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A Race Against Time:
Training and Support for Short-term International Assignments

Abstract

Scholars and practitioners both agree that the increasing deployment of individuals on short-term international assignments (SIAs) presents significant challenges that have not yet been met with the development of appropriate organisational policies and practices. This paper explores the specific forms of training and support that individuals on SIAs receive. In doing so, we illuminate the unique challenges that short-term assignees face, and identify specifc forms of training and support that organsiations may develop in responding to these challenges. Drawing on in-depth exploratory qualitative interviews with a sample of German assignees, the findings identify the need for tailored training and support through formal and informal mechanisms, developed in pre-departure and post-arrival contexts. Given the inherent time constraints for SIAs, the significance of informal support, in both pre-departure and post-arrival contexts is especially emphasised. The paper makes key contributions through providing much needed empirical evidence on the training and support short-term assignees receive and in so doing we identify specific forms of training and supports deemed relevant from the perspective of individuals on SIAs.

Introduction

Despite the increased interest in the use of international assignments (IAs) within and across the multinational enterprise, much of the research in this area focuses on traditional expatriation, largely ignoring the growing significance of short-term international assignments (SIAs) (Meyskens et al. 2009; Suutari et al. 2013). Rising costs and failure rates of traditional expatriates, coupled with immobility and supply issues, have increased the use and relevance of alternative forms of IAs, with the most popular of these being SIAs (Caligiuri and Bonache, 2016). A critical challenge that scholars and practitioners have to date failed to address is how organisational practices and initiatives are created and developed to cater for the growing rise in SIAs (Mayerhofer et al. 2004; Starr and Currie, 2009). More specifically, in order for SIAs to be effective, central organisational practices such as training and support need to be tailored to the particular and often unique circumstances that these assignments face (Crowley-Henry and Heaslip, 2014; Liisa, Saarenpaa, and McNulty, 2017; Tahvanainen, Welch and Worm, 2005).

Short-term assignees appear to generally not be provided with similar supports and benefits vis-a-vis expatriates (Suutari et al. 2013). Despite often working in multi-cultural teams while abroad, assignees are generally selected informally based solely on task competence rather than cultural skills (Starr and Currie, 2009). Equally, given that short-term assignees generally have less time in the host country than traditional expatriates, they are often expected to adjust at a faster rate post-arrival (Meyskens et al. 2009; Suutari, et al. 2013). Studies illustrate that these assignees generally end up working in countries of which they have no prior experience so may suffer from problems of integration or developing personal relationships in the local environment (Tahvanainen et al. 2005). As Collings et al (2007) suggest, despite their circumstances being very different to expatriates, short-term assignees may be confronted with similar experiences of culture shock to expatriates, but in 'fast forward'. Therefore, a key concern for short-term assignees, that traditional expatriates do not confront, is the lack of manoeuvre for a protracted acculturation process

(Tahvanainen et al. 2005) and hence are faced with the unique problem of what we term 'rapid adjustment'. It has been argued that a lack of significant pre-departure cross-cultural training (CCT), or increased local and family support while on assignment, may impact the effectiveness of the SIA (McNulty, Vance and Fisher, 2017). In comparison to expatriates, short-term assignees are often given shorter notice prior to departure, which may limit the amount of CCT necessary to manage the requirements and challenges of these assignments (Mayerhofer et al. 2004). Empirical evidence is however notably lacking in relation to the provision of cross-cultural training and supports that SIAs receive, in pre-departure or post-arrival contexts, in order to manage the particular challenges that SIAs confront. Equally, we still know very little about the unique challenges that SIAs face over other forms of international assignment. The voice of these short-term assignees is also conspicuously silent in existing research.

The value of CCT and support for expatriate adjustment is well documented (Bennett, Aston & Colquhoun, 2000; Black and Mendenhall, 1990; Forster, 2000; Littrell and Salas, 2005; Tung, 1981; Wurtz, 2014) but how different forms of CCT and support are tailored for short–term assignees is underexplored (Mayerhofer et al. 2004). This is a central problem for scholars and practitioners as research suggests that short-term assignees are often expected to look after their own training and development (Suutari et al. 2013). Paradoxically, given the simplicity and cost effectiveness of SIAs compared to expatriates, it should be much easier for companies to develop strategic training procedures specifically tailored to their needs, rather than relying on broad based standardised approaches appropriate only for expatriates (Collings et al. 2007; Meyskens et al. 2009; Tahvanainen et al. 2005). Drawing on the above insights, and the evident empirical lacuna, our study explores the particular challenges that short-term assignees face and the specific forms of training and support that organisations may develop in order to effectively manage these challenges..

The paper answers calls for a greater understanding of the particular support mechanisms organisations may develop in managing SIAs (Caligiuri and Bonache, 2016; Collings and Isichei, 2018; Crowley-Henry and Heaslip, 2014; Liisa et al. 2017; Suutari et al. 2013). In doing so, we build

on existing studies within expatriation and CCT (Caligiuri et al. 2001; Suutari and Burch, 2001; Wurtz, 2014) through applying insights to the SIA context (Mayerhofer et al. 2004; Suutari et al. 2013; Tahvanainen, et al. 2005). By drawing on qualitative interviews, the foremost contribution of our study lies in the identification of specific and tailored forms of training and support in response to the identification of the unique challenges associated with SIAs. Importantly, this consists of formal training and informal support mechanisms in pre-departure and post-arrival contexts. In particular, we identify a number of significant underlying challenges that are particularly relevant for SIAs. These challenges include short notice prior to departure, limited duration of the assignment, long working days, avoiding often inaccurate information from organisations and the likelihood of being sent to atypical locations. Our findings point to the significance of informal support for short-term assignees by establishing network ties, in both pre-departure and post-arrival contexts, and how this needs to be complemented with formal pre-departure training. In contradiction to much of the literature on expatriation (Selmer, 2001, 2002), we find that formal training post-arrival may not be necessary for short-term assignees given the time constraints and their focus on work related issues. As such, this paper provides early insights on the importance of training and support for SIAs and calls for further empirical work in this area.

Theoretical background

Ensuring effective control and efficient coordination of foreign operations has led to an emphasis on the use of IAs within multinational enterprises (Collings & Isichei, 2018). Expatriation is the traditional form of IA, which is defined as the transfer of parent country employees to foreign subsidiaries, usually between 1-3 years (Harzing, Pudelko and Reiche, 2015). More recently, there has been a significant rise in the increase of expatriate failures, which are generally a result of insufficient organisational support such as inappropriate selection or cross-cultural preparation (Kumarika et al. 2017; Mayrhofer and Reiche, 2014). To avoid the costs involved with training and supporting expatriates, firms are now increasingly deploying SIAs, defined generally as temporary

transfers to an international subsidiary 'between one and twelve months duration' (Collings et al. 2007). SIAs are often considered more affordable, practical and flexible than traditional expatriates as they can be planned for in a more specific manner, with explicit goals and measurements for success (Guttormsen, 2018; Mayerhofer et al. 2004; Tahvanainen et al. 2005).

Studies are beginning to acknowledge that SIAs come with their own specific challenges and a major problem is that their increased popularity 'has not been matched by the development of organisational policies' (Suutari et al. 2013: 133). For example, organisations perceive that short-term assignees do not get similar training and support as expatriates, mainly due to the short notice given upon departure and the short time periods spent on assignment (Bonache et al. 2017; Mayerhofer et al. 2004). Studies illustrate that short-term assignees face increased visa, immigration and tax challenges, but are given limited policies concerning integration in the host country, often leading to considerable work life balance issues as well as family and social separation (Suutari et al. 2013). Short-term assignees are exposed to greater stress and health issues than expatriates due to constant travel and relocation, particularly if on multiple SIAs over a given period (Collings et al. 2007; McNulty et al. 2017). They are also frequently used in 'insecure' or 'hostile environments', increasing the risk of health and safety issues and the need for further training and support (Bader & Berg, 2013). As such, a significant challenge for these assignees is that they are largely self-dependent, often fulfilling training, support and information needs themselves, which may create demotivation and an unwillingness to undertake future assignments (Suutari et al. 2013). Research illustrates that providing different forms of training and support may indicate organisational commitment in general and have a positive impact on an expatriates (Takeuchi et al. 2009). However, the application of training and support for short-term assignees is underutilised (Collings and Isichei, 2018). We draw on insights from CCT for expatriates to explore how specific forms of training and support may be tailored to meet the unique challenges associated with short-term assignees.

Cross-cultural training and support

Cross-cultural training is defined as an 'educative process focused on promoting intercultural learning through the acquisition of behavioural, cognitive and affective competencies' (Littrell and Salas, 2005: 308). Cross-cultural training involves any intervention that attempts to increase the skills and knowledge of assignees regarding the appropriate norms and behaviours in host countries (Caligiuri and Tarique, 2006). The main objective of CCT is to help assignees cope with potential conflict by creating realistic expectations with respect to both living and working in a host country (Caligiuri et al. 2001).

Studies have focused on CCT for expatriates and proposed a variety of different types of traditional training programs, often divided into didactic (information giving) and experiential learning activities. For example, didactic involves information giving in the form of informal briefings and formal educational activities (Littrell and Salas, 2005). Briefings may focus on a wide range of issues such as travel arrangements, job characteristics, dress appropriateness, cultural history or area studies on political and economic conditions (Lenartowiz, Johnson and Konopaske, 2014). Experiential training is a 'learn by doing' approach often involving 'participatory' simulations or critical incidents that expatriates may be confronted with (Bennett et al. 2000). Other categories such as attribution, culture awareness, interaction and language training are also considered important (Puck, Kittler & Wright, 2008). Language training is not necessary for every assignment and often the ability to exchange common courtesies in the host language are valuable demonstrations of interest that may help create relationships (Caligiuri et al. 2001). Despite this, recent studies argue that generic communication skills are often more important than language specific skills (Selmer and Lauring, 2015).

A major criticism of CCT studies is that 'integrative' broad based programs are considered the most effective, focusing on culture *general* as opposed to *culture* or *country* specific training (Bennett et al. 2000; Lenartowiz et al. 2014). As such, there are calls for a greater understanding of how

organisations may 'tailor' training in accordance with specific features of the assignment such as toughness of the host country culture or more importantly duration of the assignment (Caligiuri and Bonache, 2016). The delivery of a tailored CCT program often involves choosing between pre-departure, post-arrival or a sequential combination (Littrell and Salas, 2005; Selmer, 2002; Wurtz, 2014).

Pre-departure and post-arrival contexts

Pre-departure training is the most commonly used for IAs and it allows for realistic expectations of the practical, logistical, professional and cultural challenges, aiming to provide greater confidence on how to manage these (Caligiuri et al. 2001; Forster, 2000). Pre-departure programs are typically two to three days in duration whereas one day programs should be regarded as 'briefings', and anything shorter should be considered an 'overview' as the learning value deteriorates (Bennett et al. 2000). It has been suggested that training too early prior to departure may risk important information being forgotten but that providing it too close to departure may result in other anxieties distracting from its value (Bennett et al. 2000). A criticism of pre-departure CCT is that given its often short duration, it risks only creating stereotypes of the local culture, presenting the assignee with only a brief and biased overview of the early stages of the assignment, focusing on how to 'survive' rather than 'excelling' (Selmer, 2002; Wurtz, 2014).

Post-arrival programs in the form of in-country training appear far less common for expatriates not to mention short-term assignees (Selmer, 2001). They are generally more effectively carried out after the assignee has had a few weeks to experience and immerse themselves in the cultural and transitional challenges (Andreason, 2003). Studies illustrate that on-site mentoring is an effective form of on-the-job support that increases assignees socialisation and intention to finish (Carraher, Sullivan and Crocitto, 2008). For example, interaction training, or 'overlaps', are situations where a new expatriate learns from the assignee they are replacing (Littrell and Salas, 2005). Studies have argued that expatriates may proactively seek and build support relationships in the local country as

valuable forms of informational and emotional advice (Farh et al. 2010). Research here focuses on the importance of task-relevant expertise largely overlooking how these 'support ties' may assist with non-work related adjustment for SIAs (Bruning, Sonpar & Wang, 2012). Studies have also argued that post-arrival training may in fact be disruptive and contribute to poor adjustment as it takes managers away from important daily tasks (Selmer, 2002).

More specifically, a 'sequential' CCT approach, structured to the cycle of adjustment that assignees progress through, may be adopted (Selmer, 2001). This may involve a combination of pre-departure and post-arrival training, which provides continuous guidance and ensures incremental restructuring for adjustment (Wurtz, 2014). Furthermore, studies have failed to explore how both formal training differs from more informal supports for SIAs within these contexts (Crowne and Engle, 2016; Shen and Lang, 2009; Suutari and Burch, 2001). For example, while on assignment, there are significant spillovers between non-work and work related issues, meaning a combination of formal training and informal support should be incorporated to assist with managing the challenges of assignments (Takeuchi, Wang, Mainove and Yao, 2009). Formal training is often explicitly provided by the organisation but informal support may also be proactively developed by the assignee in a self-directed manner (Andreason, 2003).

Despite the above insights from the expatriation literature, there is very little empirical work on whether short-term assignees receive formal training and informal support both prior to and during their assignment. This is surprising given the much cited use of such shorter term global work (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2016; Collings and Isichei, 2018; Konopaske, Robie and Ivancevich, 2009).

Methodology

Empirical work on training for short-term assignees is scarce and studies have called for qualitative exploratory research that investigates the specific perceptions of short-term assignees (Suutari et al 2013). As such, this study adopted a qualitative research design which is appropriate for dealing

with complex issues such as cross-cultural interactions and adjustment. Importantly, we take short-term assignees perspectives into account when researching the challenges faced and how they can be effectively supported. The objective of the data collection was to collect detailed personal accounts from those individuals who had recent experiences of being on SIAs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews as they are an effective way to explore participants' attitudes and behaviours regarding the specific challenges they faced. The interview schedule was derived from extant literature on different types of CCT and divided into six themes, each with several guiding questions. These themes revolved around participant background, location/duration/purpose of the assignment and any formal and informal training and support they received before and during the assignment.

Purposive sampling was employed for selecting interviewee participants, in that a small sample of suitable participants, or 'knowledge informants', were selected for the relevant and valuable information they could provide (Welch et al. 2002). A purposive, maximum variation sampling strategy was appropriate as the research aims to establish common patterns in a diverse sample of short-term assignees. Sampling criteria focused on a heterogeneous sample of short-term assignees in terms of varying genders and ages, assigned to different countries for varying durations and purposes, in different positions within the company and varying experiences. Following other studies on expatriation that control for nationality, we interviewed solely German nationals that worked within a variety of different German multinational firms (Shenkar, 2012). Interviews were conducted mostly via Skype and carried out in German and translated afterwards. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, with pseudonyms used and other identifying attributes altered to provide anonymity. Table 1 shows a list of interviewee participants.

<---------- Insert Table 1 here ---------->

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted in order to analyse the interview data and establish key themes. This type of data analysis is appropriate as it offers a systematic yet flexible and accessible approach to analysing qualitative data (Van Maanen, Sorensen and Mitchell, 2007). Data was coded according to seminal qualitative coding techniques and this involved three main steps (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton. 2013). Firstly, interview data were condensed into first order codes, in the form of words or phrases referring to a unit of data in order to remain true to participants' original wording. Second order codes were subsequently established, considering terms related to the research question or issues from the extant literature on CCT. Finally, these themes were compiled into 'aggregate dimensions'. An example of these dimensions includes 'formal pre-departure CCT'. This category was found to comprise second order themes such as; 'language training', 'cross-cultural preparation' and 'practical information'. For example, first order codes assigned to 'cross-cultural preparation' ranged from 'training was planned but not approved' to 'culture was briefly mentioned in the course of language training' and 'brochures on how to behave in the host country' to different kinds of 'cross-cultural seminars'.

Findings

The following sections present findings in four broad contexts of training and support for short-term assignees: formal pre-departure training, informal pre-departure support, formal post-arrival training and informal post-arrival support. In doing so, we recognise the specifc challenges that short-term assignees are confronted within each context and identify the specific forms of training and support in each context.

Formal training for pre-departure challenges

There are a number of specific challenges that short-term assigness are confronted with prior to undertaking their assignments. One of the major recurring challenges in this context consisted of

time constraints or being provided with short notice by the organisation about the assignment. As P5 states, 'on Friday I was told, pack your bags, you are flying to Hungary on Sunday'. As such, interviewees commented that any formal training provided before departing should be tailored in response to this specifc challenge. For example, didactic training in the form of cross-cultural seminars and briefings were provided to several assignees prior to departure and to varying degrees of rigour. Culture specific training was in some instances offered in the form of a one-off afternoon lecture on specific cultural differences or a full-day cross-cultural seminar. Interviewees considered these the most beneficial and called for greater emphasis on the addition of practical information packages.

Despite this formal training being offered, assignees were critical suggesting it was too short and lacked depth, and it could have been tailored to be more culture specific, as stated below;

> What would have been more helpful would be discussions about which topics to avoid while in the country, where to get information on the specific country that we were travelling to. Country-specific training would have been much better but was not possible at this point. (P8)

Generally, most assignees were not offered any culture specific training prior to departure mainly due to short notice given, and even when some were expected to receive training, it never materialised. Those who did not receive any culture specific training expressed a need for it, even if given short notice.

Interviewees also noted the challenges of having to consistently ask their organisations for more training and information regarding the assignment. They further criticised the insufficient or lack of practical information packages they received from their organisations. Even though the firm made essential arrangements on occasion, such as flights and accommodation, information about practical matters beyond this was generally not offered or it was outdated or incorrect, causing the

assignee to lose confidence in the information. In most cases assignees noted how they did their own research on practical matters in a self-directed manner.

Many interviewees expressed a need for practical information beyond work related issues. From our findings, we noticed a trend that short-term assignees are increasingly being sent to atypical or developing locations and often given shorter pre-departure notice for these areas. Interviewees expressed a greater need for practical information on non-work related issues in these locations such as health and safety, local travel arrangements and fund withdrawals. This was another particular challenge specifc to SIAs and the comments below are indicative of this;

> …I always check how the security situation in the country is. One time I spent five hours at the airport and no one picked me up because they had forgotten about me. (P6)
>
> Recently one person was mugged, he did not want to believe it and walked around alone; cash, credit cards, all stolen. (P8)

A further related challenge here was that these atypical locations were often culturally complex, particularly when it came to assignees learning the local languages. However, language training was not abundantly supplied by their organisations as most interviewees were expected to have an advanced understanding of English. Some assignees did not expect language training, noting the complex nature of learning local languages in such a short time frame (see Table 2). Despite this, several participants expressed interest in basic language training to enable them to converse to some degree in the host country's native language. Others commented that basic language training would be helpful, particularly for creating positive first impressions and preventing any potential conflicts with local nationals;

> Every now and then it would not have been too bad to know the language, whenever the Hungarian co-workers would talk among themselves and badmouth the Germans, so you would understand some of that. (P5)

Informal support for pre-departure challenges

When asked about what type of informal support assignees received prior to departure, respondents generally cited the importance of having contacts in the host country. However , the challenges here for assignees were that these contacts were rarely supplied by the organsiation, and instead assignees often had the challenge of having to proactively find and develop their own contacts prior to departure. Interviewees commented that finding contacts was often an 'arduous' process and that rather informal contacts should be explicitly provided by the organisation. For example, social contacts were often created by coincidence as a result of the assignee's research and 'asking around' for information. These contacts were predominantly either local nationals or former assignees who had previous experience of working in, or were currently working in, the local country. On occasion, assignees had dual contacts from both local nationals and former assignees. Assignees believed that these contacts were valuable informal mechanisms for receiving specific essential information on both cultural and practical issues. The comment below is representative of these insights;

> There were two people who had been in India before who gave us information. First of all, my direct superior back in Germany and also another co-worker who had travelled to India a lot, who could tell us about the culture, what to expect, how traffic works, and what else to pay attention to. My superior was of course instructed by the firm to give information, the other contact was established by coincidence. (P3)

Equally, another challenge was that, in most instances, these contacts were not always forthcoming from the company and often the information provided was incorrect or out of date;

> …unless you know someone who has been there it is difficult to get the information you need. I was in Nigeria once and there was a contact number on the information sheet, but that person had left the country five years ago. (P6)

Assignees added that informal support mechanisms were often much more flexible ways to receive valuable and tailored information, rather than formal training, particularly given challenge of the short notice pre-departure. Another challenge cited here involved those contacts that had

previously operated within the country providing a 'biased' perspective in that they may fail to fully recall the significant challenges of the assignment location.

Formal training for post-arrival challenges

When interviewees were asked whether they received any formal post-arrival training it was clear that it did not exist, nor was it expected or requested. Our findings suggest there are two main challenges associated with this context, which typically related to the purpose and duration of the assignment. First, a major challenge for most assignees that our findings uncover is that they simply do not have the time to undertake formal training in-country, as P1 suggests, 'you only have a limited amount of time for short-term assignments, it's better to go in prepared so you can make the most of it'. Second, in relation to the purpose of the assignment, assignees that went abroad for purposes of project work, skills transfer and problem solving stated that they were working long hours and dealing with difficult issues in the workplace, leaving no time for further formal training (see Table 2).

Equally, assignees that completed SIAs for management development purposes cited how they also did not receive any formal post-departure training, and certainly did not expect any, as the assignments themselves were meant to be a type of training, used as stepping-stones for future expatriate assignments. In this sense, the SIA itself reflected a type of field experience or ad hoc on-the-job training;

> I was sent to India because we have many locations and suppliers in Asia so it was important to get to know the culture and working life there and of course to improve my English. (P3)

Informal support for post-arrival challenges

Informal post-arrival support was much more feasible and valuable for short-term assignees than formal post-arrival support. This informal support was generally provided by the organisations but

on occasion proactively sought by the assignee. The former generally took the form of a contact within the local organisation whereas the latter involved the assignee tapping into local expatriate networks, often outside the organisation. Again, finding the time with a busy work schedule as well as limited assignment duration were key challenges in attempting to develop contacts and build supportive relationships (see Table 2).

Contacts essentially acted as 'gatekeepers' between the assignee and the local culture in that they were usually the assignee's first point of contact upon arrival. The term 'gatekeeper' here refers to an employee in the subsidiary who provides support to the assignee with both work and non-work related issues. These contacts were perceived more useful for adjustment outside of work than task related difficulties. For example, they aided assignees in the development of personal relationships locally and in particular providing practical information on a flexible and daily basis;

> We had two contact persons from the same company who were there for two years. They were the first people to contact when we had problems with adjustment at the start and of course we also arranged to meet after work. (P3)

Most assignees that were provided contacts were done so through long-term expatriates who had lived at the location to provide support and guidance. Several assignees were provided with contacts who were local nationals or TCNs from culturally similar areas (Austria). Assignees commented that although any informal contacts were valuable, they had a preference for gatekeepers from their home country. Assignees who were not provided with informal contacts expressed a desire for their inclusion on future SIAs, making these gatekeepers the most requested form of informal support. This was with a view to overcoming the challenge of isolation for SIAs, particularly outside of work, as often the dangerous or unfamiliar nature of the location deterred them from leaving their hotels to socialise;

> I would include a contact person in the host country, which I did not have, who could provide support with cultural issues. So you are not left alone at 6pm when work finishes but there is someone there who supports you, shows you around the area and what there is to do. That would make the assignment much more enjoyable. (P1)

Additionally, assignees proactively tapped into local assignee networks. This informal support was not offered by the organisations and instead was often developed by assignees using social media. Although these expatriate networks were perceived as helpful it appeared that they limited the amount of cultural exposure assignees received due to the culturally homogenous nature of the networks. Equally, those assignees sent for management development purposes were often part of a larger development initiative that meant they were meeting other expatriates within the organisation.

To conclude, the above insights illustrate that both a combination of formal training and informal support are important for short-term assignees and the extent to which these practices are applied depends on pre-departure and post-arrival contexts. Table 2 illustrates the specific challenges that individuals on SIAs confront within each of these contexts.

<---------- Insert Table 2 here ---------->

Discussion and conclusion

This study explores the particular challenges that short-term assignees face and identifies the specific forms of training and support that organisations may develop in order to effectively manage these challenges. By drawing on earlier studies of CCT for expatriates (Caligiuri et al. 2001; Littrell and Salas, 2005; Suutari and Burch, 2001; Wurtz, 2014) and applying these insights to contemporary work on SIAs (Crowley-Henry and Heaslip, 2014; Mayerhofer et al. 2004; Meyskins et al. 2009; Tahvanainen, et al. 2005; Suutari et al. 2013), our research makes two important contributions. First, we contribute to the underdeveloped area of SIAs by answering calls for a greater understanding of the specific organisational initiatives that allow short-term assignees to reflect on their cultural experiences, particularly in the form of different training programs (Starr and Currie, 2009). In so doing, we add to current arguments on SIAs by illustrating that HR practices such as training and support are important but need to be tailored to the specific

challenges of the SIA. As such, this finding contradicts those studies on expatriation that argue for an integrative broad based approach to training and support (Bennett et al. 2000; Black and Mendenhall, 1990; Littrell & Salas, 2005). Second, our study is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to conduct an explicit analysis of the specific forms of training and support in response to the specific challenges of short-term assignees. Specifically, we illuminate a number of significant underlying challenges that are particularly relevant for SIAs over other types of IAs and why specific forms of training and support are important for managing these challenges. These challenges include short notice prior to departure, limited duration of the assignment, long working days, avoiding often inaccurate information from organisations and the likelihood of being sent to atypical locations. Therefore, our findings add value by illustrating that the extent to which formal training and informal support, in both pre-departure and post-arrival contexts, should be offered to short-term assignees depends on the specific challenges that SIAs confront.

Training and support for short-term international assignees

A major contribution of our research lies in the development of specific forms of training and support that appear particularly relevant for short-term assignees (Figure 1). These forms are based specifically on the type of training and support, whether formal or informal, and the context for these, for example pre-departure or post-arrival. The remainder of this section is dedicated to discussing these forms and the specific challenges inherent in the SIA process.

<---------- Insert Figure 1 here ---------->

First, our findings illustrate that formal training in a pre-departure context for short-term assignees may be beneficial. This may involve didactic and interactive cross-cultural seminars or briefings, practical information packages and basic language training. In contradiction to the literature on

expatriation (Bennett et al. 2000), which calls for an integrative culture general approach to pre-departure training, formal pre-departure training for short-term assignees needs to be culture or country specific and tailored to focus only on essential and accurate information. This is mainly due to the specific challenges of time constraints and short notice prior to departure as well as the risk of too much information being offered. For example, less rigorous didactic cross-cultural seminars or briefings than what expatriates receive, complemented with practical information packages are the most widely offered and sought after by short-term assignees in our study. The challenge here however is that even though this may be promised by the organisation it is often never provided and instead individuals have to undertake their own research. Other studies have argued that practical information be provided post-arrival (Suutari and Burch, 2001) but our findings exemplify that it may be more effective (or at least perceived as being effective) if formally provided pre-departure so that assignees have more realistic expectations (Caliguiri et al. 2001; Mayerhofer et al. 2004). Interestingly, we find that much of the information in these packages should focus on non-work issues such as health and safety rather than work related information, as many SIAs increasingly travel to culturally atypical or developing locations and have little time to prepare in advance. Ultimately, the challenge of short notice prior to departure presents the risk that overview briefings with limited generic information focus more on the survival of the assignee in the early stages of the assignment rather than overall effectiveness.

Studies on expatriation argue that language training prior to departure is traditionally the most common and valuable form of cultural training, but our findings illustrate that it is not generally offered or requested for SIAs. In most cases, although travelling to atypical or developing locations, assignees were expected to be familiar with English rather than learning complex local languages. As such, we add to studies on SIAs that show there is often not enough time prior to departure to partake in in-depth training for learning local languages (Mayerhofer et al. 2004; Suutari and Burch, 2001) but add that instead firms seem to specifically select assignees who will be effective communicators, particularly when on assignment in atypical locations (Selmer and Lauring, 2015).

Second, we find that it is important to complement formal training with informal support for short-term assignees in a pre-departure context. This is particularly relevant for short-term assignees due to the short notice given prior to departure. This informal support is manifest through the establishment of contacts in the host country that the assignee can use as flexible sources of information. This finding adds to studies that illustrate how knowledge employees may be important supports for international assignees (Forster, 2001; Suutari & Burch, 2001). Similar connections may be formally provided to expatriates but we find that for SIAs, these connections are often not explicitly provided by the company but are sourced in a self-directed manner by the assignee, often through proactive socialisation. Generally, these connections are former assignees who have previous experience of working in or were currently working in the local country, or local nationals. However, we find that short-term assignees face specific challenges in this context of proactively having to find their own contacts, which can be a time consuming process, and often provided with inaccurate contact information by the organisation. As such, organisations should provide informal support for short-term assignees prior to departure as it leads to a more flexible and culture specific way to source relevant knowledge on practical and cultural issues in work and non-work related matters.

Third, short-term assignees should also be provided with similar informal support but in a post-arrival context. Again, this informal post-arrival support is generally provided by the organisation but on occasion proactively sought by the assignees in our study. The former generally took the basis of a contact within the local organisation, whereas the latter involved the assignee tapping into local expatriate networks outside the organisation, in a self-directed manner. Local contacts, generally in the form of a HCN or PCN acted as 'gatekeepers', providing flexible and continuous support and information on both work and non-work related issues after arrival. The term 'gatekeeper' was established as they fulfil a slightly different range of activities than formal mentors for traditional expatriates (Carraher et al. 2008; Farh et al. 2010). Importantly, the role of the gatekeeper is less formal and determined by the organisation and more informal and determined

by the continuously changing needs of the assignees. Gatekeepers thus help with 'speeding up' post-arrival adjustment and act as a liaison in the host country, but unlike formal mentors they are not responsible for assistance with repatriation and career development issues, as these are rarely a problem with short-term assignees (Tahvanainen et al. 2005). Instead continuous support with practical concerns at the workplace and even leisure activities beyond the workplace is added to their tasks, making them a more informal support mechanism. As such, this helps answer calls for a greater understanding of how support with non-work related issues may help overcome challenges of feeling isolated after working hours for assignees (Takeuchi et al. 2009; Suutari and Burch, 2001).

Fourth, we find that formal training in a post-arrival context is generally not offered to short-term assignees and is not requested. There is generally no need, or time, for formal training in a post-arrival context for SIAs, mainly due to specific challenges such as shorter assignment durations than expatriates, long working hours and strict project schedules. As such, we contradict other studies that call for increased post-arrival formal training for expatriates (Bennett et al. 2000; Forster, 2000; Selmer, 2002; Wurtz, 2014) and argue that these are generally not applicable for short-term assignees given their specific characteristics. Studies have argued that issues such as personal stress and family separation hinder short-term assignees adjustment (Suutari et al. 2013) but our findings add another particular challenge in the form of having to work under the pressure of long working hours and strict project schedules in shorter assignment durations often take precedent, preventing the effectiveness of formal post-arrival training. Our findings also coincide with other recent studies that illustrate management development may be a particular form of SIA, specifically for junior employees or high potential trainees (Suutari et al. 2013). We extend these arguments further and paradoxically illustrate that these management development SIAs may not need any post-arrival training, in that they may be used as a form of on-the-job training to prepare assignees for further expatriate assignments. This insight relates to Shen and Lang (2009) who found that SIAs may act a form of high-rigour CCT for expatriates but the use of SIAs for such a

reason is something that merits further investigation. An important consideration here is that although this insight may allow us to understand how SIAs help mitigate expatriate failure, it also creates practical difficulties associated with developing effective CCT approaches for SIAs.

Practical implications

Our research findings point to a number of practical implications that organisations should consider when managing SIAs. First, organisations should recognise the importance of developing more tailored and appropriate training and supports for individuals undertaking SIAs. In particular, organisations should be mindful of the specific challenges these assignees are confronted with and rather than applying broad basic generic training approaches, they should seek to enhance the assignee experience through specialised practices and policies. Second, in order to achieve this, there needs to be greater oversight from the HR department in integrating SIAs into the overall global mobility function as well as measuring and tracing the effectiveness of certain polices for specific assignment types. As such, we call for organisations to rethink the misconceived notion that alternative forms of assignment are in less need of specialised training and support than traditional long-term expatriate assignments due to the particularly distinct challenges that they face.

Further research

Currently, organisations expect short-term assignees to carry out their own research on short notice before departure and create their own initiatives in 'speeding up' their own adjustment, which is an ad-hoc way of supporting these assignees. Further research needs to be undertaken to assess how HR policies and practices can be modified and tailored to suit the challenges associated with SIAs. Developing a pool of assignees with the necessary skills to depart on short notice or hiring external organisations to give appropriate training on short notice could be alternative options. Equally, evidenced by our research, it is important to explore whether short-term assignees are often sent

to more atypical locations than traditional expatriates and if so then what specific training and supports are provided.

The aim of the study was to gain first insights into an under-researched phenomenon as opposed to making statistical generalisations. We therefore fully recognise and call for further research to test and expand on these findings. Such research could employ quantitative methods, thus addressing the limitation of generalisability. However, we also believe there is a need for further qualitative work that explores the framework and the factors that may impact the utility of training and support in greater depth. The inclusion of HR and line managers' views, along with host country nationals who engage with short-term assignees would be useful to incorporate in future research designs.

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Table 1: Interviewee profiles

Code	Age	Gender	Position in Company	SIA Duration	Host Country	Purpose of SIA	Past International Assignments
P1	26-30	Female	Apprentice	2 months (2x)	Spain/ France	Management Development	Yes
P2	36-40	Male	Finance Manager	11 months	USA	Management Development	Multiple Business Trips
P3	26-30	Male	Apprentice	3 months	India	Management Development	Multiple Business Trips
P4	21-25	Male	Construction Manager	6 weeks (2x)	Mexico	Project Work	No
P5	31-35	Male	Logistics Manager	3 months	Hungary	Skills Transfer	4-year Expatriate Assignment
P6	41-45	Male	Service Technician	6 weeks	Ethiopia	Project Work	Multiple SIAs
P7	31-35	Male	Global Sales Manager	11 months	Dubai	Problem Solving	Multiple Business Trips
P8	31-35	Female	Sales Coordinator	3 months (2x)	Kenya	Project Work	Multiple Business Trips
P9	26-30	Male	Management position	12 months	Singapore	Self-initiated	No

Context	Forms of Training and Support		Challenges for SIAs	Representative Quotations for SIA Challenges
Pre-departure	**Formal** (Need for focused, tailored and accurate information)	• Basic language training • Practical information packages • Culture specific workshops	• Short notice prior to departure • Need to constantly ask organisation for more training • Need to proactively undertake self-directed research • Training promised but never delivered • Often sent to atypical locations with idiosyncratic conditions - difficult to learn all aspects	'They asked me if I wanted to go to Mexico and I said yes and then, well, they said your flight is in 2 weeks' (P4). 'We usually receive the order only a week before we need to fly out. We tend to leave on very short notice' (P6). 'You should not have to feel bad about asking (the company), because it's their job…I would have wanted the company to make a bit more of an effort in preparing me and giving me information' (P1) 'But you really only get (practical information) when you ask, if you do not ask you do not get' (P6). 'I prepared myself and did some research, but that was all done on my own without support from the firm' (P2) 'There was talk that we were supposed to get cross-cultural training prior to departure but it never happened' (P3). 'You cannot really learn those indigenous languages, in Ethiopia that would be Amharic, in Nigeria they have twenty different accents and they cannot even talk among each other' (P6). 'What I have to say though, there is no one culture there. We were dealing with [other cultures], which are very different cultures, which I was definitely not prepared for' (P7). 'No intercultural training can cover all differences inside a country' (P8).
	Informal (Important flexible source of information)	• Provide with contacts that have previously been to the country • Provide with local based contacts • Develop dual contacts	• Proactively develop contacts by 'asking around' but can be arduous • Receiving biased information from home based employees that have travelled to the country • Usually given inaccurate contact information	'I informed myself contacting prospective co-workers in the host country but this was not organised by the company. I managed, but it would have been significantly easier if these contacts were given. It was quite exhausting having to find out everything myself' (P2). 'Unless you know someone who has been there it is difficult to get the information you need' (P6). 'There was a contact number on the information sheet, but that person had left the country five years ago' (P6). 'You figure out those sorts of things when you are there and informal training helps that as well, but if you have heard about it before, prior to departure, that would speed up adjustment' (P3).
Post-arrival	**Formal** (Limited due to nature of work)	• Depends on purpose	• Long working days limits time	'You come back from work at 7pm and then at 7am the next day you are leaving again, so you sleep and eat and that is it. Only on Sundays we do not work' (P6). 'You only have a limited amount of time for short-term assignments, it is better to go in prepared so you can make the most of it' (P1).

		• SIA seen as form of management development	• Limited duration of assignment • Managing complex work with strict deadlines leaves no time for formal training	'There was a lot of chaos there, I think culture was one of the smallest problems. I did not have time to even think about continuing cross-cultural training in the country' (P7). 'There is no long adjustment period. You are basically expected to be ready for the job and work perfectly from the start' (P9).
	Informal (flexible source of practical information on daily basis)	• Provide with local 'gatekeepers' • Proactively tap into local assignee networks • Provide culturally similar contacts	• Limited duration of assignment • Need to proactively develop local contacts • Long working days limits ability to build local relationships • Risk of feeling isolated outside work • Health and safety issues in atypical locations limits ability to build local relationships	'It took me about 2/3 months to adjust and then I basically had to leave again…you need at least 5 or 6 months if not more to make the most of it' (P1). 'I got to know people who provided information about very essential things, where the right restaurants are or what train to take and things like that, but this was not organised at all, I did everything myself' (P2). 'They were the first people to contact when we had problems with adjustment at the start and of course we also arranged to meet after work. This made adjustment very easy'. (P3) 'There was not much contact after work, I basically just went back to my place and waited for work the next day' (P1) 'It is just important to not be left alone when going abroad' (P2). 'it will be a very short-term assignment if you have no-one to turn to' (P5). 'A reliable contact person, for me, is European, ideally German because they know our culture and the difficulties we face' (P3) 'At the start they said not to leave the hotel alone at night but of course you get braver as time passes, you cannot just sit around in the hotel by yourself every night' (P3). 'Most of the time, you cannot do much in countries like that, you definitely cannot leave the hotel on your own because it is too dangerous' (P6).

Table 2: Specific challenges for short-term international assignees

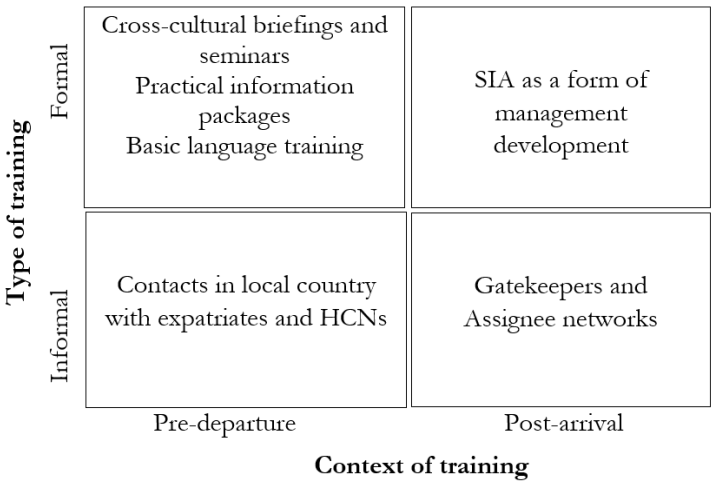


Figure 1: Training and support for short-term international assignments