increasing use of alternative international assignments, HR practitioners and line managers need to consider the challenges faced by the alternative assignee in order to formulate constructive support mechanisms that cannot rely on informal peer networks.

In light of the significance of the issues of unpredictability of work schedules and control over them found in our study, organisations may consider implementing practices that enable assignees to exercise greater control over assignment timing and duration. In addition, it might be important to monitor more closely the time off allocated to rotational assignees in particular as back to back assignments have been found to be particularly disruptive for the work-family interface. Approval mechanisms for valid refusals to travel would also be beneficial. However, it is important to note that employees not only need to be made aware of support

mechanisms but also need to have the confidence and trust in them, which should become a priority for relevant HR professionals and the respective managers.

On a related note, more care needs to be taken to ensure the sustainability of the staffing practices so as to make sure that satisfying current customer demands does not take place at the expense of selected groups of assignees. To mitigate the effect of client's demands, it may be necessary to increase the speed and efficiency of hiring engineers where there is a given budget for doing so. This may also be achieved through the implementation of graduate and apprenticeship schemes to provide a steady flow of specialist assignees into the business. A well structured and effective training programme for new specialist assignees to get them up to speed as quickly as possible might go some ways towards allowing for the workload to be shared in the shortest time possible.

Other policies that may be helpful in easing the challenges faced by alternative assignees types are stress management policies and flexible working policies. A well formulated stress policy would acknowledge the importance of identifying and reducing assignment stressors and emphasise the manager's responsibility for implementation and the company's responsibility for provision of the necessary resources. Additionally, corporate travel policies could be reviewed to introduce the possibility of flying ones family out to visit on assignment a couple of times a year so as to mitigate the negative effects of familial separation.

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