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A potential paradigm shift in global mobility? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected the global mobility (GM) policies of multinational enterprises (MNEs). Through interviews with policy decision-makers in 32 companies, we applied Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to examine how the pandemic accelerated changes in MNE policies and the management of GM. Our framework builds on contingency theory, traditionally concerned with aligning organizational policies with macro- and meso-level contextual factors. We extend this by integrating micro-level individual variables, such as career aspirations and well-being, as contingent factors influencing GM practices. There is variation in GM responses in relation to the volume of GM activities, GM-related policies, investments in digitalization and technology, and variations in mobility types. We observed a potential paradigm shift that affords employees greater agency in their global mobility paths, thereby greater granularity to contingency theory. This nuanced approach opens new research avenues and equips organizational leaders with a comprehensive set of variables for GM decision-making. Our findings indicate lasting global mobility changes but foresee gradual implementation due to associated risks.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had profound implications for the way people live and work (Eurofound, 2020), implications that are still being worked through. The pandemic disrupted the daily lives of citizens and their economies and led to business closures and restrictions on trade around the world. In international business, borders were suddenly closed to individuals. Some companies were able to respond to health and safety concerns by repatriating their staff, whereas in other companies staff were unable to move because of travel restrictions. Expatriates worried about returning home (Koveshnikov et al., 2022). In response, multinational enterprises (MNEs) adopted more regional strategies (Arslan et al., 2020; Caligiuri et al., 2020) and developed new protocols to face the situation (Tripathi & Singh, 2021). There has been speculation about the longer-term effect of such changes (Caligiuri et al., 2020).

During the pandemic, companies had to adjust by making more use of existing remote management systems. With experience, they found that, in many cases, this worked effectively, and in some cases, they

were able to manage with fewer (expensive) expatriates (Arslan et al., 2020; Mello & Tomei, 2021). For many tasks, remote working technology, which had been available for decades but little used (Peters et al., 2009; Aguilera et al., 2016), became the norm (Selmer et al., 2021). So, has international working and global mobility substantially changed or will multinational enterprises (MNEs) revert to former ways of working as we move into a post-pandemic phase? Alternatively, will there be some intermediate position between those extremes? In short, how will MNEs manage global mobility in the coming years? We are interested in understanding whether and how far the flexibility required during the pandemic will lead to a paradigm shift in how MNEs manage the international movement of people.

The rationale for global mobility (GM) was for MNEs to move people to where the work was. In a classic article, Edström and Galbraith (1977:253) outlined three key reasons for such movement: To fill positions, to control organizations, and to develop managers. Their influential ideas have been expanded (e.g. by knowledge transfer and innovation drivers) and refined over time (Harzing, 2001) but remain the core explanators of mobility policies. While organizational goals can

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overlap with individual goals – for example, in global leadership development (Collings & Sheeran, 2020) – assigned expatriation predominantly pursues the strategic and operational objectives of the organization.

The pandemic triggered massively increased use of remote working (Selmer et al., 2021). As López Peláez et al. (2021: 377) noted, “the pandemic has accelerated a process of digitalization that has produced relevant changes in ... companies’ organization”. The option of remote work on a large scale means that organizations have opportunities to go from ‘moving people to work’ to ‘moving work to people’. We argue that a convergence of factors has expedited a paradigm shift in intra-company global work.

We examine the potential acceleration of changes in the drivers of intra-company international work (Andresen et al., 2014; Dickmann et al., 2023). Managers make decisions based on the premise that international business, including human resource management (HRM), is essentially situational (Farndale et al., 2010). Based on our findings, we argue that the management of GM is contingent on the acceleration of changes in global environments regarding new technological opportunities and individual interests and that these changes, which were already occurring when the pandemic accelerated them, are challenging the existing expatriation paradigm.

Rooted in contingency theory’s assertion that the effectiveness of decisions or actions is contingent upon the specific context (Caligiuri & Colakoglu, 2007), our research focuses on the ramifications of these changes. Specifically, we examine how the shifts in GM patterns are influenced by macro-, meso-, and micro-factors. We investigate changes in the volume of GM activities, GM-related policies, investments in digitalization and technology, variations in mobility types, and potential shifts in the prevailing GM paradigm. Ultimately, utilizing contingency theory affords valuable insights into the intricate dynamics influencing changes in organizational strategies and in GM. If we can identify changes as a result of applying contingency theory, then the results may have implications for MNEs’ responses in other areas such as global talent management (Jooss et al., 2023) or responses to other crises.

We, therefore, also build on contextual approaches to HRM (Pauwe & Farndale, 2017), identifying changes accelerated by the pandemic, revisiting the assigned expatriation paradigm that implies that companies control such movements to meet paramount organizational goals. The pandemic persuaded organizations to increasingly factor in people’s needs as the understanding of technological capabilities grew and the social acceptance of and familiarity with remote work increased (Selmer et al., 2021). The pandemic underscored the necessity in GM for quicker and more intensive implementation of flexible policies directed towards individual needs. Further, given the higher ability and familiarity of individuals to work remotely – including abroad – organizations are considering reducing the benefits associated with working abroad and reassessing the disadvantages and heightened risks of sending people to work in other countries. Crucially, we observed that the extent of this rethinking of GM approaches is contingent upon the type of industry, organizational size, corporate function and individual staff interests and needs.

2. Contingency theory and global mobility disruptions

This section provides an overview of the application of contingency theory in international business, illustrating how it can be utilized to analyse potential paradigm shifts in intra-organizational global work.

2.1. Contingency theory and global mobility

Contingency theory originated as a counter to the ‘one best way’ classical management theorists. Pioneers of contingency theory (Woodward, 1958; Burns & Stalker, 1961; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), posited that organizational structures and managerial approaches depended on specific circumstances or contingencies faced by the

organization. Fiedler (1964) suggested that a leader’s effectiveness relies on the compatibility of their style with the context and Galbraith (1973) highlighted the contingent relationship between strategy, structure, processes, rewards, and people. Where the workforce was explicitly covered (Wang et al., 2021), it was predominantly analysed in terms of their capabilities (Ferreel & Larry, 1985) rather than their own interests. In essence, contingency theory maintains that “the best way to organize depends on the nature of the environment to which the organization relates” (Scott, 1992, p. 89). Some scholars argue that “any theory of business strategy must be a contingency theory” (Hofer, 1990, p. 786). We propose that individual-level factors such as career aspirations, personal well-being, and family considerations, also serve as contingent variables influencing GM practices and outcomes.

The survival of MNEs hinges on their ability to adapt to unpredictable global situations - such as pandemics or substantial geopolitical shifts. Their response may necessitate structural modifications, strategic variety, and the effective coordination of resources within and across organizations (Ciborra, 1996). If MNEs fail to embrace new technologies or modify strategies, they could be at risk (Matthyssens et al., 2005) - as the pandemic showed.

Contingency theory has been applied to HRM. Schuler and Jackson (1987) and Cooke et al. (2021), for example, proposed contingency models of HRM and business strategy, suggesting that different business strategies (such as cost reduction, quality enhancement, and innovation) require distinct HRM practices for optimal effectiveness. Specifically, within HRM, global mobility was the focus of much research pre-pandemic (see e.g., Andersen, 2021; McNulty & Selmer, 2017). Evaluating the GM policies and operations of MNEs during, and after, the pandemic can reveal how strategic adaptation and prudent resource allocation grants organizations the flexibility they need. The pandemic and responses to it have had, and continue to have, profound impacts on international business (Caligiuri et al., 2020), including global mobility (Meyer & Li, 2022), expediting a host of adaptations, and potentially triggering a shift in approaches to GM by organizations and employees. The ability of MNEs to effectively adapt their structural processes, incorporate new technologies, and recalibrate their policies dictates their flexibility in managing uncertain environments. This flexibility has been tested by the disruption of GM during the pandemic, a perfect illustration of the environmental flux addressed by contingency theory.

2.2. The purpose of international assignments, and international assignment forms

There has always been a spectrum of alternatives (McNulty & Brewster, 2017), but most expatriate literature deals with the assignment of personnel from a home organization to a host organization, generally within a single MNE. This dynamic involves complex relationships, involving a potential trade-off between individuals and organizations (Lazarova, 2004), because in certain scenarios, value creation can occur on one side, but the actual value capture may benefit another party (Bowman & Ambrosini, 2000; Pitelis, 2009). The additional value of assigned expatriates, beyond the organization’s confines, is indicated by offers of enhanced pay or better opportunities elsewhere (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). However, it is also important to acknowledge the flip side of this situation: an organization’s capacity to retain employees can potentially curtail this individual value capture (Newton et al., 2007).

Here we discuss expatriates temporarily assigned by their employer to work in a country of which they are not a citizen in order to accomplish a career-related goal (McNulty & Brewster, 2017, p. 20). Consequently, in our analysis, we exclude other internationally mobile workers, such as frequent flyers, commuters and self-initiated expatriates who have different cost/benefit relationships with their organizations and are generally not managed by the GM function. We include short and long-term assigned expatriates. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the interplay between individual and

organizational responses to global mobility drivers.

Businesses have engaged in global mobility for reasons of coordination and control, to bridge skill gaps and for developmental purposes (Edström & Galbraith, 1977; Harzing, 2001). These motives for global mobility are driven by local or global business needs – which rarely factor in individual needs in a substantial way – with the organization shouldering associated costs such as travel and relocation. Generally, the organization initiates international work and orchestrates the process via specific GM or wider HRM specialists (Dickmann, 2021). Different forms of short- and long-term assignments are used to fulfil these objectives.

2.2.1. Short-term expatriate assignments (STAs)

Short-term assignments (STAs) usually last less than six months (Brewster et al., 2021) and can be much shorter. The main reasons for the use of STAs include knowledge transfer, integration of policies and practices, filling skills gaps, completion of project work, and building business-relevant networks (Tahvanainen et al., 2005). Consultancy evidence from North American and European multinationals, (AIR Inc, 2012) indicated that 90% of their respondent companies had separate policies for STAs.

For MNEs, a major advantage of STAs is the cost savings, since family members stay at home. As the home base remains their home country, taking the decision to work abroad is easier; and the repatriation process is facilitated due to the shorter period in the host country (Starr, 2009). Though the evidence is limited, there was a view that prior to the pandemic STAs were becoming more common (Suutari et al., 2018). The employer has a major role in facilitating the move, obtaining visas and work permits and in covering the costs associated with the foreign sojourn (Briscoe et al., 2012).

2.2.2. Long-term expatriate assignments (LTAs)

Most research into global mobility has examined long-term assignees sent abroad by their employer for a period of over one year with the expectation of repatriation after that (Dickmann, Suutari, Brewster, et al., 2018). The range of such assignments varies but, in practice, at least for Europeans, the average length is around three years. Obtaining reliable numbers on international assignments is difficult, relying on untested numbers from consultants, and patchy, covering only a small number of countries. However, it does seem that, even before the pandemic, established MNEs had no wish to increase the numbers of LTAs and, in some cases at least, were aiming to reduce them, largely because of the extensive costs involved, although other problems have also been found, such as a lack of willingness to move abroad in some circumstances, adjustment challenges, repatriation difficulties and retention problems after the assignment (Bonache et al., 2021).

Our research explored whether the pandemic, which undoubtedly led to short-term disruption (e.g., Martel et al., 2021), also led to changes to policies and potentially longer-lasting innovation within GM. Is it the case that the forced disruption caused by the pandemic and associated changes has opened up opportunities that have created ongoing change to the drivers, patterns and goals of expatriation? Below, we outline how GM senior leaders reacted to the disruptions caused by the pandemic and examine their policies for the future, as well as depict a number of innovations within global mobility. In so doing, we reflect on whether a new, expanded GM paradigm is emerging.

An important observation: When it comes to the utilization of technology for flexible work arrangements, we include ‘virtual expatriation,’ which we distinguish from generalized remote working. These assignments involve moving to another country to take up multi-country responsibilities and cross-border communication for specific organizational needs (Hertel et al., 2005; Bucker et al., 2020). The aim is to reduce travel whilst on assignment. While this approach may deviate from traditional GM as described by Edström and Galbraith (1977), it represents a nuanced, emerging form within the broader GM landscape. This form is particularly noteworthy as it underscores how individual

aspects are increasingly shaping GM patterns.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The timing of the interviews was a crucial first decision, to ensure our interviewees had adequate experience of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic before collecting data. We interviewed GM specialists during the second half of 2021, coinciding with the end of lockdown (when ‘essential’ travel was permitted). These interviews were with members of the RES Forum, based in the UK, an independent community for International HRM & Global Mobility professionals, specialising in global mobility survey data, modelling, and analytics. We interviewed specialists, with discussions conducted in English. The RES Forum’s involvement helped us pinpoint the moment organizations began strategic discussions about the pandemic’s legacy. All the organizations involved in this phase were large, experienced MNEs. To add a representation of small and medium-sized MNEs, we conducted another set of interviews around the same time, targeting managers in Spain. These interviews encompassed ten organizations and were conducted in Spanish. The 32 individuals (see Table 1), each of whom had responsibility for global mobility within their organizations were all from different organizations.

The research did not aim to be representative, though there is no reason to believe that our sample organizations were unusual in any consistent manner. All interviews took place while countries and organizations were under pandemic-enforced travel restrictions, but after the initial few months of shock and uncertainty had passed. We queried interviewees about their current situation and their expectations for the medium- to long-term. Interviews typically lasted between 70 and 90 min. Our focus was on identifying the range and types of policies businesses were planning, rather than gauging the proportions of businesses adopting any specific strategy. We sourced information from a variety of sectors and sizes of companies, and discussed all types of assigned expatriates, as approaches may differ depending on these factors.

3.2. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were employed to facilitate open, detailed and nuanced responses about their experiences and perceptions. Participants were asked about their pre-pandemic understanding of GM, their responses to challenges during the pandemic and their views of the future of GM post-pandemic. Specific questions addressed the potential reduction of GM in favour of remote work, and the possible resurgence of GM to pre-pandemic levels.

These in-depth, semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data (Qu & Dumay, 2011) but we also used data from company websites and reports, the practitioner press and academic articles (mainly to complete data on the companies: number of employees, activity, countries of location, etc). We asked questions about how the interviewees’ business was affected by the pandemic, the main measures taken by the organization during the pandemic and discussed the situation of the company’s expatriates and other internationally mobile workers. We discussed current GM policies, the immediate reaction of the interviewee’s organization to the crisis, its duty of care, and both short- and long-term crisis impacts. Finally, we asked about the future effect of the pandemic and the medium- and long-term effects on global mobility policies and international HRM.

Interviews were recorded and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (Alase, 2017). They were transcribed verbatim, and data coding and categorisation were based on content analysis extracting perceptions about the topics covered. Our research employed a rigorous and systematic approach in coding and analysing all questions and responses, ensuring a high level of accuracy and reliability. To minimise bias and subjectivity in the analysis process, authors

Table 1
Description of the sample.

ID	LOCATION HEADQUARTER	INDUSTRY	SECTOR	EMPLOYEES	ASSIGNEES
GM1	US	CONSULTING	knowledge-intensive industries	236000	Over 3000
GM2	UK	ENGINEERING AND CONSULTING	knowledge-intensive industries	40000	627
GM3	GERMANY	ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE	consumer goods sector	99637	1000
GM4	CHINA	IT	knowledge-intensive industries	130	100
GM5	GERMANY	IT	knowledge-intensive industries	107415	6000
GM6	US	BANK	knowledge-intensive industries	223400	2000
GM7	AUSTRIA	FOOD	consumer goods sector	12239	90
GM8	JAPAN	TOBACCO	consumer goods sector	45000	700
GM9	US	IT	knowledge-intensive industries	341000	8000
GM10	US	CONSULTING	knowledge-intensive industries	365399	5000
GM11	GERMANY	FASHION	consumer goods sector	14633	20
GM12	US	ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE	consumer goods sector	172000	?
GM13	GERMANY	TOURISM	consumer goods sector	50584	65
GM14	GERMANY	FASHION	consumer goods sector	50584	?
GM15	FRANCE	ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE	consumer goods sector	63000	?
GM16	UK	ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE	knowledge-intensive industries	34220	80
GM17	INDIAN	IT	knowledge-intensive industries	500	30
GM18	UK	ENGINEERING AND CONSULTING	knowledge-intensive industries	9000	400
GM19	UK	LAW	knowledge-intensive industries	5191	500
GM20	UK	CONSULTING	knowledge-intensive industries	33500	380
GM21	UK	EDUCATION	knowledge-intensive industries	12000	270
GM22	US	BANK	knowledge-intensive industries	232957	800
GM23	SPAIN	HOSPITALITY	consumer goods sector	1134	7
GM24	SPAIN	MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY	consumer goods sector	210	4
GM25	SPAIN	ENERGY CONVERSION	knowledge-intensive industries	4200	1608
GM26	SPAIN	MEAT CASINGS	consumer goods sector	985	41
GM27	SPAIN	SUPPLIER OF AUTOMOTIVE PARTS TO AUTOMOBILE FACTORIES	consumer goods sector	1000	30
GM28	SPAIN	HOME APPLIANCES	consumer goods sector	3894	?
GM29	SPAIN	APPLIED MEDICAL RESEARCH	knowledge-intensive industries	400	20
GM30	SPAIN	PHARMACEUTICAL LAB	knowledge-intensive industries	1100	1
GM31	SPAIN	HOSPITALITY	consumer goods sector	160	5
GM32	US	HIGH-TECH RECONDITIONING ACTIVITIES FOR THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY	consumer goods sector	125	10

independently coded each of the questionnaires. This method of independent coding facilitated consistency and agreement throughout the coding process. To address any discrepancies that arose during independent coding, a collaborative approach was taken. Authors engaged in thorough discussions to resolve differences in interpretations, ensuring a consensus was reached, and enhancing the reliability of the research findings. Authors grouped answers by topics, such as the type of mobility, which allowed for meaningful comparisons between different codes. This comprehensive approach enriched the analysis and provided valuable insights into the various aspects of the study's subject matter. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was applied to identify the main themes and subthemes in the conducted interviews.

3.3. Data analysis

Transcriptions of the interviews were analysed using IPA (Smith et al., 2009). The analysis was conducted in several stages: firstly, a case-by-case examination of each participant, where significant statements related to the research question were noted; secondly, these notes were

transformed into emergent themes that encapsulated the essential qualities of what was found. Finally, these themes were mapped and linked, producing a structured summary of the participant's narrative (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Utilising contingency theory as our analytical lens (Donaldson, 2001), we initially focused our analysis on the variability and dynamism inherent in GM management across different contexts—including, pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic. Our theoretical framework (Fiedler, 1964) posits that the efficacy of an organization's strategy is shaped by its alignment with the prevailing context or environment, so initially we focused on macro-level environmental characteristics, differentiating between sectors such as knowledge-intensive industries and consumer goods, as well as meso-level organizational factors, comparing larger and smaller MNEs. Our analysis then evolved through abductive reasoning to capture emergent micro-level themes, like career aspirations and wellbeing. The significance of these themes became particularly evident in the post-pandemic period, thereby enriching our thematic structure. This served to validate the inclusion of themes initially considered external to the traditional scope of

contingency theory (Donaldson, 2001). In the pre-pandemic landscape, our analysis foregrounded a 'business as usual' approach, concentrating on long- and short-term assignments. Yet, as the pandemic evolved, themes of adaptability and resilience became more pronounced, an observation that aligns well with classic contingency theory (Burns & Stalker, 1961). Changes in GM strategies notably included an increased uptake of remote work and greater flexibility in international assignments (Shepherd & Rudd, 2013). We then observed changes in GM dynamics.

4. Findings: Global mobility and the pandemic

In this section, we present our findings through the analytical lens of contingency theory. We examine the influence of contingent factors at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels, on GM trends, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have observed discernible changes in several dimensions across three phases—pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic—including the volume of GM activities, GM-related policies, investments in digitalization and technology, variations in mobility types, and potential shifts in the prevailing GM paradigm. Fig. 1 illustrates the thematic map developed from our analysis.

4.1. Volume reduction in GM

The pandemic has significantly changed global mobility. Before COVID-19 hit, it was already being argued that there was a trend, amongst large MNEs at least, towards reducing traditional expatriate assignments. However, the pandemic amplified this pattern, leading to significant volume reductions across various types of expatriation. Organizations increasingly sought alternatives, including virtual assignments and hybrid working models, to adapt to the changing landscape.

"Even before the pandemic, our number of international assignments was already gradually dropping." GM 12

"We're still moving people. It's just, I would say everything is cut in half, pretty much, by the pandemic... and now, of course, the big questions about virtual assignments and all of that..." GM6

Looking ahead, respondents noted the impact of various factors at the macro (industry types, job nature), meso (organizational size, strategic aims), and micro (career aspirations, well-being) levels. The

pandemic catalysed pre-existing trends and forced organizations to reconsider their global mobility strategies to be more contingent and adaptable. In the post-pandemic era, these specialists expect to see the emergence of more flexible, hybrid, models that consider individual needs and organizational goals while capitalising on digital advancements.

"We have sometimes ramped up new [manufacturing] plants... one third of the employees there were expats.... So, this is something that probably you wouldn't do" [virtual assignments through remote work]. GM 12

"We are trying to grow rapidly in some markets, and for that, we need to bring in trusted individuals who are already familiar with the project, and that implies that despite the pandemic, our mobility will increase." GM32

4.2. Strategy and policy transformation in the wake of the pandemic

The exigencies of the global pandemic amplified pre-existing trends, spurring transformations in the strategies governing GM. 'Normal operating procedures' were severely tested during the pandemic:

Before the pandemic we were not allowed to do cross-border working. And [the policy] goes into a lot of detail about why". GM 22

"Lot of discussion around [changes in policies due to technology] because it could, if it's not managed properly., have a lot of inequality. it has a knock-on effect to how I will be managing the GM programme GM 20.

The ongoing shift in GM patterns could be identified at each level. At the macro-level, different industries demonstrated divergent strategies for adapting to the pandemic's contingencies. In knowledge-intensive sectors, GM specialists anticipated a surge in STAs at the expense of LTAs. Conversely, in the consumer goods sector, while remote work has solidified its role for support functions like HRM, IT, and marketing, a full recovery in the number of expatriate line managers is anticipated.

"I have a global HRM job and otherwise I couldn't do my work if I had to be there. So, I can work through Zoom... the logistics guy, he needs to see the containers and the shipping company and the product and the factory". GM 11.

Then, with regard to the meso-level, organizational size and strategic goals significantly influenced the reshaping of GM policies. Small and medium sized (SME) businesses, which have fewer overseas assignees,

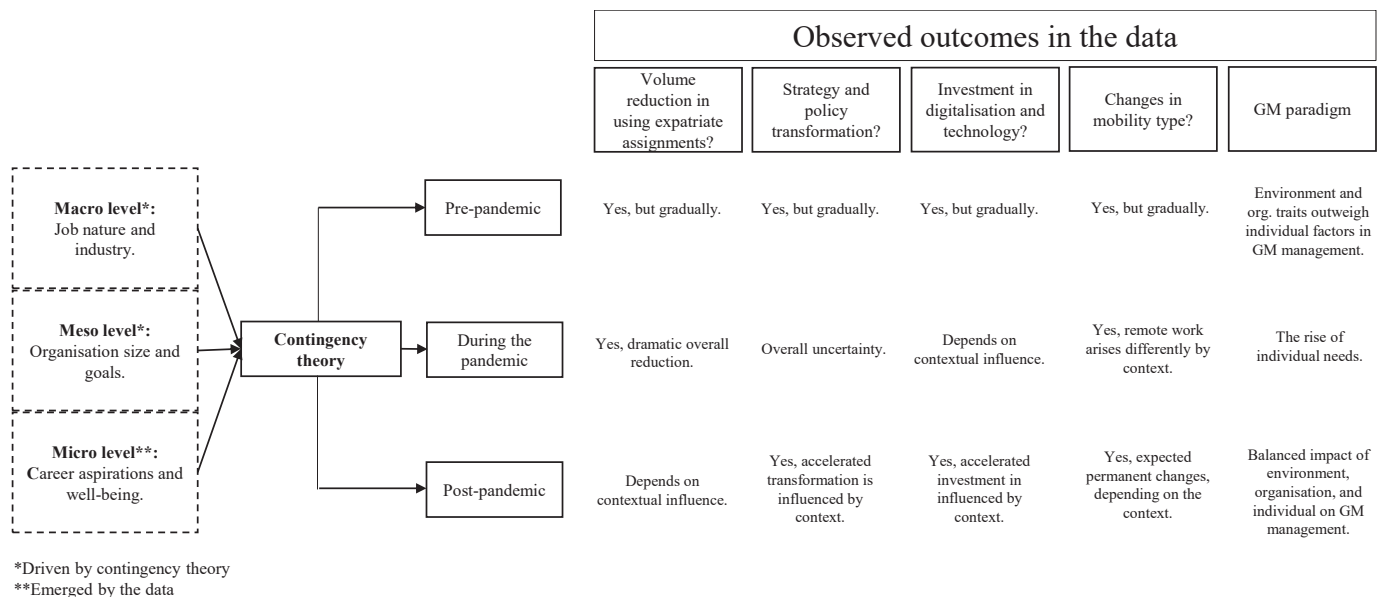


Fig. 1. The thematic map.

were more likely to return to their strategies from before the pandemic as concerns about the virus decreased: A form of inertia influenced by existing organizational goals and resources.

"In any case, we haven't made changes to our expatriation policy because we currently have few expatriates, and we have been addressing each situation individually." GM 24

Larger MNEs, on the other hand, appeared more willing to institute lasting changes in strategy, influenced not just by pandemic considerations but also by technology and evolving employee attitudes.

Finally, with regard to the micro-level, well-being and duty of care have garnered more attention post-pandemic. Career aspirations have also started to weigh more heavily in the decision-making process for both employees and employers. Consequently, the importance of individual-level factors has risen.

"Well-being, duty of care, all of that's sort of coming into it a lot more than, I would say, pre-pandemic". GM 19

4.3. Investment in digitalization and technology

The influence of digitalization and technological investment, already in process before 2020, was accelerated by the pandemic, and has had an increasing influence on global mobility strategies.

"If we can't do it with physical assignments, the client need hasn't changed... we have to go to different tools in the toolbox to get it done... we moved into kind of hyper-speed with our digital transformations." GM1.

We can understand this evolution through a contingency theory lens. With regard to the macro-level, the pandemic has spurred varying degrees of digitalization across industries. Knowledge-intensive sectors have scaled their investments in digital learning and remote capabilities, emphasizing the need for a workforce that is both skilled and adaptable. Manufacturing sectors, however, still demand a higher degree of physical presence, underscoring the industry-specific contingencies affecting digitalization strategies.

"We use the technologies even more than before, but rather push even further the boundaries. And this will reduce the demand for a lot of physical mobility that we have... in our business [consumer goods sector], short-term will increase. And then the long-term will decrease, but be replaced by these virtual assignments when possible, connected to a short-term one." GM3.

With regard to the meso-level, larger MNEs reported having the necessary technology in place for digital transformations, as evidenced by more sophisticated remote monitoring systems for performance. SMEs were more likely to be playing catch-up, investing in digital tools to facilitate telework, indicating that organizational size and existing technological resources are pivotal factors.

"Luckily for us [large MNEs], lot of things were already in place. At least as a foundation for remote work". GM 12.

"We are addressing the challenge of selecting the best technology for our business due to our limited resources." GM 32 SME

Finally, with regard to the micro-level, digitalization has also altered employee experiences and career development pathways. Talent development now incorporates digital learning modules, facilitating professional growth without geographical constraints. Employees themselves are driving some of these changes, demanding more remote work options and altering the traditional dynamics of GM strategies.

"A primary driver around mobility is the employee experience. So, what does the employee seek?. how to combine employees and organizational needs?. we're making big investments in digital learning. But those investments are being driven by people. You get the concept, but what you're

missing is the practical application, which when joined together, makes you a valuable professional. So, then we're trying to get them into virtual teams. So, now that they have the concept, they can work with experienced professionals actually implementing, delivering and gaining the practical knowhow". GM 1

"There is an entirely different phenomena, which is employees seeking to self-direct their careers and, in the process of doing that, using mobility to gain access to countries that they want to work in [...] we're going to facilitate the self-direction of their careers [...] I think what we're going to see is a decrease from the client side, we're going to see as an increase from the employee side." GM1

4.4. Changes in mobility type in the context of the pandemic

In GM, the pandemic acted as a catalyst for an ongoing transition in ways of getting work done. While traditional expatriate assignments witnessed a decline, remote working experienced an increase, influenced by various contingency factors. This highlights a more flexible and adaptable GM landscape. This section elucidates these changes, again, at each of the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels.

Prior to the pandemic, assigned expatriation was predominantly controlled by the organization. Employees' input was usually confined to an 'accept' or 'leave' decision. The GM specialists felt that the pandemic has increased employees' bargaining power. Employees are realising that in some cases they have the ability to work remotely from anywhere, creating a need for greater flexibility in GM policies. As we move forward, the concept of 'work from anywhere' is expected to shape future GM strategies.

With regard to the macro-level, the nature of the industry and job roles heavily influenced changes in mobility. For instance, knowledge-intensive industries witnessed a rise in STAs and virtual remote working and a corresponding reduction in LTAs. On the other hand, sectors like manufacturing that require face-to-face interaction are still reliant on traditional expatriate roles.

"We are in a knowledge business... we're developing training tools and digital learning that will cover the basics. So, then we're trying to get them into virtual teams". GM1.

"There will always be long term assignments ... in [a Bank] that's very heavily regulated ... If you operate in many countries, all your financial accounting, and everything has to meet the US standard" GM 6.

With regard to the meso-level, larger MNEs have exhibited more adaptability in changing their GM strategies. In contrast, SMEs were more likely to revert to pre-pandemic dynamics of expatriation. Organizations started to reassess their GM strategies to incorporate lessons learned from the pandemic.

"Googleglass tells the operator this is a button to push. And the virtual reality will identify whether we're pushing the right button or the wrong button... It is not cheap". GM 3

Finally, with regard to the micro-level, the pandemic has escalated the importance of individual preferences in GM policies. Employee career aspirations, well-being and duty of care have been pushed to the forefront. There is a shifting focus towards creating GM policies that are not just organization-driven but also employee-centric.

"Young people arrive seeking international experiences. They have already experienced going abroad during their studies and want to move around." GM 27.

"We expect that our mobility dynamics will depending strongly on our employees" GM 9.

4.5. The evolving global mobility paradigm

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the paradigms shaping GM were largely determined by environmental factors and organizational traits, with individual needs often side-lined. As the pandemic swept across the globe, there was a noticeable shift towards recognizing and accommodating individual needs within GM strategies. This change did not originate with the pandemic, but it accelerated the existing trend. Now, as we transition towards a post-pandemic future, a more balanced GM paradigm seems to be emerging—where environmental, organizational, and individual factors all significantly influence GM management.

“We have oftentimes government restrictions and legislation in the way. So, my boss would allow me to go to my family in Spain and say please, work from there and enjoy the sunshine. But I cannot, due to European Union policy that if I’m 60 or 90 days in another country, I need to pay my social security taxes there.” GM12.

“Individuals are saying: ‘I want to go and do this.’ And how are we going to deal with this?... we were only seeing ad hoc requests... now, we’re saying we need to process, and we need some governance structure... because if we don’t, then, you know, it’s going to be a bit chaotic... I think we’re seeing that dynamic shift from being employer-led previously, in terms of us sending them on assignment, to now more people going”. GM 13

“Employee experience will dictate; the employee wants to control that and have greater flexibility. We’ve got to manage that within the risk to the firm from an immigration, and tax and labor law, you know, all those perspectives.” GM 1.

As we transition to a post-pandemic era, the GM paradigm is moving towards a more holistic, adaptive model that values human elements as well as operational efficiencies. The trend suggests an intricate balancing act that GM leaders must perform, blending these diverse sets of factors into a coherent, effective, and humane, GM strategy.

5. Discussion

Informed by contingency theory, we shed light on the complex interplay among macro-, meso- and micro-factors that collectively shape the management of GM in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Historically, the traditional aims of international assignments have focused on the business need to transfer knowledge to subsidiaries, fill perceived competency gaps, augment a global talent (succession) pipeline and control and coordinate foreign subsidiaries (Edström & Galbraith, 1977; Harzing, 2001). These organization-centered drivers of global work continue to be important. However, consistent with Caligiuri et al. (2020), who argued for several substantial changes induced by the pandemic, we suggest that the theory’s utility extends beyond merely macro- and meso-factors to explain variations in the volume of GM activities, GM-related policies, and investments in digitalization and technology. We also find that micro-level variables, such as career aspirations, work-life balance, and well-being, have come to play a pivotal role in shaping GM activities. As a result, there are indications of a re-balancing of environmental, organizational, and individual variables on GM management. Overall, this signals a significant shift in GM practices from an environment- and organization-dominant model towards a more balanced, people-centric approach.

Macro-level factors, particularly the nature of industries, influence many aspects of GM. On the one hand, knowledge-intensive industries like IT and consulting have been agile in investing in digital technologies. They prioritise greater use of technology, STAs and international business travel over LTAs as they seek flexibility and adaptability, aligning well with the burgeoning ‘work from anywhere’ culture (Selmer et al., 2021). On the other hand, some traditional sectors like manufacturing continue to rely on expatriate managers and show hesitancy in adopting major digital transformations, mainly because the

work often requires physical presence (Lund et al., 2020). This dichotomy influences not just the volume of GM activities but also the types of mobility - more use of digital technology, STAs and international business travel in knowledge sectors versus LTAs in manufacturing. Variations also occur according to whether internationally mobile employees are in line functions, where global mobility may still be necessary, or in back-office and support functions, which can often be performed remotely (Lund et al., 2020). Investment in digitalization is likewise skewed, with knowledge-intensive sectors keen on leveraging technology for remote work while manufacturing sectors employ it more cautiously. The pandemic has accelerated these trends, forcing organizations to re-evaluate their strategies (Jooss et al., 2023), in line with contingency theory, to remain congruent with external realities. In essence, macro factors create a ripple effect that cascades into GM strategies, investments in technology, types of mobility, and ultimately leads to a recalibration of the prevailing GM paradigm. The post-pandemic era seems poised to amplify these industry-specific variances (Selmer et al., 2021), thereby cementing the relevance of contingency theory in shaping adaptive, resilient, and effective GM frameworks.

Meso-level factors like organizational size and degree of internationalization are critical in shaping GM activities and strategies. Larger MNEs are more willing to adapt and reshape their GM policies, not just in response to pandemic-induced changes but also due to technological advances, investing more in digitalization (Jooss et al., 2022). This is reflected in the broader variety of mobility types they offer, from traditional expatriate roles to increasingly popular use of remote working. SMEs, often constrained by resources, tend to revert to pre-pandemic strategies and are less agile in adopting technological solutions for GM. The extent and experience of internationalization further influences the volume of GM activities; organizations with aggressive internationalization strategies are more likely to maintain or even increase their GM volumes to meet strategic objectives. Such strategic considerations can also prompt shifts in the prevailing GM paradigm, making it more aligned with organizational goals and market presence. Investments in digital tools are also contingent upon these meso-factors, as more internationally experienced organizations are readier to adopt digital advances to serve their complex needs (Jooss et al., 2022). At the meso-level, the size and international outlook of an organization significantly influences the volume of GM activities, the underlying policies, investments in digitalization, variations in mobility types, and potentially even the overall GM paradigm.

Since the pandemic, our data indicates that micro-level factors like career aspirations, work-life balance, and well-being have become more significant in shaping the landscape of GM. During the pandemic, many organizations and employees discovered the viability of performing tasks remotely. This flexibility not only met individuals’ international career expectations and enhanced work-life balance but also catered to their personal preferences for work location and well-being by offering the option of office space when needed to prevent feelings of isolation. In addition, this remote work model allowed organizations to reduce costs. As the pandemic began to ease, despite compliance challenges related to institutional differences such as taxation and insurance, the global mobility landscape started to shift. It aligned more with employees’ career expectations and lifestyles rather than strictly business needs, signaling a paradigm shift.

Individuals often find that their careers benefit from expatriation, both in terms of subjective and objective career success (Mello et al., 2023b). When well-executed, expatriation serves the interests of both employees and organizations and is unlikely to disappear (Supangco & Mayrhofer, 2014). What changed during the pandemic was a managerial emphasis on considering individuals’ interests, health, and well-being (Dickmann & Bader, 2020). First, these individual considerations have begun to impact the volume of GM activities directly. The shift towards remote work and increased employee demands for work-life balance have led to a decline in traditional overseas postings, but these

micro-level factors are now being actively integrated into GM-related strategies and policies. The quest for a balanced life and career progression is becoming vital in the allocation and nature of international assignments. Second, the focus on employee well-being and the feasibility of remote work has prompted organizations to invest more aggressively in digitalization and technology (Joos et al., 2022), supporting alternative, hybrid working models. Third, individual preferences are giving rise to variations in types of mobility. Traditional LTAs, once the norm, now increasingly occur when they align with individuals' career aspirations. From our data it seems that even when face-to-face interaction is crucial for the business, this must also align with individuals' career aspirations, leading to an uptick in short-term and business travel to meet face-to-face interaction needs alongside virtual assignments.

In summary, the growing prominence of these micro-factors is signaling a potential paradigm shift in GM from an organization-centric model to a more balanced approach that also values environmental and individual variables. This evolving micro-level emphasis dovetails with the tenets of contingency theory, which suggest that optimal outcomes depend on a harmonious fit among various influencing factors, paving the way for a more adaptive and humane approach to GM in the post-pandemic world.

6. Contributions

Our study offers insight into the impact of the pandemic on expatriation policies. Using contingency theory as our analytical lens, we uncover the intricate interplay of factors at various levels—macro, meso, and micro—that influence GM policies. This adds a layer of empirical depth to both the international HRM field and contingency theory. The pandemic served as a catalyst, allowing us to identify emerging trends that signal a potential paradigm shift in GM. This shift is characterized by an increasing focus on individual needs and aspirations, as well as by technological advancements that are diversifying the kinds of jobs that can be performed abroad.

In addition to these practical implications, our findings contribute to the granularity of contingency theory and we expand on this below.

6.1. A global mobility parading shift?

The 32 GM leaders of MNEs we interviewed identified a variety of emergent global work patterns, some of them diverging from traditional GM frameworks. Some of the 'on-demand' global work, such working from anywhere, allows staff to choose their own locations while working abroad or with a foreign team. This may mean that organizational

planning, management and finance is replaced by personal design and effort. We have summarized the basic changes that we were told about by the GM leaders in Fig. 2.

From "business needs driven" to a stronger incorporation of "people's needs". The pre-pandemic GM paradigm was almost exclusively geared towards aiming to fulfil business needs through AEs. However, the pandemic decisively showed the vulnerability of internationally mobile workers, including expatriates, and the importance of their well-being (Tripathi & Singh, 2021). At the same time, organizations and staff have become more sensitive to the wider dangers of working abroad (Bader et al., 2021) and they increasingly factor these into their assignment decisions. While there continue to be business and ecological considerations, the balance of influence in the decision where and in what pattern to work abroad is increasingly favouring individuals. In other words, the GM paradigm that was based strongly on business needs is now moving to take more account of individuals' needs.

From "moving people to work" to "moving work to people" where staff have more influence in where they work. Organizations now can more easily see moving work to people as a viable option. Our findings show that although this will not be a uniform move, the enhanced possibilities of working with foreign teams or on tasks abroad while staying at home (and of working at home while living abroad) allow staff more location choice. Interestingly, even where traditionally people had to be in-situ due to skills and knowledge transfer goals, technological advances such as GoogleGlass would allow choices in location that could be, technologically at least, anywhere in the world.

From "organization-initiated, managed and financed" to more frequent "individual initiated and organised" international work. While self-initiated expatriation has existed for centuries, the disruption caused by the pandemic has meant that sophisticated virtual technology is being used more often in organizations and that staff are more familiar with it, giving assigned expatriates more influence on their global mobility. The opportunities to work from anywhere or to undertake hybrid foreign work have become more visible. This has enabled AEs to be more proactive in asking for foreign work experience which might, in some cases, fit with their, personal or family, non-work interests. The GM specialists we spoke with believed that while generally global work would continue to be initiated, managed and financed by the organization, new GM patterns are emerging that would allow individuals to have more input into international moves, giving them more influence over their careers.

Fundamental to contingency theory is that HRM is dependent on context (Paauwe & Farndale, 2017) and that applies to international HRM, too. In this case it is contingent on two key contextual shifts. First, a shift from largely business-orientated to more people-orientated mobility, with organizations paying more attention to aligning

Source: Authors' elaboration

PRE-PANDEMIC PARADIGM	Factors accelerating transformation			POTENTIAL POST-PANDEMIC PARADIGM
	Macro level	Meso level	Micro level	
From GM predominantly driven by business' needs: <i>talent development, knowledge sharing, competency gap filling, control and coordination</i>	Global health crisis influences on drivers of GM.	GM Risks Planning and Duty of Care more important	Individual learning and interests more important	To GM increasingly also driven by people's needs: <i>Career interests, duty of care considerations, personal (life-style) interests</i>
From taking people to work: <i>Global work predominantly in foreign location</i>	Travel restrictions lead to an augmented need for virtual work	<i>Enhanced role of technology tools and digitalization</i>	Individuals learned they can work from everywhere.	To taking work to people <i>Global work increasingly virtual or hybrid forms</i>
From organizational control: <i>Planned, managed and funded by organizations</i>	Travel restrictions disrupted the organizational control	Organizational learning adjusts GM strategies to situational demands	Employees' voice is pronounced.	To individual influence <i>Can be mostly planned, managed and funded by people. Compliance needed.</i>

Fig. 2. The pandemic influence on global mobility: expanding the paradigm.

people's needs with business needs (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). Individuals have gained more freedom to pursue self-directed careers within their organizations. Second, at the macro level, global mobility is contingent on the job and industry type, and the kind of work performed, which varies across countries and requires more flexibility in developing strategies and policies. Crucially, we observed a significant rise in the level of flexibility among several of our, particularly larger, companies in the development of their global mobility policies and practices. It seems that in some companies there is a mindset change that will allow staff who want to work internationally to do so, as long as it is not harmful to the organization.

6.2. Contributions to the theory

Our study adds granularity to the conceptual framework of contingency theory, particularly within the context of GM. Historically, contingency theory has focused predominantly on the role of organizational and environmental factors in shaping decision-making (Shepherd & Rudd, 2014). However, enriched by the unprecedented global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, our research introduces a nuanced yet substantial layer of individual agency into this longstanding theory. In the GM context, the pandemic served as a catalyst, fast-tracking the integration of personal factors into the theory's traditional focus. For example, our research highlights the heightened significance of factors such as the flexibility offered by virtual work, the increased focus on the duty of care, and individual career aspiration as key GM drivers. This potential paradigm shift effectively elevates individual agency from a side-consideration to one of the central determinants in decision-making models rooted in contingency theory. This development not only emphasises the growing importance of individual agency in GM but also validates an already accelerating trend that predates the pandemic.

Although the pandemic has undeniably modified various aspects of the work environment, its most lasting impact may spotlight the need for a more nuanced and balanced version of contingency theory. This updated framework includes not just organizational and environmental factors but also includes individual internal variables, such as career aspirations and the desire for greater flexibility to achieve a better work-life balance. While organizational objectives and structures remain crucial, this shift leans towards a more balanced and inclusive paradigm where individual desires and needs also hold weight.

In summary, the insights gleaned from our research suggest that, although the pandemic has been a critical catalyst for change, the real advance is in contingency theory's ability to include a richer, more balanced, and humane set of considerations in decision-making processes, especially in the field of GM, though potentially extending to other disciplines as well (e.g., artificial intelligence, Abedin, 2022).

6.3. Implications for organizations

Looking at MNEs' global mobility policies, strategies and operations during the pandemic enabled us to see how they adapted to the changing world of global work. The interviews with 32 global mobility leaders showed that many foresaw important changes to their organization's GM approach which they expected to last beyond the pandemic. Our results show the changes in the global mobility focus of organizations after the pandemic and reflect an increase in the investment of expatriates in decisions to stay or leave in order to develop their own career capital. The continuing dilemma for GM departments about how much autonomy to allow individuals, and how much to try to control the situation and reduce the risks, remains but with perhaps added pressure from the expatriates themselves to pay attention to their wishes and their career development (Mello et al., 2023a). The option of just stepping back from close management of the company's international workers, just providing guiding principles amidst devolved decision powers, is seen as potentially putting international assignees under fiscal

or regulatory risk and as unlikely, but the balance may change. MNEs may have to take more account of the interests of their expatriates but it is likely, therefore, that although the direction of change may be set, the change may occur only gradually.

Partly as a result, the GM specialists we consulted foresaw a growth in short-term assignments. Those in the larger, more experienced, MNEs in particular are looking carefully at the appropriate length of each assignment. Three years may be just right for some purposes but it seems unlikely that every project will need that length of time spent abroad and if the work can be done as a short-term assignment, with the expatriate contract remaining at their home base, then this is not only cheaper for the organization but may fit the expatriate's needs better.

For larger MNEs the more widespread problem of teasing out what can be done at a distance through the technology continues and needs to be thought through in the context of expatriation. For smaller and less experienced MNEs, the post-pandemic situation provides another opportunity for them to undertake a deeper rethinking of their expatriation policies: Do they really need expatriates in that position? And, if they do, what are they there to achieve and does our treatment of expatriates and repatriates support those objectives?

6.4. Limitations and future research

One limitation of our research is the potential for recall bias and inaccuracies in respondents' retrospective accounts of their pre-pandemic approach to the management of GM (McAdams et al., 2008). The significant and abrupt changes brought on by the pandemic may have influenced the way respondents remember and perceive their pre-pandemic strategies. As they reflect on their past practices, it is possible that they unintentionally reinterpret their approach in light of the pandemic's impact. For example, to maintain a clear focus on the research goals, certain responses related to quarantine requirements were deliberately omitted from our analysis as these responses were not directly relevant to influencing future GM decisions.

In addition, while we aimed at interviewing a broad spread of GM leaders in charge of their organization's global mobility from different industries, countries and company sizes, our study has the usual limitations of qualitative investigations in terms of representativeness and generalizability. Some of the GM policies in response to the pandemic are new and will be tested over time, thereby being subject to changes. Clearly, therefore, research needs to explore changes to GM patterns over time. As companies and HRM leaders gain more insights into the management of what we have argued is a new, extended GM paradigm it will be fascinating to assess how individuals and expatriates' families are using their increased power in the dynamic relationship of global work, development and careers.

Data Availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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