

International Journal of Research in Human Resource Management



E-ISSN: 2663-3361
P-ISSN: 2663-3213
IJRHRM 2020; 2(2): 19-26
Received: 10-05-2020
Accepted: 13-06-2020

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Short-term international assignments and their performances: A conceptual framework for future researchers

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26633213.2020.v2.i2a.41>

Abstract

Significant research has been undertaken on expatriates, but comparatively little is available on short-term international assignees (SIAs) (Conroy, *et al.*, 2018, Vance *et al.*, 2017) ^[5, 19, 33]. Limited coverage of SIAs within the literature encouraged this conceptual paper which seeks to not only understand the concept of SIAs but also that to offer a direction for future researchers to carry out research with a holistic approach. The purpose of this paper is to propose a model to increase the adjustment and performances of SIAs. This conceptual model has integrated a series of activities: organizational support and social support that is expected to take place at three-time stages to make sure SIAs adjustment and performance. The outcomes of the paper will come up with adequate indicators to measure the integration and effectiveness of the job performance of SIAs. The literature-based data compilation was done to develop this model.

Keywords: Short-term international assignment, cultural adjustment, IHRM practices, organizational support, social support

1. Introduction

Researchers in the field of international human resource management IHRM increasingly realize the limitations of traditional long-term expatriation in favor of its more flexible cousins the alternative forms of international assignments. Short-term international assignments (SIAs) are the most prominent among other alternative types of international assignments (Herod, 2008; Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005) ^[15, 31].

Even though these SIAs are largely self-dependent, often fulfilling training, support and information needs themselves, which may due to the short notice is given upon departure and the short time periods spent on completing a task ((Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004, Bonache *et al.*, 2017). However, these types of self-bearing create demotivation and an unwillingness to undertake future assignments (Suutari *et al.*, 2013) ^[29]. Because of the available empirical and theoretical knowledge gap, researchers and practitioners have to date failed to discuss “what mechanism has improved the performance of SIAs”. This study attempts to present a conceptual model in explaining a mechanism that ensures the performance of SIAs at both the on-assignment stage and the post-assignment stage of the assignment. On the other hand, performance outcome assessment would be an excellent feedback for the management in developing the potentials of the rest of the home country's local staff. The paper is organized into several sections. First, the meaning of international assignments and the related cycle are explained. Next, it refines the term SIAs while an explanation of the proposed model is included in the last section before the conclusion.

1.1 What is an international assignment?

An international assignment typically begins when an employee is sent abroad to work in an organization's foreign business plant. This employee called the international assignee/s and the given task is called international assignment/s. This population of international assignees was also known as independent, internationally mobile professional, self-directed expatriate, self-initiated foreign experience or employee, international itinerant, highly skilled expatriate, a foreign executive in a local organization, (professional) foreign worker, self-initiated repatriate, sojourners, and international academic (Tharenou, 2015) ^[20, 32].

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Traditionally, international assignments refer to the assignments which are coming under the expatriation-repatriation process including expatriates and repatriates. Throughout the history of international human resource management literature, expatriate assignment (expatriate is an employee that transfers from one location to another country in the name of the work) was the single and the most popular international assignment type which labels as traditional international assignments, standardized international assignment, structured assignments, or long-term international assignments. Later own researchers' attention draws on the complexities of traditional long-term expatriation in favor of its more flexible counterparts; the non-traditional or alternative forms of international assignments. Thereby, researchers intended to introduce the second category of international assignments literally call "non-traditional", "non-standard" or "alternative international assignments" including short-term assignments, commuter, rotational, contractual, virtual, international business travelers. Other types of alternative assignments also discussed by researchers (Meyskens *et al.*, 2009, Briscoe *et al.*, 2009) [2] as localized employees, second-generation expatriates, just-in-time expatriates, rewards and punishment assignees, outsourced employees, and self-initiated employees, not generally thought to be associated with international assignments. But all among, SIAs are the most popular alternative types of international assignments.

2. What does short-term international assignments mean?

Basically what constitutes short-term is an unsolved fact, even by now. The time duration is concerned, there is no clear distinction on the time duration of the assignment, but these assignments classified as 3 to 12 months (Herod, 2008) [15], while in some cases showing it 6 to 12 months. (Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005; Peltonens, 2001; Harvey *et al.*, 2011), and according to Collings, *et al.*, (2007) [4, 14, 31] between one and twelve months duration. PricewaterhouseCoopers (2002) defines short-term assignments as "longer than a business trip, but shorter than typical expatriate assignments. The purpose of Short-term

international assignments is concerned, most of the short-term assignees engage in specific projects or the transfer of skills or knowledge. In addition to that short-term assignees used for training and development purposes as well. Family attendance is no clear, but researchers take family non-attendant as a criterion of differentiating long-term assignments to short-term international assignments (Starr *et al.*, 2009) [28] and in most cases assignees may not accompany the family (Petrovic, 2000) [1]. Among the reasons, disruption for spouse career, children education, single-parent custody problem as well as mostly for Asian countries (e.g. Sri Lanka) maintain the own residence, and elder caring under extended nuclear families (father, mother, grandfather, and grandmother living in the same shelter under the protection of assignees), animal caring possible to be reasons. The assignments which exceed 6 months (according to some research findings more than 3 months) it is common to see the involvement of the HR department to organize the assignees properly and staff rightfully for efficient and effective HRM.

2.1 Purposes of short-term international assignments

The purposes of SIAs have been identified by researchers such as filling a skill gap, solving a problem, transferring technology, achieving career advancement, developing talents in people, filling project requirement, keeping relationships with joint ventures, licensing and contracting, and improving quality of work life and personal life under the broader categories of assignment types (Collings *et al.*, 2007 [4]; Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005). Briscoe, *et al.*, (2009) [2, 31] broadly categorized these purposes as *demand-driven*, which is primarily developed around general manager or director positions and *learning-driven* purposes of assignments. Roberts, Kossek and Ozeki (1998) [25] categorized assignments as spatial, awareness building, and virtual assignments. The basic purpose of the spatial type of assignment is to develop an in-depth understanding of global business, as well as an international set of contacts. The direction of the awareness-building type of assignments is to enhance assignees understanding of cross-cultural issues within a short time period.

Table 1: Some directions of SIAs

Differences between Expatriates and Short-term assignees	
Short-term assignments	Expatriates
Mostly Time duration 3-12 months Generally family unaccompanied Tax protection Limited air shipment of personal items Full subsistence cost provided Involvement of HR department is subject to time duration More affordable, practical and flexible	Mostly time duration 1-5 years Generally family accompanied Tax equalization Full relocation benefits Different approaches to compensation Fully involved Less affordable, practical and flexible
Purposes of short-term assignments	
Filling a skill gap Solving a problem Transferring technology Keeping relationships with joint ventures	Achieving career advancement Developing talents in people Filling project requirement Improving quality of work life and personal life
Advantages and disadvantages of using short-term Assignments	
Advantages	Disadvantages
Minimum disturbances for individual career Less restricted by family concerned Spouse career unaffected Generally less expensive Less time consume over filling the position	Taxed differently in home and host Unaccompanied family states Limited air shipment of personal items No home housing assistance

Challenges of Short-term international assignments	
Short notice to departure Limited duration of the assignment Long working days greater stress and health issues than expatriates Strict work deadline Need to proactive by assignee himself/herself	Inaccurate information visa, immigration and tax challenges work life balance issues as well as family and social separation No formal training Risk of feeling isolation

3. A conceptual model

The proposed model first introduces a cycle of SIAs including three stages. As in the literature, the existence of two-time stages namely, pre-departure and post-arrival periods are identified (Conroy *et al.*, 2018, Scullion and Collings, 2006) [4, 5], but in addition to that this model incorporates one more another time stage as, on-assignment stage in line with the proposed literature in expatriate-repatriate management (McNulty *et al.*, 2017) [19, 20, 21] because of the unavoidability of its impact on SIAs on-site performances. If the SIAs failed to adjust themselves to the host culture it creates difficulties for doing their work and achieving their objectives in the host country. This model mainly focuses on the various adjustments that SIAs have to make to maximize their work performance during on-assignment and post-assignment periods. Thus, this model has introduced particular support mechanisms organizations

may develop in managing SIAs at each time stage. This support mainly has divided into two aspects like IHRM functional support and general support. In addition to require organizational support through HRMPs (Collings *et al.*, 2007 [4]; Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005) [31], unaccompanied families were incorporated to see their impact on cross-cultural adjustment leading to performance of SIAs. In addition, the social support aspect was included to undertake further subsequent detailed analysis. SIAs are exportable to find their own coping strategies during the entire period of the assignment (Crowley *et al.*, 2014) [6]. As a result, it is something common to see their reliance on social supportive channels like family, friendship channels including work-related friends, and non-work-related friends. That social support aspect thereby incorporated to make an inquiry to enhance our understanding under expatriates' related identities.

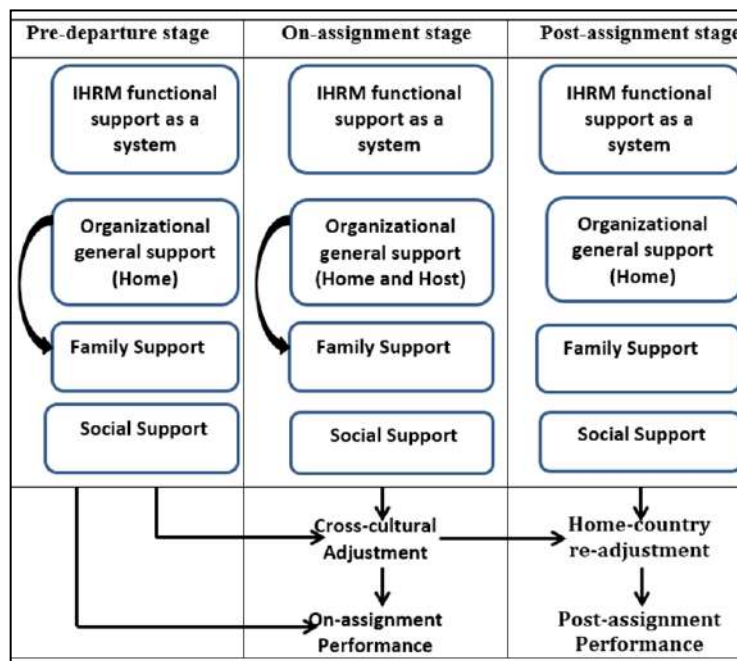


Fig 1

3.1 Three stages of short-term international assignments

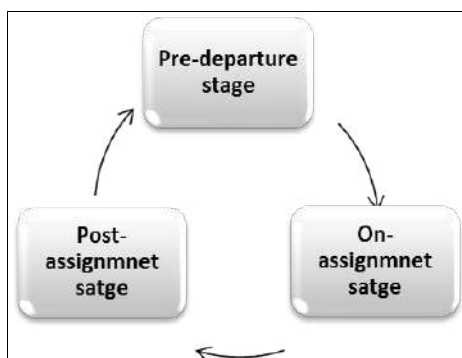


Fig 2

Pre-departure stage

Pre-departure stage is the period that the selected short-term assignees before departure to the host country where he/she expected to work. Organizations generally prepare the selected assignees during this period, mainly by the respective line departments (Welch, 2003) [31]. Literature report that an increasing trend formalizing this assignment type with the help of the HR department and (Sculling and Colings, 2006) consequently some HRM function are occurring in addition to some supportive programs which are not coming under regular employment contract. HRM Functions occurred are: job characteristics, recruitment, selection, pre-departure training, (Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005) [31] as well as general supportive practices like, travel arrangements, basic language training, culture specific

workshops, practical information package, dress appropriateness, cultural history or area studies on political and economic conditions (Conroy *et al.*, 2018) ^[5]. These pre-departure programmes help employees for their international assignments which directly link with overall performance of the assignment (Conroy *et al.*, 2018; MacNulty *et al.*, 2017) ^[5].

On-assignment stage

This is the time stage where the SIAs are staying in the host country. But less attention was drowned due to limited time availability of completing the assignment. Appointment of mentors, a host country employee who acts as a cultural trainer, helping with unfamiliar work, and living environment is also taken place at this stage. The common HRM functions at this stage are on-assignment orientation, cross-cultural training, performance evaluation, etc.

Post-assignment stage

This is the period that the SIAs are returning to the home country back. To facilitate the repatriation process, various methods can be applied. Provide local gatekeepers, contacted with local assignees network, offer similar local contacts are some of the supportive aspects at this stage.

3.2 IHRM functional support

The work done on short-term assignees by Brewster *et al.*, (2001) ^[1, 29], Evens *et al.*, (2002), PricewaterhouseCoopers (2002) Mayerhofer *et al.*, (2004), Tahvanainen *et al.*, (2005) ^[31], Collings *et al.*, (2007) ^[4], Starr *et al.*, (2009), Suutari *et al.*, (2013), and Conroy *et al.*, (2018) ^[5, 28, 29] supported to theorizing on the organizational support through HRM practices the perceived support as information given support, emotional support and instrumental support are quite unclear due to several reasons like ad hoc basis settlement in nature, short notice for departure, etc. SIAs are highly context-bound like available time for departure, duration of the stay period, and some of the individual characteristics of SIAs (position, previous international experiences). Due to the absence of the one best way to manage human resources, the intervention of business strategies with HRMPs would enhance the accuracy of the predictions among HRM-performance relationship (Pena *et al.*, 2010) ^[24]. On the other hand, if selection practices, including selection criteria and techniques, does not match the purpose of the assignments, lesser performances again are the result, due to the absence of competent assignees and their poor skills and abilities (as in; Milliman *et al.*, 1991; McNulty *et al.*, 2004) ^[19, 20-22]. Further, unless the compensation packages incorporate assignment purposes, they don't impact employee motivation, task completion, learning attempt, future demand for the assignments. Technical assignees that underwent job-related skill development training will ensure task completion more accurately and this matching will lead to career advancement opportunities which account for international performances as one criterion (Guttormsen, 2018) ^[13]. On the other hand, considering business expansion-assignments and focusing more on interpersonal skills would be an advantage to successful task completion, which leads to improving the marketability of the assignees upon repatriation. Customized performance appraisals are ensuring the confidence of getting involved in decision making, as a consequence motivation, and possibilities of

development of career, which connect the purpose of the assignments to motivation, development of the career (Gregersen *et al.*, 1996) ^[11]. Required mental and physical attempts over the completion of the assignment vary by the purpose of the assignments. High mental attempt and less physical attempt are required for coordination purposes than technology transfer assignments and possible incentive rates and promotion possibilities vary over the successful completion of the task leading to different performance levels.

3.3 System impact of IHRM functions on short-term international assignments

In addition to the impact of HRMPs individual basis, researchers argue that complementarities or synergies among HRMPs would enhance firm competitive advantages (Guchait and Cho, 2010) ^[12]. Bundling of HRMPs in this manner results in $2 + 2 > 4$, the whole is greater than individual practices. In past literature, two types of synergies that accumulated to vertical fit (external fit) and horizontal fit (internal fit) are found. The interdependent synergies among HRMPs are known to be horizontal fit, bundling, internal alignment, configuration, and complementarities in alternatively (Chanwick, 2010) ^[3] which eventually balance the obstacle among functions if any. Bundling of HRMPs creates multiple, mutually reinforcing conditions that support employee motivation and skill acquisition, which are always greater than isolated effects. As employee performance is a function of an employee's ability and motivation in such a way that e.g., expected outcomes from each selection and training individually will increase when they get combined together (Delaney and Huselid, 1996) or performances are greater when they are combined with promotions as well as rewards to the management of the organization (Schuler *et al.*, 1987) ^[2, 26]. On the other hand, the bundle of HRMPs decides the nature of the relationship and interaction between and among managers and employees resulting in good labour-management relationships in the workplace. There is no single best configuration of HRMP bundle, but multiple unique configurations are capable of maximizing performance (Pauwa, 2006). Available literature was more supportive to identify different bundling categories as motivational, and development based (Jayasekara and Takahashi, 2014) ^[16] but in this study, the author limited for each individual level configuration to foresee the possibilities of development of HRMPs in such a context that is still in the development stage of IHRM practices on short-term international assignments.

3.4 General organizational support for SIAs

Although organizational supports for SIAs are not well researched, up to date, we still assume that it would enhance adjustment possibilities of SIAs further. Organizational support is important to changes in professional and social life which poses stress and finally makes some inconveniences for SIAs. In the case of assignees that exceed more than 183 days, including weekends, holidays, or other non-work days in a country, tax liabilities are something common (Herod, 2009) ^[15]. A survey on Global Mobility Program management of 377 multinationals conducted by an international consultancy firm call ORC and Deloitte in 2007, 38.5 % of companies have not taken any action in visa and income tax regulations for a short-

term assignment (Herod, 2008) ^[15]. In such a condition, some instrumental based administrative support would be an advantage for their adjustment. On the other hand, with regard to emotional support, facilities to keep good contact with the rest of the family members in the home country, timely necessary information sharing with assignees, or provision for additional home leave would tend to upgrade the emotional fitness of SIAs further. However, organizational support through E-support is more meaningful during the on-assignment period. Inclusion of E-learning, E-mentoring, and E-counseling; periodic re-assessment; and learning agreement revisions are more meaningful as cost-effective methods.

Upon their return, more promotion opportunities to make the best of their experiences are likely to be one of the best ways it is still important to appreciate their international contribution, although they are not often available. Organizations can use them more creatively by rotating them into different functional areas where ever possibilities to do so. Assigned them to be a part of a cross-cultural team, things that leverage their expanded knowledge, such as designing a program for international assignees, etc. would improve their attachment towards the organization. Implementation of databases or data bank and allow them to write-ups on their experiences in newsletters.

3.5 Organizational support for unaccompanied families of SIAs

In most cases, family relocation does not occur, in the literature base (Collings *et al.*, 2007) ^[4] or survey data (Brewster *et al.*, 2001 ^[1, 29]; Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005) ^[31], or longitudinal case study (Starr *et al.*, 2009) ^[28]. A survey was done by ORC Worldwide (2003, 2005) also has revealed that the condition of family attendants of SIAs is very poor. Separation from the family members even for a short period of time would be a cause to keep the assignees in a psychic prison. Thereby extended organizational supports for unaccompanied families ensure good support to the deported spouse/father or mother. In common, disruption of the child-father/mother relationship can have a great influence on child development which always works badly for the assignees' mentality. Absence from daily life will miss some events in family life (e.g. birthday party, children's school events, the upland visit to the doctors make a burden for the assignees. Thereby facilitating for enhancing communication with assignees, organizational assurance of receiving continuous support for family members, would make sure emotional and information support of SIAs. A short trip for family members to host location, offering property management costs, which include lawn services, pool service, or take over some household responsibilities like minor repairs of residence, would be possible on behalf of the assignees. Finally, they have improved happy family relations between SIAs with necessary assistance over the given information and emotional support which positively connected with the performance of SIAs. These practices create a good organizational image in the eyes of family members, developing a psychological bond. On the other hand, researchers have shown that when employees feel that their families are supported by their organizations, and feel valued by their organizations, and feel valued by their organization, they tend to develop identification with and a moral obligation to the organization (Shen and Zhu, 2011)

^[27]. This would add a new direction to the literature on SIAs.

3.6 Social support

Spousal emotional support before departure to the host location helps the assignees to overcome negative feelings of accepting the assignments. As the assignment is regarded as an opportunity for pursuing professional and self-development (Starr *et al.*, 2009) ^[28], spouse encouragement and collaborative decision making is supportive to accept the assignment. Meanwhile, willingness to bear the family matter by spouse himself/herself even for a short period will be good emotional support. As explained in the expatriate literature, attention on reducing marital stress, but expressing warmth and caring from the spouse is kind of reward for deportable assignees. Furthermore, lesser expectations from a partner like emotional need and sensitivity to family affairs make fit over mobilizing psychological resources at the host location. The researcher believes this is holding true even in the case of SIAs. In addition, children are likely to be more pronounced for international dispatched, but lesser research attentions are drawn. The absence of a companion of a mother or father, disturb the parent-child relationship which is considered an important part of a family. They are less likely to exhibit behavioral problems by engaging in risk behaviors, such as drugs, alcohol, cigarette use, and school drop (Sylvester and Reich, 2000) ^[30] owing to this relationship. Emotional and material responsiveness of development, protection, training for socialization or emotional security to explore the environment with guidance are required for child development. Psychological separation from parents is disturbed by such activities. However, suppose children are assertive, self-sufficient and make their own decisions by themselves, show their independence and capacities to survive even without the lesser attention of the mother or father keep good emotional fitness of assignees. The degree of involvement in their school activities, the extent that and how they arrange them into a target-oriented or the competitive framework is a relief for good mental fitness. The international experiences can make a distance between the return SAs and his/her family. Reentry may not be easy unless family members accepted him/her. Rework settlement depends on how effectively the returning assignee has been able to keep up with events back home. Thereby family support, including continuity of affection, love and acceptance and giving much free time to restart the journey would help the assignees to do the given job with higher capacity for attached to the job and organization. According to Tahvanainen *et al.*, (2005) ^[31], and Conroy *et al.*, (2018) ^[5], in most cases, SIAs have no chance to interact with local people because of the nature of the designed work. In the case of many individuals and their families now relying on their own coping mechanisms to manage international relocation, work related and non-work related supportive channels would be relatively easy to support for the purpose of having information, instrumental and emotional support. Thereby the role of a work-related friend at home would be decisive on sharing their earlier international experiences and information on what can be the stress in the workplace. Past experienced expatriates and/or SIAs from other departments sharing positive and negative experiences and pros and cons of the assignments would reduce the psychic cost of relocation with keeping

good mental fitness.

According to Mayerhrfer *et al.*, (2004) cross-cultural issues hold true even in the case of SIAs too. The majority of organizations let the assignees play their own mechanism and look after themselves to ensure adjustment issues. SIAs are required not only to perform the given task itself but also to operate within a completely new context, with new individuals and new cultural requirements. SIAs also will be a member of a multicultural team, which obligatory to bear some responsibilities to accept different values, norms and ways of doing things even for a short period compared to expatriates (Crowne *et al.*, 2016) ^[7]. They need to flavor of international life and some cultural exposure to make cultural conversant. Thereby a discussion on cross-cultural issues, including adjustment is still highly desirable, even in the case of SIAs. Getting guidance from the available rich literature on expatriation and cross-cultural adjustment, a consequent impact of the aforementioned supportive channels on cross-cultural adjustment is proposed in this study too.

There are no existing studies on SAs cross-cultural adjustment as well as more country readjustment. However, the literature on expatriation has shown a valuable explanation of identity. Due to their short visits, in most cases it is available pre-position in the home country which is more favorable to integrate their assignment skills and learned cross-cultural sensitivity, global awareness, and self-efficacy to enhance current practice upon return (Stahl *et al.*, 2002) ^[23]. Thus, adjustment is viewed as affecting other work-related outcomes such as organizational commitment, performance, and turnover intention.

3.7 Adjustment of SIAs

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3.8 Performance outcomes of SIAs

For SIAs the drawback is the calculation of performance in financial terms that would not be tenable at shorter time duration, and thereby the inability of identifying the financial impact of incurring cost to the assignments (McNulty *et al.*, 2009; McNalty and Tharenou, 2004) ^[19, 20, 21, 32]. In the final attempt of being a global firm in the future, development of potential leaders through behavioral modification is necessary with the assurance of the continuity of the responsibility upon return (Briscoe *et al.*, 2009) ^[2]. On the other hand human feelings like satisfaction, motivation, commitment, intention to retention, etc. add value to the organizational process, leading to better financial performances (Foley *et al.*, 2012; Paaauwa *et al.*, 2006) ^[10]. In addition to that job-specific task proficiency, non-job-specific task proficiency, supervision/leadership, demonstrating effort, maintaining personal discipline, and facilitating peer and team performance are also expected through SIAs irrespective of the time phase of the assignment.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals various results. First, the conclusion of the findings is that for SIAs in order to be successful at each time stage, must have adjusted themselves in the new cultures as well as to the home country even after short absences in the home country. In this regard, the policy implications and formalization of these types of SIAs can be tentatively out of the main interest of top management. In this scenario, attention on HRMPs with the help of HR department would be more reasonable due to the poor explanatory power of the existing theories to reveal the realities of short-term international assignments (Herod, 2008) ^[15]. On the other hand, such excessive power to line managers on HRMPs is problematic and counterproductive due to a number of reasons. Specialized knowledge on HRMPs helps maintain consistency and conformity of the practices throughout the organization.

Internally consistent HRMPs with high horizontal fit become coherent, complementary, and create synergy in the sense that one practice supports the success of other practices (Khair *et al.*, 2002, Chadwick, 2010). As far as HRM functions deviate from their formalities, consistency and consequent synergistic impact would not be expectable. The absence of systematic designing of HRMPs due to the lesser involvement of the HR department and the poor coordination of the HRMPs of central organizational actors predicted a lesser synergistic effect among functions (Chadwick, 2010). Owner management view on the strategic partnership of SIAs as well as HR department involvement in strategic decision making in international business operations are antecedents of such coordination that enhance horizontal fit among functions. Even though HRM should not be the sole responsibility of HR managers nor line managers, but the rational role sharing between the two might be more applicable. Along with the stage of internationalization, an identified road map to the business should take into consideration more critical sharing of the HRM responsibilities. This model thus opens a forum of discussion to investigate whether the absence of the HR department and excessive involvement of the line department is the matter. The level of involvement of HR departments at the strategic formulation of international business and thereby policies for SIAs would be necessary

to be further investigated. However, according to Herod (2008) [15], there is no clear one-size-fits-all solution, as business needs, assignment location, the average length of assignments, and the assignee's nationalities and job levels should be considered in identifying the appropriate policies. Organizational given supports for unaccompanied families emphasized the necessity for continuity of the welfare as a matter of organizational labour-management policy. Finally, family support for SIAs was sufficient enough to make an impact on adjustment as well as performances. Because family members perceived that the organization takes care of not only partners, but the whole family, and this perception must improve the sense of belongings much. Such feelings might improve more work-friendly relationship among family members and assignments during his absent period.

In addition, the work-related linkages among organizational employees' group also give a new strategic direction on the development of collaborative working culture in the organization. This presents the necessity of being more strategic on the development of good professional networks because of that kind of work relationships are able to exchange resources, information, and knowledge, which reduce transaction cost or increase transaction values, in a more cost-effective manner. In addition to that, giving a strategic orientation for welfare activities or more attention on timely updating mechanism over background information on returned past assignees, and would be an advantage to improve the awareness on assignment at pre-departure stage.

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