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**Developing organizational resilience  
via international mobility:  
a conceptual framework**

Franca Cantoni  
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Quaderno n. 106/aprile 2015

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## **Abstract**

Globalization forces multinational companies (MNCs) to be overexposed to social and economic shifts and jolts. As a consequence, to survive they need to develop capacity for resilience to be able to anticipate, adapt to, and/or rapidly recover from negative events that may occur. Resilience can be analysed at a macro-, meso- and micro-level (organization, organizational units, individual). Similarly, the HR system of a MNC is designed at the macro-headquarter level (HR philosophy, strategy, guidelines), executed at a meso-subsiary level (HR local policy and practice) and enacted and perceived at a micro-individual level. Symmetrically, international mobility (IM) might be used to activate companies' local responsiveness, aimed at the final goal of enhancing the ability of companies to perform globally as they try to balance (horizontal) coordination amongst local subsidiaries and (vertical) control. Within this framework we posit that HR mobile professionals can play a crucial role in translating the general international HR (IHR) policy at the local level, enacting the local responsiveness. The paper moves from the mechanical definition of resilience, trying to 'integrate' different perspectives borrowed from other fields via proposing a multi-level framework posing on the interplay of IHR management along three different levels of execution: headquarter, subsidiary, individual.

*Keywords:* Organizational resilience, international human resource management, international mobility, careers, expatriates



## *Introduction*

In turbulent, surprising, and continuously evolving environments only flexible, agile and dynamic organizations can thrive. Since globalization forces MNCs to be overexposed, they need to develop organizational resilience meant as the capacity to anticipate, respond, adapt to, and/or rapidly recover from a disruptive event (Mallak 1998; Vogus and Sutcliffe 2007). Following the general setting proposed by Hackman (2003) and the constructs summarized by Jiang et al. (2012a), resilience can be analysed at a macro-, meso- and micro-level (organization, organizational units, individual). Similarly, the HR system of a MNC is designed at the macro-headquarter level (HR philosophy, strategy, guidelines), executed at a meso-subsidiary level (HR local policy and practice), and enacted and perceived at a micro-individual level.

Building on previous studies (Sparrow 2006, 2009), Sparrow (2012) indicates the three strategies that the international mobility (IM) functions might use to manage local responsiveness, aimed at the final goal of enhancing the ability of companies to perform globally as they try to balance (horizontal) coordination amongst local subsidiaries and (vertical) control. Within this framework we posit that HR expatriates play a crucial role in translating the general HR policy at local level, enacting the local responsiveness (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1992; Ostroff and Bowen 2000). This paper tries to 'integrate' various perspectives borrowed from different fields (Campbell 2008; De Cieri, Cox and Fenwick 2007) by capturing various levels of social complexity (e.g. Hughes 1958) by proposing a multi-level framework (e.g. Klein and Kozlowski 2000; Ostroff and Bowen 2000; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; van Veldhoven and

Dorenbosch 2008) that passes through the role of IHR management along three different levels of execution: HQ, subsidiary, individual (e.g. Delbridge, Hauptmier and Gupta 2011; Edwards 2011; Edwards and Rees 2008; Vance and Paik 2006).

The paper is organized as follows: first, it presents the literature review on three main aspects: 1) MNCs and their capacity of resilience; 2) The role of HR employees as objects and subjects of international mobility; 3) The analysis of International HR Management (IHRM) systems. Second, a conceptual framework is proposed. Finally, it addresses some elements of discussion and provides suggestions for future research.

### 1. *The environment and capacity for resilience of MNCs*

Crisis and discontinuity characterize extant organizations forced to struggle with various types of risks (Kaplan and Mikes 2012): *preventable risks* such as breakdowns in processes and human errors; *strategic risks* undertaken voluntarily after weighing them against the potential rewards; and *external risks* which are beyond one's capacity to influence or control, are scarcely predictable as well as their potential impact, and little knowledge is available on how to handle them.

Besides these three types of risks, MNCs face an additional complexity given the fact that their external environment is positioned at the 'interception of societal [global] history and individual biography' (Grandjean 1981, p. 1057) and their internal environment '*arises at the intersection of differences in country environments*' (Sundaram and Black 1992, p. 736). Traditional risk management methods, focusing mostly on organizational culture and strict compliance with regulatory, industry or institutional directives, can help to approach the first two types. Given the exogenous nature of external risks and the

complexities related to cross-cultural management, cultivating capacity for resilience is the suggested approach for MNCs.

A detailed literature review gave us some definitions of organizational resilience. Although researchers working on the theme use different terms to describe different aspects of organizational resilience, they all orient their analysis on some common features, that is the ability to find new solutions, effectively communicate and reorganize in response to crisis (Kendra and Wachtendorf 2003). The working definition of a resilient organization is, therefore, one that has the capability to 1) change with minor frictions when changing contexts by demonstrating flexibility and plasticity; 2) withstand sudden shocks; and 3) recover to a desired equilibrium, either the previous one or a new one, while preserving the continuity of its operations. Figure 1 visualizes the correlation between individual factors, environmental factors, trigger event, reboot process and period of turbulence.

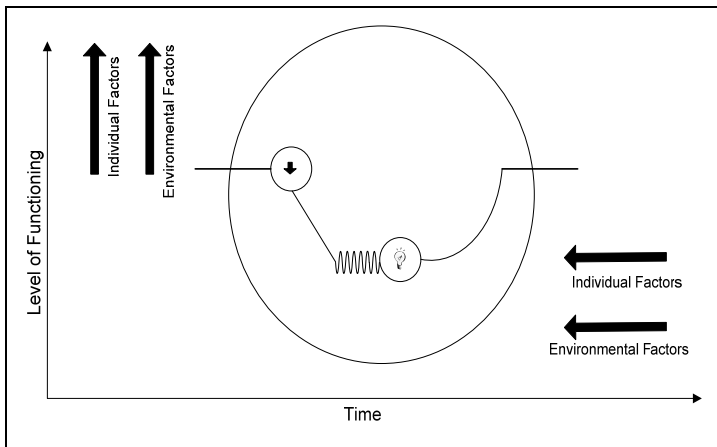


Figure 1. Influence of factors



The three elements in this definition encompass both recoverability (the capacity for speedy recovery after a crisis), and adaptability (timely adaptation in response to a changing environment). A resilient organization stays productive, efficient and effective also during turbulences and difficulties as it is able to learn from experiences and mistakes and to look forward with energy, trust and renewed push and positively overcome new challenges.

According to our point of view, resilience results from the processes and dynamics that create or retain resources (cognitive, emotional, relational, structural) in a form that is sufficiently flexible, storable, convertible, and malleable to enable organizations to successfully cope with and learn from the unexpected (Sutcliffe and Vogus 2003). Nowadays, MNCs are exposed to increasingly complex and equivocal external environments (Burton and Obel 2004) characterized by hypercompetition and rapid change. In complex environments, where the unexpected is an increasing part of the everyday experience, MNCs, their units and their members may have limited capacity to anticipate every challenge that arises (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005). Resilience is having the necessary capacity *'to cope with unanticipated dangers after they become manifest'* (Wildavsky, 1988, p. 147).

Two specific beliefs seem to anchor resilient organizations. First, these organizations treat success lightly and are leery because of the potential for the unexpected to occur (Weick and Sutcliffe 2001). In other words, resilient organizations assume that their model of risks is in need of regular updating, that their countermeasures are incomplete, and that their grasp on safe operations is fragile. Second, resilient organizations also believe that they can readily cope with a wide array of anomalies and are constantly striving to grow their capabilities to do so. Resilient organizations believe that they are imperfect but can achieve excellence

over time through learning from events and near events. Moreover, resilient organizations are constantly engaged in:

- proactive and preemptive analysis of possible vulnerabilities (fear of failure);
- the questioning of assumptions and received wisdom to create a more complete picture (reluctance to simplify interpretations);
- discussion of the human and organizational capabilities that enable safe performance (sensitivity to operations);
- attempts to learn collectively from the errors that have occurred (commitment to resilience); and,
- making decisions to transfer the person or the people with the greatest expertise to deal with the problem at hand regardless of rank (deference to expertise).

These behaviours enable organizations – and in particular MNCs – to better detect and correct emerging and manifest errors in a timely manner, thus minimizing adverse outcomes. Hence, in contrast with the deterministic approach (Staw, Sandelands and Dutton 1981), we believe that resilience and the process of its generation can be better and more convincingly explained by adopting a developmental perspective. The notion that resilience is ‘developmental’ is crucial, as it emphasizes that it is developed over time by continually handling risks, stresses and strains, and by allocating adequate resources in a proper way.

Actually, multiple resilience processes will occur (see Figure 2). Every time a resilience process is completed the organization believes it has returned to homeostasis. However, what really happens is that the organization has reached a higher level of functioning because by successfully mastering the resilience process additional skills or abilities have been acquired. If the same or a similar trigger event occurs again the organization will be able to cope with it in a more effective and efficient way.

The mental capacities of the employees and the ability for self-awareness enable the organization to learn from past experiences. If the life of an organization is seen as a chain of infinite resilience processes the final level of functioning ( $LF_f$ ) can be defined as the sum of all resilience processes (Equation 1)

$$L F_f = \sum_{k=1}^n LF(k)$$

Equation 1. The level of functioning

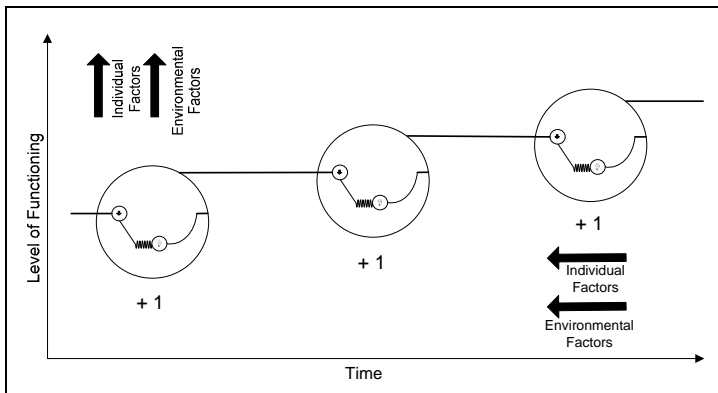


Figure 2. Multiple events

Figure 2 visualizes the change in level of functioning during the course of multiple resilience processes. We see now that resilience is a dynamic process that refers to successful adaptation despite adversity. The process needs to be kick started by a trigger. Although each resilience process seems to be a return to homeostasis, multiple resilience processes over time lead to an increase in the level of functioning.

Resilience, as considered in this work, is a multifaceted construct (Cascio 2012), mainly composed of three elements: behavioural, cognitive and contextual.

**Behavioural elements** can be developed through a combination of practised resourcefulness and counterintuitive agility juxtaposed with useful habits and behavioural preparedness (Lengnick-Hall and Beck 2003, 2005). Combined these behaviours create centrifugal forces (influences that make ideas, knowledge and information available for creative action) and centripetal forces (influences that direct inputs and processes towards actionable solutions) enabling a firm to learn more about a situation and to fully use its own resources under conditions that are uncertain and surprising (Sheremata 2000).

**Cognitive factors** represent the shared mindset that enables a firm to move forward with flexibility. They are an intricate blend of expertise, opportunism, creativity, and decisiveness despite uncertainty. Cognitive foundations for resilience require a solid grasp on reality and a relentless desire to question fundamental assumptions. In addition, alertness, or mindfulness that prompts an organization to continuously consider and refine its expectations and perspectives on current functioning enables a firm to more adeptly manage environmental complexities (Weick and Sutcliffe 2007).

**Contextual conditions** that support resilience rely on relationships within and outside an organization to facilitate effective responses to environmental complexities. In that, resilience brings together the three distinct perspectives identified by Gunz and Mayrhofer (2011, p. 253): conditional, boundative and temporal; in this same vein, the resilient organization can be seen as a contextualized configuration to tackle external uncertainty and equivocality (Mayrhofer, Meyer and Steyrer 2007). The four essential

contextual conditions for resilience include: psychological safety, deep social capital, diffuse power and accountability, and broad resource networks (Lengnick-Hall and Beck 2003, 2005). Combined, these factors promote interpersonal connections and resource supply lines that lead to the ability to act quickly under emerging conditions that are uncertain and surprising.

Given these definitions, we firmly believe it is possible and beneficial for MNCs to develop capacity for organizational resilience via HR managers' international mobility. We call this process 'resilience management' and the role played by HR managers is crucial – here defined as 'core employees' engaged in international mobility programmes.

## *2. HR employees as core employees*

MNCs are constantly exposed to two conflicting pressures (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1992): global standardization and local responsiveness. These tensions are not related exclusively to the functions and the activities which mirror the companies' core business (typically: R&D, marketing, manufacturing) but extend also to support functions, like HR. Additionally, organizations (both companies and subsidiaries of MNCs) operating in the same region, nation or cluster are exposed to the same institutional pressures, like mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), sharing similar HRM systems. In turns, enacted by the implementation of the HR policies and practices, employees' attitudes and behaviours tend to be similar in the same organization as a result of contextual effects (Bliese and Hanges 2004; Gunz and Mayrhofer 2011; Morley, Heraty, and Michailova 2009). As DeCieri, Cox and Fenwick (2007) have noticed the tendency to prefer imitation to integration is common both to the practice and to the research in the field of international human resource management (IHRM).

We consider ‘core employees’ (CE) as those working in the main and characteristic activity of the firm (Atchison 1991; Lopez-Cabrales, Valle and Herrero 2006). We are aware that all employees (core and contingency employees) contribute to firm success, but taking into account that CEs are closely related to firm core competences, they become more relevant than others performing secondary and repetitive tasks (Barney and Wright 1998). This recommendation has important implications for our paper as we believe that HR managers function as CEs as they possess the ability to create a strategic vision and identity for the company, communicate these throughout the organization, and encourage the workforce to achieve them (Lado, Boyd and Wright, 1992). Previous research (Boycigiller 1991; Rosenzweig 1994) has shown that international mobility may improve inter-subsiary communication and coordination by relocating the entire corporate scheme and the organization’s viewpoints along with the expatriate. Having been employed by the organization in its headquarters, it is expected that the expatriate has become a part of the corporate culture by means of adaptation and socialization, and will consequently communicate aims and intentions in the form in which they were planned. Following Jiang et al. (2012a) the primary levels of an HR system (system, policies, practices) are distributed along three different domains: knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs), motivation and effort, and opportunities to contribute. Consequently, HR manager expatriates – if properly assigned by the HQ (Andresen, Bergdolt and Margenfeld 2012; Andresen, Biemann and Pattie 2013) – can be associated with KSAs and organizational capabilities that define the competitive advantage of the firm (Brewster, Sparrow, Vernon and Houldsworth 2011; Lopez-Cabrales et al. 2006) by favouring the conveyance of the philosophy, architecture, and principles from the HQ (1<sup>st</sup> level) into policies and

programmes delivered to the subsidiaries (2<sup>nd</sup> level) and then broadcasting them into practices and processes to each single employee (3<sup>rd</sup> level). Being planned at a corporate level and executed by addressing individual behaviours, international mobility intercepts the ‘individual biography’ (Grandjean 1981), linking macro- and micro-frames of references (Jones and Dunn 2007; Schein 1978). In this sense, the achievement of organizational resilience via international mobility can be seen as the result of the interaction between individuals, institutions and society (Barley 1989; Hughes 1937, 1958; Mills 1959).

If we consider the fact that MNCs nowadays are asked to safeguard and protect their competitive advantage they need to identify, design and implement structures and behaviours, not only to effectively and promptly face uncertainty but also to anticipate and prevent it (Kostova, Roth and Dacin 2008). As they interact with continuously evolving environments, to survive jolts and shifts MNCs need to develop a capacity for organizational resilience (Mallak 1998; Vogus and Sutcliffe 2007). An organization with a heightened resilience is, indeed:

- more likely to weather both the problems of day-to-day business and successfully navigate the issues that arise in a crisis;
- aware of itself, its key stakeholders and the environment within which it operates;
- able to identify and manage its keystone vulnerabilities including the positive and negative impacts that these could have for the organization in a crisis;
- able to adapt to changed situations with new and innovative solutions and/or the ability to adapt the tools that it already has to cope with new and unforeseen situations.

In this sense, we posit that it should be strategic for MNCs to develop an International HR system internally and externally consistent and directed at nurturing the cognitive, behavioural and contextual dimensions of resilience (e.g. Poole 1990; Scullion 2005). Considering the fact that the relationship between individual and organizational resilience reflects the typical interaction between systems and subsystems, and organization-level capabilities are not just additive composites of individual capabilities (Ashmos and Huber 1987), both the action of individuals and the interaction effects matter (Hofman and Morgeson, 1999; Morgeson and Hofman 1999). The complex social network in which it is enacted alters both the development and realization of the MNC's capacity for resilience in important ways. Therefore, while we direct our attention to developing resilience-related KSAOs (adding 'other characteristics' to the KSAs) among subsidiaries' employees, our ultimate focus is on the role of HR expatriates as '*vehicles of transmission*' of these dimensions through the three levels of a MNC structure: HQ, subsidiaries, employees. Finally, while Sparrow (2006) identifies expatriate networks as one of the potential mechanisms for integrating knowledge across a global company, Mabey, Kulich and Lorenzi-Cioldi (2012) explicitly analysed the effect of the HR function in the creation, capture and diffusion of 'high-quality knowledge'. In this vein, the international mobility of HR employees can enable not only the 'translation' of HQ policies at a local level, but also favour the diffusion of 'collaborative thinking which includes tolerance, openness and unrestricted knowledge exchange' (Mabey, Kulich and Lorenzi-Cioldi 2012, p. 2464).

### 3. *MNC structure and IHRM system*

Resilient employees can collectively create resilient organizations if MNCs adopt an IHRM system internally



consistent and directed at nurturing cognitive, behavioural and contextual dimensions of resilience along the three structural levels.

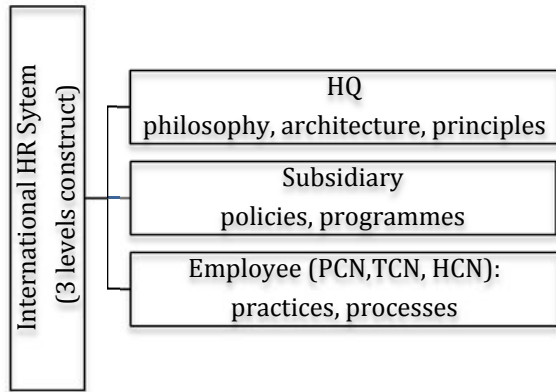


Figure 3. The International HR system as a multilevel construct

According to many researchers (Arthur and Boyles 2007; Becker and Gerhart 1996; Edwards 2011; Edwards and Rees 2008; Lepak, Marrone and Takeuchi 2004; Schuler 1992) an HR system is viewed as consisting of some overarching, broad elements (HR architecture, HR principles or HR philosophy) that provide general direction for the management of human capital, some mid-range elements (HR policies, HR programmes) that provide alternative approaches to align HR practices with HR architecture and strategic objectives, and some lower-range elements (HR practices, HR processes) that reflect the actual HR activities implemented in specific circumstances (Lepak et al. 2004).

As we focus our research on MNCs (Evans, Pucik and Barsoux 2002) where managing HRs is more complex than in domestic firms, we define an International HR system as a multilevel construct where HR managers hold a very

delicate role due to the need to handle the interplay among:

- the HR system;
- different countries' needs;
- different types of employees: host-country national (HCN), parent-country national (PCN), third-country national (TCN).

Moreover as we conceive organizations as open systems, International HR managers are in charge of keeping the coordination and congruence (namely 'fit') between the various elements described above. Consequently, an IHR system has to be considered as a key and crucial element for MNCs to be successful by effectively managing employees for running international activities (Briscoe and Schuler 2004). Hence, it is likely important to appropriately integrate an IHR system with the organizational strategy to implement the global achievement of the organization and obtain competitive advantages on a long-term basis. This suggestion is strengthened by researchers and professionals, paying an increasing attention to the strategic nature of an IHR system and its herewith-resulting implications for organizational performance, which in turn leads to the emergence of Strategic International Human Resource Management (SIHRM), being defined as '*Human Resource Management issues, functions, and policies and practices that result from the strategic activities of multinational enterprises and that impact the international concerns and goals of those enterprises*' (Schuler, Dowling and DeCieri 1993, p. 422). Fostering capacity for resilience in HR can be considered among the most important strategic activities of an organization not only on a national but also on an international scale. From our perspective, it has to be considered as a necessary activity in HRM besides the most traditional ones, that is planning, recruitment, selection, placement, performance management, training and

development, compensation, etc.

Additionally, we follow Peltonen (2006) when he defines IHRM as a *'branch of management studies that investigates the design and effects of organizational human resources practices in cross-cultural contexts'* (p. 523). In this vein, the coordination of organizational activities aimed at executing the company's strategies might be accomplished via the cross-national transfer of managers and management practices. In particular, it requires the HR expatriate to be able to assume new roles such as *'effective influencer'* (Novicevic and Harvey 2001, p. 1260), *'network leader'* and *'process champion'* (Evans et al. 2002, pp. 471-472), *'constructive fighter'* (ibid: 487), *'guardian of culture'* (Sparrow, Harris and Brewster 2003, p. 27) and *'knowledge management champion'* (ibid: 24). Moreover, if we adapt Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall's roles for HR (2002), we can conceive the HR expatriate as:

- *'human capital steward'*: acting as a guide and facilitator in partnership with employees with the aim of achieving the highest return possible on a company's human capital investments;
- *'knowledge facilitator'*: facilitating both knowledge capital (held in explicit and implicit sources) and knowledge flows;
- *'relationship builder'*: managing relationships between individuals and groups both internal and external to the organization to enhance social capital across the total value chain;
- *'rapid deployment specialist'*: taking responsibility for the development of flexible human capital resources with an emphasis on adaptability, tolerance and capacity to learn.

As the paper by Andresen et al. (2014) remarks, the terms

‘self-initiate expatriation’ (SIE), ‘assigned expatriation’ (AE) and ‘migration’ often overlap or are applied as synonymous in the expatriation research (p. 2295). Considering the role ascribed to international mobility for the achievement of the capacity of organizational resilience, this paper focuses on the *intra*-organizational SIEs, considering the expatriates that keep their employment within the same organization, and the AEs, as employees moving abroad according to a specific and deliberate company’s mandate (e.g. Andresen et al. 2012; Andresen, Bergdolt, Margenfeld and Dickmann 2014). The underlying assumption is that both AEs and *intra*-SIEs would not present ‘dark sides’ for the employees’ actual engagement and motivation, resulting in negative consequences for the employees (Jensen, Patel and Messersmith 2011). Another element to be taken into consideration is organizational purpose through the organizational international career logic (OICLs). Following Mayrhofer (2001), the types of international assignment are based on two dimensions: personal development versus management and control purposes. The combination of the two (supposed) independent variables leads to four different OICLs (Mayrhofer 2001): 1) *watchdog, trouble-shooting logic*, 2) *senior management, high potential logic*, 3) *developmental-junior logic*, 4) *isolation, dead end logic*.

The adoption of a multilevel perspective in analysing IHRM systems permits to overcome the criticism to the Mayrhofer’s typology addressed by Andresen and Biemann (2013): *‘that instead of distinguishing four types, the use of the two dimensions would be a better basis for argumentation as personnel development always has an impact on careers and management and control efforts are only relevant in strategically important subsidiaries ... Moreover, Mayrhofer assumes that each company pursues one dominant, organizational international career logic,*

whereas it is to be expected that all logics will be represented in larger companies operating on a global scale' (p. 537). Alternatively Andresen and Biemann (2013) propose a typology based on transitions according to country(ies) and organization(s): *early career* (home country, current organization), *international organizational career* (foreign country, current organization), *international boundaryless career* (home country, other organization), *transnational career* (foreign country, other organization). In the same vein of considering management development in MNCs, Sheehan (2012) considers the *inputs*, the *process* and the *outputs*, considered as the perceived importance and provision of management development by line managers. Amongst the inputs, subsidiary size, sales growth, capital intensity and country were found significant, whereas the *process* was mostly influenced by 'best practice' and management support (Sheehan 2012). On this subject it is useful to recall the distinction between *content* and *process* of HRM systems operated by Bowen and Ostroff (2004). Although the two features are interrelated, *content* refers to the '*individual practices and policies intended to achieve a particular objective*', whereas *process* considers '*how the HRM system can be designed and administered effectively*' (Bowen and Ostroff 2004, p.206). Interestingly, Jiang et al. (2012b) found that skill-enhancing practices are positively related to the development of human capital and less positively related to employee motivation than motivation-enhancing and opportunity-enhancing practices.

#### 4. *The conceptual framework*

As stated by Lengnick-Hall, Beck and Lengnick-Hall (2011) capacity for resilience is developed by the strategic management of HR, in order to create competencies among core employees (Lopez-Cabrales et al. 2006). The HR system can play a crucial role in developing organizational

resilience meant as the process followed to anticipate, respond, adapt to, and/or rapidly recover from a disruptive event (Garavan 2012; Mallak 1998; Vogus and Sutcliffe 2007). In fact, both resilience and the structural and operational aspects of HR systems can be analysed by multilevel constructs (Arthur and Boyles 2007; Becker and Gerhart 1996; Hackman 2003; Lepak et al. 2004; Schuler 1992).

Following the general setting proposed by Hackman (2003), resilience can be analysed at a macro-, meso- and micro-level (organization, organizational units, individual). Similarly, the HR policy of a MNC is designed at the macro-headquarter level (HR philosophy, strategy, guidelines), executed at a meso-subsidiary level (HR local policy and practice), and enacted and perceived at a micro-individual level. As clarified in the previous section, IHRM can play a crucial role in the activation of the cross-level mechanisms that start from the HR philosophy and end (or, should end) with their metabolization by individuals at a local level, leveraging on their cognitive, behavioural, contextual behavioural patterns. In fact, while international mobility mainly involves employees coming from core functions (Andresen and Biemann 2013; Andresen et al. 2014; Garavan 2012; Sheehan 2012), the expatriation of HR employees could instead sustain the spread of general practices and enable the activation of various mechanisms taking place at various levels:

- HQ: strategy execution (results, diffusion of common cultural values, promotion of ethics, norms, etc.) via HR architecture , HR principles, HR philosophy;
- Subsidiary: local responsiveness, via HR policies and programmes;
- Individual, personal development via lower-range elements (HR practices and processes).

As indicated by Sparrow (2012), the balance between horizontal coordination amongst local subsidiaries and vertical control can be obtained via a *flexible strategy* which is consistent with dominant environmental or demand forces and that is deployed through ‘more flexible and individualized management of IM policy’ (p. 2408). Within this framework, together with Sparrow (2012) we posit that the HR expatriate could play a crucial role in translating the general HR policy at local level, enacting the local responsiveness (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1992) and to maximize the company values (Sundaram and Black 1992) if flexible and customized IM policies are designed (Andresen and Bergdolt, 2012). From an ontological standpoint, this paper tries to ‘integrate’ different perspectives borrowed from other fields (De Cieri et al. 2007; Campbell 2008). The consideration of resilience as a phenomenon that can be studied via a multilevel analysis (e.g. Klein and Kozlowski 2000; Ostroff and Bowen 2000; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; van Veldhoven and Dorenbosch 2008), together with the feasibility offered by the three-layer structure of MNCs, allows the capture of various levels of social complexity (e.g. Hughes 1958), spanning from the whole company to individual personal development. Accordingly, after having recalled the original idea of resilience, the proposed conceptual model for organizational resilience will try to combine the IHRM so far presented in a consistent way that considers three levels of execution: HQ, subsidiary and individual.

Going back to the mechanical origin of the phenomenon, Campbell (2008) reports the following definitions:

- Resilience is the ability of a material to absorb energy when it is deformed elastically, and release that energy upon unloading.

- The proof of resilience can be defined as the maximum energy that can be absorbed within the elastic limit, without creating a permanent distortion.

- The modulus of resilience is defined as the maximum energy that can be absorbed per unit volume without creating a permanent distortion.

In uniaxial tension, this can be calculated by integrating the stress-strain curve from zero to the elastic limit (Figure 4 and Equation 2).

$$U_r = \frac{\sigma_y^2}{2E}$$

Equation 2. Resilience and the stress-strain curve



Figure 4. Stress-strain curve



Where  $U_r$  is the modulus of resilience,  $\sigma_y$  is the yield strength, and  $E$  is the Young's modulus.

Considering our previous interpretation of the phenomena and the categories introduced by Sparrow (2012), in parallel with the lessons from materials engineering, we can state the following:

- Resilience happens when the international mobility function is able to activate local responsiveness. Despite the substantial differences between (*intra*-)Self-Initiate Expatriates (*intra*-SIEs) and Assigned Expatriates (AEs) the fact that HR employees are moved abroad puts them in the condition of facing the issue of bringing policies from the HQ, or from another subsidiary, and having the mission to activate them in the local environment. Such an attempt at being locally responsive requires the interpretation of the local environment and the formulation of solutions which might be compatible with the local exigencies (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1992) and with the local culture (Hofstede 1980; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010). The pressure towards adaptation can be so high that attitudinal and behavioural consequences often become similar as a result of contextual effects (Bliese and Hanges, 2004; Gunz and Mayrhofer, 2011). Such an assumption is consistent with all the OICLs identified by Mayrhofer (2001), except for the one in which the international career is neither in the lens of personnel development, nor aiming at control (*Isolation, dead end logic*). Similarly to what has been noticed by Shen, Benson and Huang (2014), also in such a context the 'quality of working life' can play an important mediating role between HRM systems and performance.

- The proof of resilience is related to the cognitive base of the organization, and to the lack of or availability of resources it can mobilize when subject to a stressor to enable detection, and to develop a proper strategy to manage local responsiveness. The consideration of the modulus emphasizes the knowledge transfer role that could be played

by career trajectory that from the early stage converges towards the international organizational career (Andresen and Biemann 2013). In the same vein, being based on ‘pivotal talent pools’, global talent management (GMT) programmes could contribute to the enhancement of the proof of resilience and enable MNCs to remain competitive even under recessionary pressures (Garavan 2012).

- The modulus of resilience is related to the learning side of the organization, activated through the ‘functional integration’. In this sense, the role of HR international mobility can be assessed via the induced value creation it can stimulate in the critical functions related close to the core business, like R&D, marketing and manufacturing functions. This is particularly valid for the OICLs aiming at developing personnel, both for junior and senior positions. In this vein the *process* enabler – ‘best practice’ and management support – identified by Sheehan (2012) could play an effective role. The structuration of HR policies inspired by the resilient framework would therefore enact the exploitation of the additive and/or synergistic relationships across organizational level and across HR domains (Jiang et al. 2012a, p. 82).

The interaction of the described components of resilience along the different organizational layers and across the three levels of analysis could confer on the MNCs ‘situational strength’, linked to the situation expatriates (individuals) ‘seeing’ based on their ‘perceptions, cognitive maps, schemata, enactments, and even behaviour in the situation’ (Bowen and Ostroff 2004, p. 207). Crossing the three main layers of the organizational architecture of MNCs, and considering the individual motivational triggers, the framework proposed here can be considered as the base for the development of a career-related High Performance Working System (e.g. Jensen et al. 2011; Messersmith, Patel, Lepak and Gould-Williams 2011). International

mobility and a consistent design of career paths can stimulate activation of the cross-level mechanisms that start from the HR philosophy and end (hopefully) with their absorption by individuals at a local level, leveraging on their cognitive, behavioural and contextual behavioural patterns. Being resilience and international mobility (careers) multi-level phenomena, the novelty of our framework lies in the tentative to conjugate them in order to capitalize the interplay of the IHR management along three different levels of execution: headquarter, subsidiary, individual.

## *5. Discussion and future research*

The aim of the paper was to advance our understanding of the role of IHRM for the competitiveness of companies, with a specific focus on MNCs and the achievement of organizational resilience as a means for sustainable competitive advantage. In this sense, IHRM policies and practices oriented to organizational resilience might help MNCs to achieve the expected performance, through responsive subsidiaries, able to create the (local) environment able to guarantee quality working (and non-working) lives of individuals (e.g. Shen et al. 2014). The multilevel perspective through which organizational resilience has been framed is consistent with the reality that in international contexts HRM policies and practices are mostly formulated and implemented at the organizational level, which encompasses subsidiary, functions/departments, teams and eventually individuals. The consideration of the international mobility of HR employees distinguishes the paper from the mainstream literature which has been privileging the line, core-function linked role. This paper, instead, posits that the local adaptation of IHRM policies could be triggered and maintained via the expatriation of HR employees, while local responsiveness not only covers

companies' business models but also the supportive functions.

The directions for future research roots on the two main limitations of the paper. The first one related to the underlying assumption that the MNC is always able to predict *ex ante* the right strategy and policy for the local environment considered. In fact, subsidiaries are embedded in nations, regions, or economic or political clusters. The proposed framework is consistent with the fact that the same company (headquarter) might *a priori* adopt different strategies in dealing with different locations but does not consider the mediating and moderating effect related to the execution of such strategies and policies. Subsequently, the cross-cultural perspective is underestimated, so is the comparative HR management (Vance and Paik 2006). In fact, as reported by many studies the actual execution of IHRM policies and strategies (actual results) might differ from country to country (Andresen and Biemann 2013), both for the expected flexibility and for the strategic delivery model (Sparrow 2012), as well as for the effect of the country-of-origin effects (Sheehan and Sparrow 2012).

The second limit of the framework is related to its conceptual nature. Resilience, *per se*, is a phenomenon that could generate an infinite number of potential constructs (Cascio 2012), and we currently do not have any established measure that can be used in response to the call for configurational comparison. Yet, the paper could stimulate the development of instruments that would allow researchers to capture in a more precise way the configurational settings and use them in research on organizational resilience. Further, we have implicitly considered the situation of one HQ with  $n$ , undefined, subsidiaries, the number of the elements of the social space, their interactive relationships and eventual networks effect. In fact, the paper considers the centralization of the IHRM practices at the HQ and the diffusion of them to the subsidiaries, replicating a

multinational operating scheme (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1992), in a setting of centralized authority and seeking of multiple value in which MNCs ‘adopt primarily value-based strategies’ (Sundaram and Black 1992, p. 748). Mutual interactions amongst the subsidiaries and cross-national learning effects have not been considered. Notwithstanding its inner limits, we believe the framework could be of interest for further investigation and can eventually be operationalized via statistical multi-level modelling that allows between-in models in order to allow between-unit predictions of the relationships (Osborne 2000; Snijders 2011).

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