Guest editorial: Global mobility in times of global calamity: COVID-19 reactions, responses, and ramifications for the future of work

Introduction

When we wrote the call for papers for this Special Issue in April 2020, we opened with a scenario describing a situation we would have believed to be impossible a few years earlier. Readers were asked to imagine a global crisis unprecedented outside of (world) war times–the European Union introducing passport controls again, countries around the world closing their borders to foreigners, non-essential businesses shutting down, country after country entering lockdown, non-essential workers being ordered home, foreign staff repatriated and major international airlines slashing up to 90% of their scheduled flights.

Now, in early 2022, we know that this scenario was not the beginning of a Dystopian Hollywood movie but a brief description of the "new normal" at the end of March 2020. The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), at that time a new, severe illness affecting people's lungs and airways, was very recent. We had neither the knowledge of how to deal with this disease that we have today, nor a vaccine helping limit the spread of this new disease. In fact, we were looking at something we did not know how to manage. The only certainty was its potential to have a major effect on people and societies all over the world, which of course also includes businesses. Our prediction that this crisis would heavily affect multinational corporations (MNCs), in particular their global staffing operations and cross-border moves, proved to be correct. Consequences like struggling to retain global supply chains can still be felt today, as for instance the shortage of semi-conductor chips that have had a tremendous effect on the automotive sector.

We further set out to argue that, from a business academic perspective, it seemed that the whole inhabited world is currently a hostile environment. Little did we know that when COVID-19 finally seemed under control, transforming from a pandemic to an endemic, the world would face the next major shock. On February 24, 2022, Russian forces started an invasion of Ukraine which, in the days after, turned out to become the largest conventional military attack in Europe since the end of World War II, with many people being worried that this situation could lead to World War III. In response, many countries have imposed severe sanctions that have affected the Russian economy as well as the world's economy. Simultaneously, a large number of MNCs have followed suit and stopped all their operations in Russia. For example, McDonald's and Starbucks have closed all their stores, major automakers, such as BMW, Ford, Mercedes Benz or Volkswagen, ceased local production in Russia and stopped the export of both end products and spare parts into Russia, Netflix stopped its streaming services, Intel will no longer deliver products to Russia and Rio Tinto announced a full retreat from the Russian market. While these actions are intended to pressure Russia to stop its war, the implications for companies are severe as well. From lost revenue to logistical challenges in their supply chains and questions of how to manage staff in Russia, the decisions facing MNCs are enormous. Should Russian host country nationals be laid off or kept and paid despite not being able to work? Should expatriates be called home indefinitely or temporarily? How can the safety of staff be guaranteed and what will the strategy be, should Russia indeed decide to retreat?

Since its inceptions, the *Journal of Global Mobility* (*JGM*) has been an academic platform to present and discuss recent developments in global mobility literature, with its aim to "keep a finger on the pulse." This is also reflected in a number of timely special issues, including the present one. Global mobility scholars have been at the forefront of business and management research on global calamities, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent articles have explored the risks that crisis situations and hazardous environments present to global mobility practices and to expatriate staff from a range of perspectives (McNulty *et al.*, 2019). These include the impact of dangerous situations on expatriates' performance or turnover intentions (Bader *et al.*, 2017a; Bader and Schuster, 2015), discrimination and hostility directed at global workers (Bader *et al.*, 2018b; Hutchings *et al.*, 2013; McPhail and McNulty, 2015), and expatriates' physical and psychological health (Bhanugopan and Fish, 2008; Faeth and Kittler, 2017, 2020), including issues such as work environment, workload and work–life balance (Bader *et al.*, 2018a). While much research has focused on expatriates working in parts of the world seen as "hostile", the crisis of COVID-19 – like other recent virus outbreaks (e.g. H1N1 in 2009, Ebola in 2014–15) or natural disasters (e.g. extreme fires in California and South-Eastern Australia in 2019–20) – showed that dangerous contexts know no borders and can affect global workers in myriad locations. Similarly, while much expatriate research has focused on man-made threats such as terrorism, crime and civil unrest (Bader *et al.*, 2019), little is known about the stressor–outcome relationships emerging from other forms of threat (Fee, 2017). Building on these ideas, this Special Issue of *JGM* was intended to be an immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We aimed at encouraging global mobility scholars to investigate the reactions and responses of global workers and organizations to COVID-19 and to consider the ramifications of pandemics like COVID-19 for the future of global work addressed in previous research (e.g. Bader *et al.*, 2017b; Bader *et al.*, 2019; Fee, 2020; Fee *et al.*, 2019, Shaffer *et al.*, 2012, 2016). Even though we did not limit submissions to exclusively focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, most authors considered some of the issues raised by this pandemic in a broader context.

Papers in this Special Issue
In response to our call for papers, we received a high number of submissions, which was then evaluated on the basis of quality and fit for the Special Issue. While some did not meet the core criteria, the majority went into the review process. Eventually, we are proud to report that, after several rounds of revisions, we accepted six papers to be included in the Special Issue. We were amazed how quickly researchers have picked up this timely and relevant topic and how many authors responded to our call. Albeit sample sizes may not be as large as they would have been in "normal times," we believe it is still a meaningful empirical basis. We would like to thank the authors for their persistence and excellent work in improving these papers and express our gratitude to the numerous reviewers who invested so much time and energy to make this Special Issue a success. In the following, we briefly introduce each of the accepted manuscripts before we turn to outlining avenues for future research.

The Special Issue opens with a manuscript entitled "COVID-19: Prevalence of job-demands, stress, work-life difficulties, and work-life balance among international business travellers" authored by Kumpikaite-Valiuniene, Pinto and Gurbanov. Drawing on data from 141 international business travelers, this quantitative study investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the routines of international business travelers and explores the implications for their work–life balance. Using the job demands-resource (JD-R) model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007) as a theoretical basis, Kumpikaite-Valiuniene *et al.* find that a decline in job demands in response to international travel being very limited was not sufficient to reduce respondents' stress levels. However, there was a positive impact on reduced workload coming along with reduced demands that did have potential to improve

work–life balance. This timely study advances our knowledge about how global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic impact the professional and private lives of an important sub-group of globally mobile employees, i.e. international business travellers.

Authored by Tripathi and Singh, the next study, entitled "Sailing through the COVID-19 pandemic: managing expatriates' psychological well-being and performance during natural crises" builds upon the work of Bader and Berg (2013, 2014) and applies their model to natural crises, offering propositions in this novel context. Emphasizing how resilience, social network and support from the organization, supervisor, and family can help mitigate adverse effects of stress on the psychological well-being of expatriates, the paper extends expatriation literature by accounting for implications of *inter alia* the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, the authors also cover the indispensability of virtual collaboration in global mobility during challenging times.

In their qualitative study entitled "How do low-status expatriates deal with crises? Stress, external support, and personal coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic," Haist and Kurth address the impact of threats and crises like those presented by COVID-19 on a range of expatriate types. The experiences of "low-status" expatriates, who may be particularly vulnerable due to fewer resources, economic insecurity and employment in high-risk vocations, compared to more privileged expatriates (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2013; Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2019) are particularly relevant in times of crises as their situation might be even more precarious. Interviewing 16 expatriates and 16 social actors, Haist and Kurth find that low-status expatriates experience high levels of stress, which was further exacerbated with the introduction of COVID-19 containment measures. At the same time, there seems to be little to no support from employers or social actors that could improve the situation of this type of expatriates. Providing an insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected low-status expatriates, the authors stress the importance of personal coping strategies when external sources of support are not present and offer an important extension to the literature on these types of globally mobile workers.

Aiming at discovering the impact restrictions imposed in response to COVID-19 had on the private and professional lives of employees, in the study entitled "Radical changes in the lives of international professional women with children: from airports to home office" Primecz takes an extremely timely and important perspective by considering the role of professional women with children. Her qualitative, explorative study shows that the radical decrease of international travel, replaced with a seismic shift towards online work from home put tremendous pressure on parents in general and mothers of young (below 12) children in particular. Exploring the social implications of this shift as well, the study concludes that reflection on gender equality and the different role distributions between men and women in response to the COVID-19 crisis is necessary in order to improve the situation for working mothers in the future.

In the study "COVID-19 and self-initiated expatriate health workers: Spanish nurses in Germany," Rosa González, Barker and Shah interviewed Spanish nurses working in Germany after the outbreak of COVID-19. Building on considerations of varying implications of COVID-19 across different countries, self-initiated health workers perceptions of home versus host country safety during the global pandemic were investigated. The authors find that their respondents showed exacerbated feelings of stress, paired with some reporting feelings of guilt for not being in their home country during these challenging times. However, contrasting the impact and management of the crisis in Spain versus Germany, alongside the relative effects on health workers and the larger society in both countries reinforced the respondents' decision to stay abroad. Adding to the literature of self-initiated expatriates at large, this study further contributes to research on well-being and safety of globally mobile employees, particularly during times of crisis.

This Special Issue concludes with a conceptual paper entitled "Pandemic stress and the role of resources in expatriate local interaction adjustment: an extension of Berry's model"

by Reade and McKenna. Building on Berry's (1994) acculturation model and the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), Reade and McKenna look at environmental stressors from the standpoint of host-country nationals (HCNs), going beyond cultural differences and interaction adjustment. They offer a typology of expatriate–HCN interaction adjustment accounting for the conditions under which stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic facilitates the cohesion (versus division) among culturally diverse co-workers. In doing so, the paper takes a novel interdisciplinary approach to develop a contextualized typology of interaction adjustment between HCNs and expatriates. This important contribution to expatriation literature is a favorable basis for future empirical investigation and can be considered as a pioneering piece to pave the way for future research in this and related areas.

Avenues for future research

With these six manuscripts, we believe our Special Issue makes a solid contribution to global mobility literature responding to the impact of COVID-19, and while many very interesting questions were answered and important gaps in the literature were closed. Building on this, we see the need for more research investigating global mobility in times of global calamity. With COVID-19 still not completely overcome, the events happening in Ukraine during the time of writing this manuscript, and other potential disruptions in the future, we are convinced that research needs to investigate and find answers to questions going beyond what we know already.

While all six articles in this Special Issue focus on COVID-19, they approach this from a diversity of perspectives. The Special Issue comprises two conceptual pieces and four empirical studies – three of which are inductive explorations. The range of actors influenced by COVID-19 that are studied range from those who are badly needed during calamities (health workers) to the vulnerable (low-status expatriates in precarious employment) and the more privileged, whose impact is cushioned through remote work options (international business travelers).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most articles in this Special Issue focus directly or indirectly on psychological stresses that globally mobile actors might experience as a result of COVID-19 disruptions. Yet, these papers unearth other unexpected outcomes worthy of further investigation in the context of crisis or calamity. For instance, Rosa González, Barker and Shah highlight the contrasting emotions of guilt and sorrow experienced by health professionals because their host country was a relatively "safe" context in contrast to their home country during the height of the pandemic. Tripathi and Singh's conceptual model draws attention to the potential role of virtual collaboration as a way to moderate the negative consequences of psychological well-being during crises like COVID-19. While the growth in working from home during the pandemic has received ample attention (citation), Primecz's study of the experiences of business traveler mothers draws attention to ways that extraneous events like COVID-19 can recalibrate gender roles – in this case, by confining these women's mobility. Similarly, much global mobility research emphasizes the value of organizational support during times of stress for expatriates and others; yet Haist and Kurth's investigation of low-status expatriate workers brings into plain sight the disparities between well-resourced multinational organizations – the platform for most expatriate studies – and the (lack of) support available to other expatriates, who are left to rely on their own coping resources on top of the other challenges of their work and expatriate lives.

Each of these offers insights into possible trends and patterns which have the potential to influence our professional realm in significant ways. For instance, in what ways will newly normalized mediums of communication like video-conferencing transform how expatriates' adjustment and other stresses are ameliorated in coming years (Tripathi and Singh)? Now that virtual expatriate assignments and working from home have proven their value, will social expectations associated with parenting set back the recent progress in equalizing

expatriate gender imbalance (Primecz)? This could also be related to issues of how to evaluate and manage expatriate performance across the globe (Bader *et al.*, 2021). In what ways do expatriates in different settings and contexts experience mixed emotions relating to their home/host environments that go beyond homesickness (Rosa González *et al.*) and that shed insight into expatriates' mindset, well-being and/or the adjustment experience?

On a more general level, we believe it is worth exploring whether, and to what extent, there will be a transition from international assignments to global virtual work (Selmer *et al.*, 2022) which has implications for the corporate return on investment (cROI) of assignments (McNulty and DeCiere, 2011), cultural intelligence and cultural experience (Pidduck *et al.*, 2022), as well as expatriate/repatriate career progression Breitenmoser *et al.* (2018). Related to that, it is worth exploring how new forms of managing staff globally will affect selection and training of global employees and build upon work investigating the impact of external threats on the global value chain (Bader *et al.*, 2020).

In essence, it is reasonable to assume that the future of global mobility beyond COVID-19 is yet to be defined. Whether the pandemic improved international assignees' resilience or made them more reluctant to travel seems like an equally important question as investigating the implications COVID-19 had and will have for the recruitment and retention of expatriates and other globally mobile staff. We very much believe that these avenues for future research are extremely timely and valuable and would like to encourage authors to join the conversation and address these issues in their future work.

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