

# New Trends in Global Staffing and Implications for IHRM

## The Case of Short-Term Assignments in MNCs

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### Abstract

In this paper, we tackle the contemporary trends in global staffing by focusing on short-term international assignments (SIAs), which are being considered as prosperous alternative to traditional long-term international assignments (LIAs). This area has been under researched, and we attempt to fill the gap by exploring SIA definition, motivations, their effectiveness and implications on IHRM in MNCs.

Our study was conducted in four large MNCs operating in 180 countries and regions. The data collection had two phases: interviews with 5 HR managers and 8 international assignees and filling out of on-line questionnaire by 102 international assignees from these companies.

This study reveals that SIAs have been used in these companies to replace some LIAs, and offered more effective use of resources. It also discloses that SIAs are successful in achieving company's strategic objectives. The paper further finds that there are clear differences in managing SIAs and LIAs. Based on these findings, we discuss the implications for HRM in MNCs and the further research on SIAs.

### Introduction

As the global business environment is becoming highly complex and dynamic, there are growing debates regarding the utility of conventional expatriate assignments. Collings *et al.* (2007) identified five key aspects of this debate which are supply-side issues, demand side issues, expatriate performance and failure, costs and career dynamics. According to Myskens *et al.* (2009), traditional, long-term expatriate assignments involve two issues: planning and turbulence. From the planning perspective, they argue that organisations fail to anticipate staffing needs and receptively approach this area. Also, the long term sequenced plans may not provide the adequate mix of needed talent, because turbulence in the environment makes it difficult to forecast the talent/needs match. Therefore, the growing turbulence has led to the intensification of alternative LIAs. Although the use of traditional LIAs did not noticeably decrease, there is a growing use of alternative assignments in MNCs. As GMAC (2005) indicates that 62% of 125 MNCs claimed their organizations were looking for alternatives to traditional assignments. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers survey (2005), 51.7% of 203 surveyed companies are expecting the increase in use of short-term assignments with comparison of 30% in 2000.

Numerous literatures indicate the need for using SIAs, while some research such as PricewaterhouseCoopers and Centre for Research into the Managements of Expatriates at Cranfield University, provided the trends and key aspects of alternative assignments. Starr and Graeme (2009) have recently taken an empirical study of family related issues of short-term assignees. Myskens *et al.* (2009) described SIAs in their study as assignments between one month up to one year and of highly technical nature. They also discuss that families usually does not move with the expatriate which makes work-life balance a great issue for these assignees. However, they do not go further into research or arguments around the topic. As a consequence, we know relatively little on the nature of these assignments, the context in which they are used and their implications for HRM in MNCs. Collings *et al.* (2009) point out that academics are still at an early stage of exploring these assignments and that there is a great scope for further theoretical and empirical research in this area, especially in terms of effectiveness of SIAs in achieving strategic objectives of MNCs and at the individual level, the impact of these assignments on employees' personal lives and careers. Our study attempts to fill the gap by conducting the detailed case studies covering four large MNCs to explore these issues.

### **Hypotheses on short-term international assignments**

The noteworthy research which provided credible and highly useful data on SIAs was conducted by Tahvanainen *et al.* (2005). They gave deeper insight into SIAs by comparing them to traditional LIAs in 11 large Finnish MNCs, and tried to find out how the companies define SIAs, the context in which they use SIAs, how they manage such assignments and what are the key advantages and disadvantages from the company's perspective. However, this study only covered MNCs from Finland and further research is required (Tahvanainen, Welch & Worm, 2005). Their research revealed that a definition of SIA is company specific but could be generally considered as 'an assignment longer than a business trip but shorter than one year with family remaining at home country' (Tahvanainen *et al.*, pg. 665, 2005). In this regard, Collings *et al.* (2007) argue that relocation of the family is of secondary issue in defining short-term assignments but could be of great relevance in operational aspect of MNC and personal aspect for the assignee. Based on these arguments, we propose: **Hypothesis 1:** Short-term assignment is an assignment longer than a business trip but shorter than one year with family remaining at home county.

Tahvanainen *et al.*, (2005) has identified the following context in which SIAs are used: problem solving or skills transfer, control purposes and managerial development. Other reasons which come forward are temporary import of talent to train local staff, work on projects and eliminate costs of relocating entire families. Again, further empirical research is suggested on circumstances in which SIAs are used and variables which impact on their usage (Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005; Collings *et al.*, 2007). Thus, we propose **Hypothesis 2:** Short term assignments are used mainly for position filling, problem solving, skill transfer, control purposes and management development.

In terms of key advantages of SIAs, the study revealed that these are flexibility, simplicity and cost effectiveness. In conjunction with these benefits, main disadvantages include taxation (especially for assignments over six months), personal issues such as alcoholism and marital issues, failure to create effective relationships with local colleagues and customers and work visas/permits. Tahvanainen *et al.* (2005) also found that staff selection of short-term assignees is highly informal, as company mainly relies on the candidates familiar to selectors, while cross-cultural training seems often to be more important for short-term assignees than for traditional expatriates; however it is typically not

provided. SIAs longer than 6 months were treated as expatriated assignments for compensation purposes. Performance management was carried out in the same way as for other employees in the organisation, whereas the repatriation seems to be far less problematic than for traditional assignees. Based on these arguments, we propose **Hypothesis 3**: Short term assignments are more flexible, proactive, cheaper and easier to implement than long term.

Starr and Graeme (2009) have recently done a study on influential role of family in SIAs. Their study added to the existing literature by recognising the concern of single assignees, the influential role of immediate and extended family during the assignment, the importance of family support due to separation throughout the assignment process and family issues associated with repatriation. They concluded that SIAs seemingly overcame or avoided family related issues which have been linked to traditional, long-term assignments. However, they did create new accounts to traditional HR issues. They also found that family involvement and influence was even more important for short-term assignees than for long-term ones, in relation to acceptance of the assignment all the way through repatriation. However, these results were also gained only from Finnish MNCs and further data is required to make valuable conclusions and define IHRM implications. The process of international assignment implementation includes: selection of candidates, training, compensation, performance management and repatriation (Dowling *et. al.*, 2008). Based on these arguments, we propose: **Hypothesis 4**: Assignees on SIAs have greater family related issues, since family does not accompany them and **Hypothesis 5**: There are different issues that arise in the SIAs process, and managing SIAs may differ from traditional LIAs from HRM perspective.

### Methods

Four MNCs have been chosen as our cases. Two of them are from the tobacco industry; the third is from the construction industry and fourth is a pharmaceutical company. All companies are multinational with a presence in more than 180 markets worldwide and employ both LIAs and SIAs. One tobacco company has HQ in the UK, the second tobacco company and the construction company have their HQ in Switzerland, while the pharmaceutical company is centrally located in Belgium.

We used interview and survey to collect the data. We interviewed five HR managers from four MNCs and eight international assignees and surveyed 150 international assignees from these four MNCs. All of the interviewees have experience of working between five and seven years in the company. HR managers are responsible for different markets. The study involved two phases. First stage consisted of a qualitative research through thematic analysis of in-depth face to face and telephone interviews with human resource managers and international assignees, which lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Additionally, HR managers were asked to provide company's SIA policies and job contract forms. These documents were reviewed to gain further insight into companies' short-term international assignment policies. The second stage consisted of sending out on-line questionnaire. Questions provided were closed, and routing was used to filter out respondents (short and long-term assignees). The employees who completed the questionnaire are international assignees working for MNCs. Questions mostly focused on their motivations, experience and issues they had during SIAs. 150 Questionnaires were sent out and 102 replied, from which 29.4%, went on SIAs, 41.2% went on both long and short-term IA, while 29.4% went only on LIAs. The data from questionnaires was analysed and presented through tables, charts and cross tabulation using Microsoft Excel.

## Findings

### Definition and motivations of short-term assignments

Two companies regarded SIAs as assignments lasting from 3 months up to one year, while the other two classified them as assignments lasting from 3 months up to 18 months. Findings indicate that the global working environment is becoming more dynamic and flexible to specific markets' and employees' needs. Also the results in this study regarding time length of SIAs could indicate that the definition of SIAs is not explicit. However, all companies distinguished SIAs from long-term assignments in terms of family relocation, as for SIAs family remains in the home country. As to the motivations of using SIAs, three main motives outlined are: 1) Position filling or skills transfer. SIAs are often replacing IAs in skills/technology transfer and filling position gaps for functional tasks. Another important outcome of going on a SIA from a company perspective, for all four companies, is that employees gain additional skills and experience which they bring back to the home office. HR managers from both tobacco MNCs explained the importance of SIAs in developing employees' future prospects of going on long-term assignments, as being mobile is considered as a highly valuable characteristic of their employees. 2) Management development. Three out of four companies pointed out the greater possibility of international experience through SIAs for junior staff. 3) Project implementation. According to interviewed HR managers, SIAs are more appropriate for ad hoc implementation of projects. In the survey, over 38.9% of 72 people say that their assignment was to fill the position gap or transfer of skills; further 22.2% think they were sent for personal development, 27.8% for project implementation and 11.1% for organisational development. As to the motivations for taking a SIA, the respondents (54.2%) pointed out that career enhancement was their strongest motive; 38.9% accepted SIA to gain new experience and 31.9% for financial reasons. When the assignees were asked to express their preference on the IA, 25% would rather be sent on SIA while 53% would possibly consider SIAs rather than LIAs. The reasons for employing SIAs do not largely differ from long-term assignments. However, short-term development assignments are more frequently used than LTAs as cost effective ways for junior staff to gain certain skills in a shorter period of time and contribute to the home office with the new knowledge. This claim was confirmed by 72 surveyed assignees' position, age and type of assignment they were sent on. In comparison, SIAs are used for senior management development and general management positions (as longer international exposure is demanded to achieve company's objectives), to open new markets and control foreign operations (especially in the beginning when it opens). SIAs are also used to replace IAs for knowledge/skills transfer, technology transfer and functional tasks – accounting, sales, etc. However, personal motivations for accepting IAs are noticeable differences among assignees.

## **Effectiveness and main advantages/disadvantages of SIAs**

The HR managers in this study have been provided with this question and feel that SIAs have significantly contributed in successfully dealing with fast changes in work dynamics. HR manager from the tobacco company explained that SIAs meet company's strategic objectives as they are cost effective, easier to plan and offer accelerated employee development. All HR managers have also revealed that SIAs offer faster response and solutions to market demands. One HR manager explained how his company sent an employee on a SIA to close down a business in a specific market. The process was performed more rapidly and efficiently, when comparing to previous situations when employees were sent for a similar purpose on long-term assignments.

The main advantage of SIAs is allowing employees to gain new experience and develop further their skills in a relatively short period of time. The main difference when comparing to long term assignments is that employees return to their home office in a comparatively short period of time (up to two years) which means they will apply new skills in the home office. According to one of the HR managers from a tobacco company these employees 'become more valuable to the home location after they return', which is not the case for long term international assignees in this company, as they become permanently mobile and terminate contract with the home location. Another opportunity which SIAs create, from all five HR managers' point of view is the possibility for employees to become recognized as 'internationally mobile' and be part of a group of LIAs who receive enviable benefits. Two other key advantages of SIA are cost effectiveness and easier planning, as it requires fewer resources, mainly due to the different compensation package and absence of family related costs, and it is much easier to follow realization of goals on SIAs as they include creation of more specific goals than LIAs. One HR manager indicated accelerated learning and development of assignees as a great advantage of SIAs, and also believes that these assignments are more adaptable to fast work changes and dynamics, where time plays a crucial role and it is a great benefit for the company when development assignments can be completed in a shorter period of time. The survey finds the greatest advantage of SIAs is the possibility of gaining new experience and enhancing career prospects (27.7%) with the chance of returning home after a relatively short period of time (83.3%). 27.7% of 72 respondents also acknowledged that the flexibility of SIAs is another advantage. Furthermore, a few assignees added the necessity to adapt fast to changes as another possible benefit for their development, and would be beneficial for their future careers. 63% of them would consider going for another SIA.

Main disadvantages identified from managements' point of view are complex administrative work, work permits and measuring return on investment. Four HR managers explained that SIAs require equally complex administrative work as long-term assignments. They also pointed out that visa and work permits are frequently a concern, as they require a long period of time to be issued. Due to these problems, HR managers often need to start planning SIAs much before their start, same as for long-term. All HR managers also defined inability to measure return on investment of short-term assignees as another considerable issue. In the survey, 68% of short-term assignees claimed that the greatest issue they have experienced is family related, as the family does not accompany them. 45.8% believe they have experienced complications due to dual careers and 44.4% highlight difficulties to create effective relationships with colleagues and customers. Interviewed short-term assignees explained that they had to make immense effort to establish new reputation and build effective relationships with local staff and as soon as they have achieved it, they were sent

back to the home country. This is one of the main reasons they would prefer going on long-term assignments, next to the better compensation packages.

### **Main HRM issues on SIAs**

**Selection:** three out of four companies claim they have highly formal and developed system of selecting employees for SIAs. HR manager from one of the tobacco companies described the process as ‘formal procedure of succession planning’. On the contrary, another HR manager from the same tobacco company believes that the procedure is frequently informal, as open positions for SIAs are often not published (cannot be seen by employees) comparing to long-term assignment positions, so the decision on the selection is done internally among line managers and employees. The HR manager of the construction company also points out that candidates are usually chosen from the region with high level of informal negotiations with their line managers. Two out of three interviewed assignees confirmed that the selection process for SIAs has been rather informal and included unofficial negotiation with managers. Moreover, according to all HR managers, the candidates for SIAs need to have first of all appropriate skills and be recognised as a talent since the company will invest considerably in him/her by placing them on a SIA. The data gained from interviews was further tested through quantitative research with the sample of 72 assignees. 52% of them believe that the selection process was informal and 47.2% believe it was formal.

**Training:** Four out of five interviewed HR managers explained that pre-departure and on site cross cultural training are not available by default for short-term assignees; however training can be provided on request. HR manager from a tobacco company pointed out that this type of training was more common for assignees coming for development assignments. All other expatriates going on SIAs are usually not even aware of the possibility for requesting such training. One company only employs induction training. The main reason for not employing cultural training was that SIAs are very task oriented so there is no need for assimilation to the host culture. However, HR manager from the pharmaceutical company claims that their company frequently provides different types of training (such as language courses, cross-cultural training, one week induction program, and provision of mentors) for both long and short-term assignments through these are not structured in the same way for the two types of assignments (training for SIAs is shorter and often optional). Majority of surveyed short-term assignees (93%) revealed they did not have any training provided. However, when rating the importance of training on the scale from 1 to 4 (1 being not important, 5 being extremely important), 14 assignees revealed that training is not important in their view, while 43 assignees believe that training is somewhat important. In addition, all interviewed short-term assignees agreed that formal cross-cultural training was not necessary as acculturation was not the primary concern due to the short nature of the assignment. It is interesting to point out that three out of five HR managers claimed their companies do not use cross-cultural training for long-term expatriate assignments by default.

**Compensation scheme:** the research has revealed that all four companies use the same principal for structuring the compensation for SIAs. As short-term assignees remain employees of their home office, they receive the same basic salary as in the home country; however they also have additional daily allowances (adjustments to the expenses of the specific country) which are added to the amount of their home salary. The short-term expatriate package also includes paid accommodation and often the use of the company car. 97% of surveyed short-term assignees are satisfied with their compensation.

**Performance management:** All companies use a formal performance management system. Short-term assignees, just like all other employees, have set objectives to be achieved for the year and these are inputted in the company system, however the objectives must be

very detailed due to the short nature of the assignment. At the beginning of the year performance objectives are inserted in the home office, but when employee moves the data is also transferred to the host market. In all cases, the line manager in the host country is held responsible for the employee's performance management. One HR manager pointed out however, that the system is not well structured and there is much confusion in practice. She revealed that there are often issues in communication between the line manager in the host country and the manager in the home office, as the line manager is responsible for sending feedback regarding assignee's performance to home location where this data is inputted. She further pointed out that this procedure works well if managers are eager to communicate regularly and closely on sharing the data. She outlines the lack of structure and instructions in this area.

Repatriation: MNCs in this study emphasised that short-term assignees generally have no problem with repatriation to the home office as re-entry plan is known since the beginning of the assignment. Two out of three interviewed assignees claim they do not see issues with repatriation and a need for communicating frequently with their home offices. However, one of the interviewed short-term assignees has expressed his concern for better communication with the home office as he was sent on several SIAs consecutively. He additionally explicated that he has outgrown his position at home location and would prefer to be appointed to a new position, but has not had the chance to discuss it with the line manager at home. From the quantitative analysis, majority of surveyed short-term assignees (88.9%) supported the claim that they have not experienced issues with repatriation. According to all HR managers, there are frequently repatriation issues with long-term assignees and that is one of the reasons they sometimes do not return to the home country but become reassigned to a new location which meets their professional requirements. Furthermore, frequent and effective communication with the home office is imperative for ensuring long-term assignees' satisfaction.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

From the findings above, we can see that due to the need for internationalising work force, MNCs in this study use SIAs more frequently as cost-effective ways for junior staff to gain certain skills in a shorter period, which differ from the LIAs which are commonly used for senior management development and general management to open new markets and control foreign operations. In these companies, SIAs are also often replacing traditional IAs in skills/technology transfer and filling position gaps for functional tasks. Moreover, their shorter time span, cost efficiency, flexibility, less time dedicated for planning and opportunity to gain accelerated development present major advantages of SIAs. By using SIAs, a wider talent pool can be utilized, thus making efficient outcomes of MNCs strategic objectives, and it provides a proactive way of minimising the issues of planning and turbulence associated with LIAs. What's more, according to one of the HR managers from a tobacco company: "*employees who went on SIAs become more valuable to the home location after they return*", which is not the case for long-term international assignees in this company, as they become permanently mobile and terminate contract with the home location mainly because these markets often lack attractive executive positions. However, the main shortcoming of SIA is its negative impact on work-life balance of assignees as they are not accompanied by family or partners. This finding also responded to the need for definition and categorization of SIAs (Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005). According to this study SIAs can be defined as assignments lasting from 3 months up to 18 months with possible negotiations on the length, with family remaining in the home country and salary payment, pension and social benefits being the tasks of the home office in order to reduce costs. Overall, SIAs have been successful in achieving company's strategic objectives as they offer faster response and solutions to market

demands, thus companies have a tendency to shift from traditional IAs towards them whenever possible.

**Table 1: C**

	Traditional assignments	Short-term assignments
<b>Purpose</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Filling positions or skills gaps</li> <li>• Management development</li> <li>• Organisational development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills transfer/problem solving</li> <li>• Management development</li> <li>• Managerial control</li> </ul>
<b>Duration</b>	Typically 12-36 months	Typically up to 6 or 12 months
<b>Family's position</b>	Family joins the assignee abroad	An assignee is unaccompanied by family
<b>Compensation</b>	Expatriation package: base salary plus various allowances	1. Assignments up to 6 months: the company's travel policy forms the basis for compensation 2. Assignments up to 12 months: the company's expatriation policy forms the basis for compensation
<b>Performance management</b>	Based on the assignment	As for any other employee
<b>Repatriation</b>	Often problematic	Mostly unproblematic
<b>Advantages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good relationship with colleagues</li> <li>• Constant monitoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility</li> <li>• Simplicity</li> <li>• Cost effectiveness</li> </ul>
<b>Disadvantages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dual career issues</li> <li>• Expensive</li> <li>• Less flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taxation</li> <li>• Poor relationship with local colleagues</li> <li>• Work permit issues</li> <li>• Side effects (alcoholism, high divorce rate)</li> </ul>

This study also finds that the HRM process of SIAs differ from LIAs. First of all, the companies are generally seeking in utilizing formal recruiting methods, however informal negotiations can arise when individuals detect suitable candidates. In addition, formality of the selection seems to be correlated with the position of the candidate, as higher positions appear to have strictly defined selection criteria. For most traditional LIAs, the formality of the process is not questionable and is mainly very official and transparent as indicated by Dowling and Welch (2004). Secondly, even though the literature strongly emphasises the importance of cross-cultural training for all expatriates in creating a quicker and more successful adjustment to a new location (Dowling, Welch and Schuler, 1999; Harzing and Ruysseveldt, 2004), this type of training does not seem to be frequently used in practice for SIAs, while it is more common for traditional LIAs. As SIA is strongly task oriented, acculturation of assignees is not the primary concern. Moreover, the compensation structure is much simpler and cost effective for SIAs than LIAs while costs are allocated in a different way among home and host office for the two types of assignments. Performance management for SIAs is done the same as for any other employee, whereas for LIAs different format has to be created for each assignment. In terms of repatriation, short-term assignees do not seem to have problems; however they might lose contact with the home location regarding possible re-entry opportunities, especially if they have professionally outgrown their position at the home location.

From these findings, to take a full advantage of SIAs, MNCs need to be aware of the several factors. First of all, selection of candidates for SIAs is very frequently informal which means that selectors identify possible candidates via 'coffee machine' system (e.g. Harris and Brewster, 1999). This can be an effective solution on the short run, but in the future it can neglect the wider availability of talented staff that can possibly be more suitable for a specific assignment. Also case-by-case negotiations with the potential candidates have been described by Minbaeva and Michailova (2004) as one of the major causes of assignment failure. Thus, in this aspect a more formal approach to staff selection for SIAs would be more appropriate. Moreover, candidates for SIAs should already be familiar with the culture and market where the assignment will be utilized, or should already have some cross-cultural experience if cross-cultural training is not provided for SIAs. It can be more suitable for companies to employ assignees who are working in markets close to the assignment destination. In addition, candidates for SIAs seem to experience significant issues with work-life balance as they are not accompanied by family or partners. Consequently, it would be more convenient to allow family relocation for assignees on SIAs if the absence of family can influence their commitment and focus at work. As to performance management, HR managers should frequently audit it to ensure that it is done properly among line managers and that the achievements are in line with objectives of the assignment. In terms of repatriation, if the assignee is sent on more consecutive SIAs, frequent communication with the home office would be appropriate in order to ensure that re-entry plan is satisfactory for both sides.

The main limitation of the research was the inability to reach a larger number of MNCs. Also, HR managers were responsible for sending out the surveys, and there was lack of information on where assignees are employed so in-depth analysis per case study was not possible. Further research on SIA implications on IHRM of MNCs from other industries and countries of origin would be beneficial in order to gain wider understanding and greater credibility of findings. The difference in roles of long-term and short-term international assignees also needs to be additionally examined as to conclude when it is most suitable to use SIAs, and to outline the circumstances in which SIAs can fully replace IAs to enable MNC's most efficient employment of resources. Also, further research on accepting SIAs rather than IAs could be useful as to respond to the issue in global staffing of fall in supply of international talent. Moreover the impact of SIAs on assignees' careers should be looked at closer in order to test the efficiency of SIAs as development assignments. This study has extended the single empirical study on SIAs conducted by Tahvanainen *et al.* (2005) and added perspective of four MNCs from three different industries. It has made new inputs on differences of SIAs from traditional LIAs, especially on the compensation scheme and advantages, motivations for their use and effectiveness in achieving MNC's strategic objectives. The paper supported and made further detailed explanation on previous findings on performance management, repatriation, cultural training and family issues, as well as that SIAs minimise the issues of planning and turbulence associated with long-term IAs. Thus, this study made a contribution to this research area.

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