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Trying to "*Stay one step ahead of the game*".
How to manage a global workforce
and play early on environmental uncertainty

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Abstract

Nowadays, multinational corporations (MNCs) are exposed to increasingly tangled and equivocal external environments (Burton, Obel 2004) characterized by hyper competition and rapid change. When the 'unexpected is an increasing part of the everyday experience' (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfled 2005), MNCs may have 'limited capacity to anticipate every challenge that arises' (Sutcliffe and Vogus 2003, p. 104). Being resilience the capacity 'to cope with unanticipated dangers' (Wildavsky 1988, p. 147), with this paper we posit that international mobility can help MNCs to understand better the specificities of each level of environment they deal with (general, specific, local). Playing early on environmental uncertainty they put themselves in the condition of building the pre-requisites for resilience. Flexible enough to react quickly to external market shifts, being able to detect and correct emerging and manifest anomalies promptly - thus minimizing adverse outcomes - these organizations remain steadfastly "one step ahead of the game".

Keywords: MNCs, environment, competition, resilience, uncertainty, global workforce

1. *Introduction*

MNCs, by definition, must confront a multiplicity of environments, each of which characterized by special features and hallmarks feeding a growing level of uncertainty, a situation that involves imperfect and/or unknown information.

In this work we posit that international assignees have the potential to bridge the information gap between the HQ and the subsidiaries: indeed, they can act as " *information conduits*". By promptly returning fresh and updated information to the HQ, thus giving the possibility to play early on environmental uncertainty, they would enable the MNC to "*stay one step ahead of the game*". In this regard, expatriates can help the MNC in developing the pre-requisites for 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).*

This paper is structured in 6 paragraphs. In Section 2 the Authors describe the MNCs'need for resilience, that is the ability to effectively and promptly react to a negative event or solicitation from the external environment. In this work, we posit the existence of a 3-levels environment: general, specific, local. Section 3 aims at highlighting the strategic role attributed to international mobility being expats considered as "*information conduits and environmental analysts*". We will see that each typology of expat (Third-Country National, TCN; Host-Country National, HCN, Parent-Country national, PCN) can give a specific contribution to the MNC being work-related information exchanges/transmission part of any assignment. Section 4 is dedicated to the description of the conceptual framework. Section 5 is devoted to the explanation of the research methodology, while Section 6 discusses some preliminary results and Section 7 derives managerial implications.

2. *MNCs and the need for resilience*

Crises and discontinuities characterize extant organizations, forcing them to struggle with various types of risks (*Kaplan & Mikes, 2012*): *preventable risks*; *strategic risks*, and *external risks*. While traditional risk management tools are able to tackle the first two risks, the latter are beyond one's capacity to influence or control, are scarcely predictable (and so are their potential impacts), and little knowledge on how to handle them is available. Given the exogenous nature of external risks and the complexities tied to cross-cultural management, cultivating capacity for resilience (*Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003; Lengnick-Hall, C.A., Beck, T.E., & Lengnick-Hall, M.L. 2011)* could be a viable way for MNCs.

The working definition of a resilient organization is similar to the one of materials engineering *(e.g. Campbell, 2008).* A resilient organization is one that has the capacity to change with minor frictions by demonstrating flexibility and plasticity, withstand sudden shocks and recover to a desired equilibrium, while preserving the continuity of its operations. It encompasses both recoverability (the capacity for speedy recovery after a crisis), and adaptability (timely adaptation in response to a changing environment).

According to our point of view, resilience results from the processes and dynamics able to create and 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 & Vogus, 2003*). In that, resilient MNCs differ from the other ones by their ability to tackle the external uncertainty and equivocality *(Mayrhofer, Meyer & Steyner, 2007)* by being "potentially ready" for the unexpected to occur (*Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011*). Resilient MNCs develop the capacity to cope with a wide array of anomalies and are constantly striving to grow their capabilities to do so, through learning from events and near events.

This forward-looking and self-correcting type of organization

anticipates changes routinely and addresses them proactively. When something negative occurs, the resilient organization distinguishes itself in its response, which is immediate, thorough, and constructive.

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. Subsequently, they believe they are imperfect and constantly engaged in building the pre-requisites for resilience through :

- proactive and preemptive analysis of possible vulnerabilities;
- the questioning of assumptions and received wisdom to create a more complete picture;
- the attempt to learn collectively from the errors that have occurred

Hence, in contrast with the deterministic approach (*Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981*), we believe that resilience and the process of its generation can be better and more convincingly explained by dynamic and interactive perspective. The "developmental" characteristic of resilience is therefore crucial, as it emphasizes that organizations evolve over time by continually handling risks, stresses, and strains, and by allocating adequate resources (expats) in a proper way.

In particular, our work focuses on the understanding of the role of the expat in building the pre-requisites for resilience.

3. *Expatriates as "information conduits and environmental analysts"*

To build pre-requisites for resilience (*Mallak, 1997*), MNCs need to develop an accurate system to read the environmental phenomena, anticipate shocks, learn from errors and prevent negative results. International assignments have obvious potential to be used as information transfer "shuttles": from the HQ to the subsidiary (control) and vice versa (feedback/report). Information asymmetry

requires the engagement of individuals who can effectively bridge these informational gaps and enable the HQ to better integrate its foreign operations. The information flow between the subsidiary and the HQ with the aim to reduce this asymmetry can thus be considered as a major issue (*Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989*).

In this sense, MNCs engage expatriates, not only for corporate control and expertise reasons in vital global markets, to facilitate entry into new markets or to develop international management competencies (*Bird & Dunbar 1991, Boyacigiller 1991, Rosenzweig 1994, Shaffer, Harrison & Gilley 1999, Forster 2000*) but also – according to our point of view – to conduit information back to the HQ and consequently "play early on environmental uncertainty". In this sense, they build the pre-requisite for resilience.

The management of uncertainty has been recognized as a critical concern for organizations since Thompson's seminal book, Organizations in Action (1967): "*Uncertainty, which threatens the ability of the organization to survive and attain its goals affects the structure and functioning of organizations*" (*O'Reilly and Pondy 1979: 125*). As uncertainty increases so do the information processing requirements of the organization (*Galbraith, 2010*).

In this sense, expatriates fulfill a fundamental role during their stay abroad as they are:*"expected to share their local contextual knowledge with HQ staff in order to facilitate effective corporate activities in these local markets. At the same time they are socialized in the HQ corporate culture and learn firm-specific routines and behaviors that enable them to master future management tasks within the organization. As a result, they seem to act both as **knowledge senders and receivers**".*

While it is now more widely recognized by managers and academics that repatriation needs careful managing, attention to the stable contact with the HQ during the assignment period has been somewhat belated. In the past, the unpredictable and incremental nature of globalization led to reactive assignments, and the management of the period abroad as well as the re-entry to the firm were left unspoken or dealt with informally on an ad-hoc basis. As more expatriates completed their assignments, firms were faced with organizing these period abroad

and returns to a more planned pattern that allowed for a more strategic and complete use of the newfound experiences and insights, while at the same time easing the return to their home country and firm.

Typically, on completion of the international assignment the MNC brings the PCN/TCN back to the home country, though not all international assignments end with a transfer home. Some TCNs may agree to become part of the multinational's international team of managers and thus have consecutive overseas assignments.

Things are completely different for HCNs who are not involved in any repatriation process as they live in the same country where the subsidiary is based.

At a glance, as capacity for resilience lays its foundation in the ability to read and interpret environment in a fast and accurate manner in order to anticipate, respond and rapidly recover from a disruptive event *(Mallak, 1998; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007),* the strategic management of the flow of information returned by expatriates can be, in this sense, of crucial support.

Moreover, Caligiuri (1997) found that the "success" of expatriates could be evaluated by measures that included:

- the completion of assignments
- cross-cultural adjustment
- performance.

Her study showed that expatriates and their peers further divided performance into:

- technical
- pro-social
- managerial

The last two types of performance include representing the organizations to customers and the public and transferring information across strategic units and establishing interpersonal bonds with host nationals. In this sense, according to our point of view, by recognizing the performance appraisal mechanisms highlighted by Caligiuri, we enhance and emphasize the role of the expatriate as "*boundary spanner*" (*Ancona & Caldwell, 1992*). It is well known that an MNC interacts with the uncertainty generated by the multifaceted and complex environment it is engaged with. The external environment

contains elements over which organizations have little control, and for whom they pose fundamental problems. Environments differ in their degree of uncertainty, and different degrees of uncertainty require appropriate degrees of intelligence collection and information processing (*Dollinger, 1984*). In this sense, expatriates can be viewed as:

- "multicultural brokers" (*Thomas, 1994*) able to establish social ties and bring together resources that are located within separate cultural communities *(Cohen, 1977; Fernandez & Barr, 1993)*
- "*information conduits and environment analyst*" able to support the organization in the difficult process of collecting information and managing increasing level of uncertainty

Aknowledged the complexity of the role of the expatriate in the interface and interaction with the environment, in this paper and for the purpose of this study, we assume the possibility to carry on a multilevel analysis *(Sniders, 2011)* where:

- the environment is artificially partitioned into 3 levels (general, specific, local)
- the levels are interconnected
- boundaries between levels are weakly identified and intercommunicating.

As showed in Fig. 1, beyond a *general environment* (characterized by rules, laws, regulations) that defines the economic, political, financial and social substrate upon which the entire MNC (HQ and subsidiaries) works, it is possible to distinguish the *specific environment* inside which the HQ operates as well as the *local environment* that characterize each subsidiary.

General Environment	Level 1
Specific Environment (HQ)	Level 2
Local Environment (each subsidiary)	Level 3

Fig. 1 - Three levels of environment

Regardless of the nature of expatriation ("self-initiated" or "back-sponsored"), expatriates should provide a great contribution in terms of knowledge of the environment. Indeed, the regular transmission of information by the expatriate to the HQ can allow the MNC to meet the requirements of the market, reacting promptly or event anticipating. This pouring of information and knowledge is extremely useful as it put the MNC in the best conditions to read, understand and interpret the signals, or course if constantly transmitted. In other words, the prompt transmission of information from the subsidiary to the HQ can be considered and treated as one of the pre-requisites for resilience.

According to our point of view, the proper use of international mobility policies can help both:

- the expat in the advancement of the carrier
- the organization to better understand the specificities of each level of environment. In detail, during their career:
    - TCNs develop a deep knowledge of the *general environment* by belonging to a separate nationality to both the contracting government and the "area of operations".
    - PCNs can become deep expert of the HQ *specific environment* and culture
    - HCNs can be considered as deep expert of the *local environment* (subsidiary level)

Level of environment better known	Typology of expat
General	TCN
Specific (HQ)	PCN
Local (subsidiary)	HCN

Fig. 2 - Typology of expat and level of environment analyzed

In Fig. 3 we represent how the global workforce managed by a MNC should help in the knowledge of each level of environment.
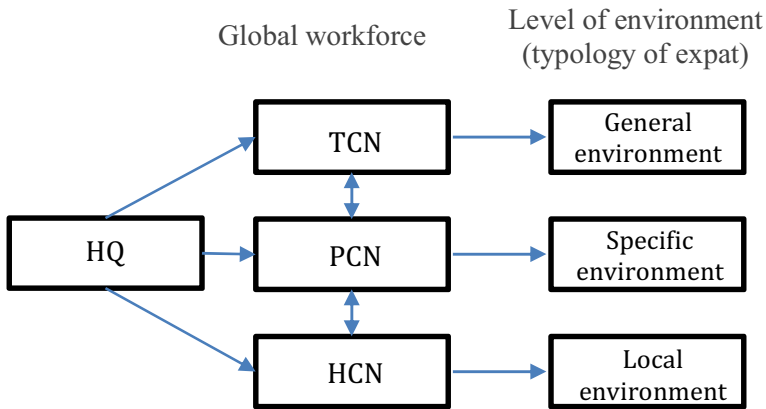
Fig. 3 - Knowledge of the environment and quality (frequency and formalization) of the feedback to HQ

As stated before, when a shock occurs, the resilient organization distinguishes itself in its response which is immediate and constructive. To allow this prompt action, the basket of environmental information has to be constantly and methodically updated by the global workforce. The frequency and the formalization of the information transmitted to the HQ should help the MNC to *"stay one step ahead of the game.* Indeed, it helps the proactive and preemptive analysis of possible vulnerabilities, one of the 3 pre-requisites for resilience.

4. *The conceptual framework: managing a global workforce*

Global workforce refers to the international labor pool of workers an MNC disposes of. MNCs - because of different reasons ranging from corporate control and expertise reasons, entry into new market, develop international management competencies - make a considerable employ of expatriates who are person temporarily or permanently residing in a country other than that of their citizenship.
In our study, we argue that international mobility has to be conceived and managed as a tool to ease the MNC's capacity for resilience.

In this sense, we believe in the following hypothesis (H):

H: Expatriates - in addition to their main mandate - can help MNC's ability for resilience by assuming the fundamental role of "multicultural brokers" and "information conduits" from the subsidiary to the HQ.

Two additional hypotheses can be derived:

H_a More frequent and formalized the feeback returned to the HQ is, the more accurate will be the info collected on the environment and higher the potential capacity for resilience developed by the MNC

H_b Interaction within the pool of expatriates improves the general/global quality of information

Considering the complexity of the topic and the difficulties related to data collection, we believe a gradual approach would have been preferred. For these reasons, we focus our attention mainly on the main hypothesis (H). Progressively it is our intention to deepen also H_a and H_b.

5. *Research settings: methodology and data collection*

Considering this research as a pilot project, to collect information about our hypothesis, we are conducting some exploratory interviews. The request for cooperation has been sent by mail and addressed to 72 expatriates, mainly Italian, belonging to different companies working in heterogeneous sectors. Fig. 4 shows an extract of the sample composition by job title and the destination of the expatriation experience.

Job title	Destination
Marketing & Pricing Director	Germany
Partner	Portugal
Head of Digital	France
Regional Director	France, Italy, Benelux

Country manager	France, US
Country Manager	India, Russia, Turkey
Chief Financial	Russia
President, Global Asset Management	Spain
Founder	UK
CEE Payroll Operations Leader & HRTO Manager	Sweden
Executive director	UK
Acting CEO	New Zealand
Finance director	Japan
Business control global functions - controller HR	Sweden
Vice president Distribution	Equador
Member of PA	Switzerland
Senior Director	UK
Credit and Debit Expert	UK
Sourcing Analytics manager	Switzerland
WEO & Founder	Spain
Senior Portfolio Manager	UK
Marketing manager BU Bakery	US
Designer e Stylist	Arab Emirates
Managing director / Chief operating officer	France
Founder and Director	UK
Co-head Quantitative Investment Strategies	UK
Chief Innovation Officer	US
Sales & Energy Services Manager	Slovakia
Assistant General Counsel	US
Senior Product & Markets Manager	Switzerland
Owner	US
Senior Sales Manager	Spain
Securities Lending Administrator	UK
Director Export, NBD	Germany
Credit Foncier	Austria
Finance Business Partner-IT Business	UK

Competitive intelligence lead Analysts	UK
Supporting Finance Manager	Arab Emirates
Consultant Forensic Services	UK
Supervisor	UK
Cost Accounting and Commodity Risk Management	Switzerland
Finance Project Specialist	Switzerland
Logistic Coordinator	Norway
Fixed Income Syndicate	UK
Euro Category Marketing Associate - Personal Care Division	Switzerland
Supply chain finance analyst	Switzerland
Manager-Client Service	UK
Senior Accountant	Luxembourg
Senior Finance Analyst	UK
International Account Manager	Luxembourg
Client Administrator	Luxembourg
Project Leader	Hungary
Consulente settore Servizi finanziari	Switzerland
Tax Advisor	UK
Record to Report - General Ledger Accountant	Poland
Cost Controlling Coordinator	Congo
Staff Accountant	UK
Member of the Board of Directors	UK
Optimization Consultant	Ireland
Floor Manager	UK
International Junior Brand Manager	France
Responsible Commercial software	France
Research Associate	Netherland
Managing Director	Japan
Head of Sales Department	Tailandia
Intern	US
Junior Financial Management Manager	UK

Product Specialist	Switzerland
Financial Trader	UK
Change Management	Germany
Marketing Department America Latina	Argentina
SEO Manager	Germany
Junior Category Management Manager	Poland
Sales Marketing Executive	UK
Account Manager	Arab Emirates
Transaction Banking Product Associate Geographies	UK
Customer Service Agent	Malta
Country Manager	France

Fig. 4 - Extract of the composition of the sample

As drown in Fig. 4 the sample results heterogeneously composed both in terms of job title and expats' destination. These features will make the survey representative of a multiplicity of viewpoints.

To address the research questions, we are conducting open-ended and mostly unstructured interviews (*Mayring, 2002; Yin, 2003)*. Given the objective to be exploratory and thus to collect rich evidence, a special focus is placed on using narratives. By employing this approach, the interviewer encourages the interviewee to freely respond and contribute to the topic. This enables us to discover relevant new issues as well as identify and understand complex behaviours and relationships without inflicting any a priori classifications that could restrict the field of investigation *(Mayring, 2002)*.

The interviewees revealed varying levels of prior international experience being the vast majority of respondents in their mid-career. The interviews had an average duration of 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and the recorded conversations transcribed.

In qualitative research, a number of unique threats to validity exist stemming from effects the researcher has on the study's participants *(Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003)*. To minimize response bias, we ensured strict confidentiality of the interview results to all interviewees and emphasized that individual responses would not be

disclosed. All participants received a detailed description of the interview process before the interview to ensure a common level of understanding of the research project and its intentions. Interviews are conducted by phone or Skype.

There was a need in some interviews to get back to a topic that had been raised earlier as some participants would start to provide richer descriptions as the interview progressed. In doing so, we maximized the comparability of the interviews.

6. *Preliminary results: discussion*

Up to now, only 13 have teamed up. Interviews are still in progress and we count to complete them in two months. Evidence gathered through interviews show that nowadays companies using expats are very attentive in collecting information from the subsidiaries.

Regardless of the typology of the employee, work-related information exchanges are part of any assignment. Through regular communications, a considerable amount of information on the environment is <u>continuously</u> reached, analyzed and interpreted. Most companies require a daily return of results, plus a weekly and monthly report.

These activities may become more intense in the months or weeks immediately before the return. Upon return, a series of immediately practical and long-term activities of information analysis are requested.

Probably due to the large size, the expat respondents were required to return formal and structured feedback. Few interviewees were actively engaged in local expat communities, in activities scheduled by the Consulate or other socialization activities. Only expats in the US state the frequent overlap between private and working life.

As a matter of fact many MNCs do not invest in training, especially if the PCN holds a senior position. Main difficulties are encountered by HCNs and TCNs as – in most cases - they do not receive proper training and complete instructions on how to return stable feedback on a regular basis during the assignment as well as once completed.

7. *Managerial implications and conclusions*

In the past, according to our experience on field, one of the most common weaknesses of the expatriate was the prompt and methodical return of the information collected. As overwhelmed by others, and seemingly more urgent issues, the collection and fast transmission of fresh and detailed information to the HQ was frequently put in the background and not considered as priority.

Nowadays, one of the fundamental capacity today's organizations need to develop is resilience, which is the ability to anticipate or effectively and timely respond to negative events. Being the MNCs' capacity for resilience a strategic need built on the availability of detailed, updated and fresh information, we believe in the crucial role assumed by expats. International mobility *(Schein, 1978; Schuler, 1992)* indeed - if managed according to specific criteria and modalities - can be of extreme help for the organization for the collection of information about the environment. The collected information - if properly analysed and interpreted - can be used to better understand the nature of the external solicitations and consequently to develop capacity for resilience in terms of:
-    anticipation of an external negative event
-    identification and implementation of a prompt and fast countermeasure

Indeed, returning information collected during the assignment allows the HQ to carefully read and interpret in advance environmental shocks and discontinuities. Of course, to be effective, it must be carried out using formalized methods and appropriate timing according to the category of expatriate.

Effective and structured programs are implemented in those MNCs who believe in the importance of recognizing value to the overseas experience. Less structured programs are applied to HCNs and TCNs whose completion of the assignment not always consider the formalized return of the acquired knowledge and information to the HQ.

Being the research in its early stages, results are preliminary. In any case, some considerations and suggestions emerge:

- Formal and informal interaction between the expat need to be improved
- Expatriates need to be trained before their departure on how to return information (lots of MNCs do not invest in training, especially if the expatriate holds a senior position)
- PCNs should be addressed and helped to give stable feedback during the assignment as well as during the re-entry and after repatriation
- TCNs should be encouraged to return stable feedback on a regular basis during the assignment as well as once completed
- HCN should be dragged into this activity with an accurate e precise training.

In conclusion, given the common ground played by expats as "*information conduits and environmental analysts*" we can support that - if properly trained and managed before leaving, during their stay, during re-entry and replacement - they can be conceived as strong lever to ease the MNC's capacity for resilience as they are directly involved in the construction of its pre-requisites.

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