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## International Journal of Human Resource Management (IJHRM) Special Issue on: International human resource management in contexts of high uncertainties


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### International human resource management in contexts of high uncertainties

The aim of this special issue is to examine more closely of the implementations of international human resource management (IHRM) practices in the contexts of high uncertainties. It seeks Contexts of relevance encompass those experiencing financial crisis, economic sanctions, political and civil uncertainty, environmental collapse and/or deep recession. It aims to supplement the *Danger and Risk as Challenges for HRM IJHRM Special Issue* which encompasses terrorism, violent disorder, crime and other physical risks, by focusing on initially seemingly peaceful forms of uncertainty, even if their consequences might lead to societal collapse. While appreciating that these contexts are very different, the key theme that cuts across all of these contexts are the unexpected changes that they brought, creating considerable ambiguity for businesses, and how they manage their people. Businesses will face the challenges of coping in such contexts, with unpredictability in demand, and in supplier relations, in adding greater time pressure to the decision-making process, and in terms of work and employment relations (Pearson and Clair, 1998). Through operating in different settings, multinational enterprises (MNEs) may be able to hedge risk, but at the same time protecting their own interest from a distance can be extremely difficult (Cantwell, Dunning, & Lundan, 2010). They will also impact on MNE decisions to invest and reinvest in particular settings (Oh & Oetzel, 2011). However, reducing or eliminating their presence in the host location is not always possible. MNEs may have substantial resources and infrastructural interests in the host location that need to be protected. Again, there is often a pressing need of MNEs to use expatriates on international assignments to complete strategically critical tasks, but the same time managing expatriate staff becomes much more difficult when countries of domicile become more unstable. However, these situations often present golden

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opportunity for businesses. Studies have found that the option value of MNEs in entering a country under the uncertain conditions can be high (Miller, 1998). This is because government and international bodies often inject considerable amount of investments into the affected countries in aiding the recovery and rebuilding process and, in turn, pumped up the local aggregate demands, opening new opportunities for MNEs in relevant industries (Vigdor, 2008). At the same time, consumers' demand for products and services may change; demand may not necessarily decline, but what consumers may want may be different, and this will impact on the demands placed on a firm's human resources. These MNEs may therefore experience expansion of workforce under these situations. There are multinational organisations, such as inter-governmental agencies as well as international relief organisations, who would purposefully be sending staff into countries experiencing crises.

MNEs are being noted for their often superior ability to implement highly tactical, more robust talent management practices, including work-based, HRM-led and international systems, in line with the rest of their worldwide operations (Glaister, Karacay, Demirbag, & Tatoglu, 2018; Hartmann, Feisel, & Schober, 2010; Mellahi, Demirbag, Collings, Tatoglu, & Hughes, 2013; Tatoglu, Glaister, & Demirbag, 2016; Demirbag, Tatoglu & Wilkinson, 2016). However, with the environment suddenly becoming much more precarious, MNEs may be likely to operate on a much more restricted budget towards their human resources, and move towards leaner staffing. This could mean retrenchment and the cutting back pay as well as other compensations and supports, which makes the implementation of a strong IHRM programme difficult. At the same time, uncertain contexts increase the need for subsidiary control, which, according to previous literature, require a more locally responsive HRM practices that are sensitive to the local condition may also be needed (Mellahi et al., 2013). Furthermore, in the context of systemic shock such as an economic crisis, the relative position of owners of highly fungible capital could increase (Wood, 2013). This would include MNEs, who are often uncommitted and switch to another country when presented with better opportunities. Thus, with their strong bargaining power, coupled with the deterioration of economic conditions, the relative power of the employees, including expatriates, could be significantly diminished (Wilkinson & Wood, 2017). Streeck (2009) presents a highly pessimistic view that this could mean the worsening of employment conditions, including the reduction of not only pay and benefits, but also job security and workplace democracy. Others, however, point to the resilience of institutions in upholding pre-existing rights for the workers (Thelen, 2014).

From the employees' point of view, there is an emerging consensus that going through expatriation is an emotional journey (Bozionelos, 2009; Herman & Tetrick, 2009; Selmer, 2001, 2002; Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005). Such emotion can be manifested in positive ways, such as excitement, optimism, hope and passion (Youssef & Luthans, 2007), which could be facilitative to the expatriate's ability to settle, but there are also negative emotions, such as fear, worry, anxiety, doubt and

grief (Jordan & Cartwright, 1998), that could potentially cause disengagement, detachment, resulting in a demotivated and disgruntled expatriate, the spill-over effect of which could be so strong that potentially it could affect the overall organisational performance and reputation (Richardson & McKenna, 2002). Negative emotions such as those mentioned above are most likely to manifest in the situation of rapid change and uncertainties (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Therefore, expatriation that are poorly thought out could lead to failed assignments, premature return of expatriates and the loss of their returned expatriates (Takeuchi, Wang, Marinova, & Yao, 2009). Failed expatriation has the potential not only derailing the MNEs' performance and capabilities, but also that their corporate reputation in the international arena could suffer.

There is a strong role that organisation can play in managing the process of employee's resilience development in the face of disruptive events (Coutu, 2002; Luthans, 2002a, 2002b). Drawing on psychological theories including Bandura's (1982) work on self-efficacy, as well as Seligman's (2002) work on learned optimism, studies in the more conventional domestic context have suggested that individuals have very different mechanisms in handling unexpected challenges (Gray, 1987), or anything in between. Luthans (2002a, 2002b) have found that it is those with strong psychological strength who are more able to cope successfully in the face of significant adversity or risk, and to take up responsibilities and bounce back from such situations. Such findings have serious IHRM implications in terms of recruitment, training and supports. It implies that MNEs would need to develop a rigorous selection process involving the considerations of certain traits and capabilities that are most likely to reflect on an expatriate's level of resilience when arrived in the host location. At the same time, it points to the importance for MNEs to offer relevant organisational training and supports (c.f. Coutu, 2002)

Despite this, research on unstable and unpredictable contexts on business and HRM remain relatively scarce and scattered across disciplines (Oh & Oetzel, 2011). In particular, whilst the specificities of these contexts have been explored through the literature of disaster and crisis management (Boin & Lagadec, 2000; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Quarantelli, 1988; Ritchie, 2004), from the operational side through the literature on global project and supply chain management (Lin Moe & Pathranarakul, 2006; Richey, 2009; Van Wassenhove, 2006), public relations and communication (Guth, 1995; Jaques, 2007; Regester & Larkin, 2008), managing customers' flows and expectations (Elliott, Harris, & Baron, 2005; Oloruntoba & Gray, 2009), the people management side of crisis and volatility have not been the research focus. The lack of research on the IHRM issues relating to these crisis, disasters and conflict is disappointing since there is a growing consensus that the threat posed by these situations is growing. It is also disappointing because of the increased acknowledgement that the successful management of international human resources is a major determinant of success or failure in international business (Tung, 1984).

As a key journal to the field, the International Journal of Human Resource Management (IJHRM) has been the leader in terms of investigating how IHRM is shaped by the contextual specificities. It has published some key articles that are relevant to this special issue, including Lee and Reade (2015), Jia and Zhang (2012), Merlot and De Cieri (2012), Zhang, Jia, and Gu (2012), Zagelmeyer, Heckmann, and Kettner (2012) and Kamoche (2003). This special issue intends to build on this previous work, by systematically drawing both from existing theoretical framework of crisis management (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1990), as well as building new theories through an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from different fields including but not limited to psychology, sociology, economics, but also from other business and management disciplines. We envisage that the papers in the Special Issue will analyse the issues of IHRM in the contexts and conflict, disaster and crisis from multiple levels: at the individual level concerning the expatriates, host workers and the managers, at a firm level of MNEs in terms of their performance challenges and support practices that they offered, at the sectoral level where certain industries and sectors (such as the service sector) would be more adversely related than others, and, at the macro level, in considering the policy/regulatory implications. Methodologically, we welcome submissions utilising a variety of methods, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches.

Contextually, we welcome submission in relation to different forms of crisis, disaster and conflict. The following list is not intended to be exhaustive:

- Economic crisis (e.g. financial crises, deep recessions)
- Natural disasters (e.g. floods, hurricanes, drought, tsunamis, earthquakes)
- Political crisis (e.g. rise of extremist populism, constitutional crises)

### **Potential themes to be addressed within the special issue**

Against this background, this special issue calls for empirical and theoretical papers that explore and analyse the IHRM in the contexts of crisis, disaster and conflict. More specifically, we welcome the following or any other relevant research themes:

- *Systematic review of previous literature on the roles of IHRM in the contexts of crisis* – As mentioned, the IHRM literature in this field is largely disjointed and fragmented across disciplines. A review on the scholarly efforts into the matter would provide a reference point to academics in directing future research agendas, as well as offering clarity to practitioners looking for insights into their managerial implications and other practicalities.
- *Talent management and HR planning in high uncertainty contexts* – How does systemic crisis, such as economic crisis and social unrests, affect the HR Planning of expatriate deployment processes? How does this affect

MNEs choice of talents between parent, host and third country nationals? Does MNEs adopt different talent management strategies compared to domestic firms in the high uncertainties context? How does the emphasis on local responsiveness and global integration changes during economic and political instabilities, and how they affect the HRM practices of MNEs?

- *Country of origin effects* – Gomes, Sahadev, Glaister, and Demirbag's (2015) studies of European and Indian MNEs noted consider home country effect in their implementations of IHRM practices. We encourage studies both on firm and individual levels. Questions of interest could include: how the home and host country effects matter in the high uncertainties context? How would country of origin effect affect the extent of resources that an MNE would devote to HR (e.g. training) in a situation of uncertainties? Do certain cultural traits within the host and home culture of the expatriates more likely to affect the resilience of expatriates, in high uncertainty situations?
- *Systemic crisis, bargaining and employee relations* – Systemic crisis creates 'blind alleys and ruptures' within the existing economic system (Hollingsworth, 2006). How do uncertain situations affect the bargaining dynamics between MNEs and their employees? How does this in turn affects the HRM practices deployed by MNEs?
- *Different IHRM responses at the different phases of crisis* – Literature suggests that the process of crisis management entails the three main phases of preparedness, responsiveness, and recovery (Coombs, 2007; Hickman, 1997; Smith & Sipika, 1993). Presumably, at each of the stages multinational organisations and expatriate may face different challenges and require different forms of supports. We are particularly interested in exploring the different IHRM practices that MNEs implemented at each of the phases, as well as the transformation between phases. Studies that examine the intersected implications of gender, nationality, ethnicity, economic/social background of expatriates, etc. in influencing organisational IHRM practices would be particularly welcome.
- *Organising voluntary, international humanitarian and CSR efforts following environmental disaster* – Voluntary and international humanitarian efforts often arose as a result of environmental disasters (Merlot & De Cieri, 2012). The skills, expertise and manpower of expatriates are often considered to be invaluable for the local community affected. However, formal HR planning is always going to be difficult due to the unexpectedness and urgency of the events. Furthermore, many of the deployed expatriates are motivated by intrinsic rather extrinsic reasons, creating further complications in terms of turnover and performance management. We welcome contributions that would further enhance our understanding of the implementations of IHRM in management expatriation of this kind, as well as other related challenges.

- *Sectoral specific IHRM challenges in the context of high uncertainties.* High uncertainty contexts do not affect different sectors uniformly. Some of the most notably affected ones include the customer-orientated service sectors such as tourism, hotel and hospitality in the face of disaster and conflict, as well as banking and finance related sectors in the wake of an economic crisis. Other sectors, informal economies, and underground businesses, sometimes thrive in the context of high uncertainties. We also welcome studies that examine cross-sectoral differences in terms of assignment patterns, expatriate motivation, and other IHRM related issues.

Authors should submit an electronic copy of their manuscript as a Word- file with title page detached to <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/rijh>. The title page should include the names, titles, professional affiliations and contact information of the authors. Authors' names should appear on the title page only. Authors should refrain from revealing their identity in the body of the manuscript. The paper will then go through a double-blind review of the paper using similar criteria to those for any paper submitted to IJHRM. For additional guidelines with respect to formatting and so on, please consult 'Instructions to Authors' on the IJHRM's website:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?journalCode=rijh20&page=instructions>

## Timetable

It is expected that the Special Issue will be published in 2020. Papers should be formatted in accordance with the IJHRM style. Papers to be considered for this special issue should be submitted no later than 31 March 2019.

The Guest Editors would be glad to discuss ideas for papers informally via e-mail: Geoffrey Wood: [gtwood@essex.ac.uk](mailto:gtwood@essex.ac.uk) Fang Lee Cooke: [fang.cooke@monash.edu](mailto:fang.cooke@monash.edu) Mehmet Demirbag: [mdemirc@essex.ac.uk](mailto:mdemirc@essex.ac.uk) Caleb Kwong: [ckwong@essex.ac.uk](mailto:ckwong@essex.ac.uk)

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