

The Potential of Virtual Global Mobility (VGM): Implications for practice and future research

Abstract

Purpose – In recent years global organizations have been forced to adopt technology-driven virtual solutions involving faster, less costly and more effective ways to work worldwide. One potential outcome may be through Virtual Global Mobility (VGM), defined as the replacement of personal physical international interactions for work purposes with electronic personal online interactions. The purpose of this article is to discuss the potential of VGM and explore to what extent it can replace or complement physical global work assignments.

Design/methodology/approach – We aim to raise a discussion about the concept of VGM and elaborate on its potential to replace physical mobility.

Findings – Representing a change of trend, we argue that long-term corporate expatriates could become necessary core players in VGM activities while the increase of the number of global travellers may be halted or reversed.

Originality/value – Even though we have witnessed a massive trend of increasing physical global mobility there is also a counter-trend: instead of moving people to their work we see organizations moving work to people. Given this development, as one of the first articles to do so, we chart the suitability of VGM to fulfil organizational objectives.

Keywords: Virtual Global Mobility (VGM); Global virtual work; Expatriates; Global travellers; Global work assignment purposes

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented global crisis and has resulted in an unexpected, and sudden disruption to billions of employees around the world (Kniffin *et al.*, 2021). Global organizations were forced to change their operations basically overnight and many employees were required to work from home. Pressed to resolve communication challenges, organizations adopted technology-driven virtual solutions (Nell *et al.*, 2020) and have increasingly transitioned traditional jobs into more fluid work (Boudreau, 2020). While this was first perceived as a substantial burden there could also be advantages connected to adopting a virtual style of working. In particular, faster, less costly and more effective ways to work worldwide can create competitive strategic advantages that will enable global organizations to emerge from the pandemic even stronger. One potential outcome of the recent pandemic may be what we refer to as Virtual Global Mobility (VGM), which is defined as the replacement of personal physical international interactions for work purposes with electronic personal online international interactions (Selmer, 2021).

The purpose of this article is to discuss the potential of VGM and assess to what extent it can replace or complement physical global work assignments. We first elaborate on the nature of international online work and how this can establish certain preconditions for VGM. We then discuss the implementation of VGM and analyse to what extent and how VGM can substitute physical relocation for different types of expatriates. Following this, we outline managerial implications and directions for future research.

Virtual work and its consequences for VGM

In this article, we have described VGM as moving work to people across national borders instead of moving people to their work. Here the focus is specifically on the technology mediated work of white collar workers that has traditionally been performed by expatriates. In that regard, three classical, yet still relevant, purposes for global work assignments are to fill positions, to develop organizations and to develop managers (Caligiuri and Bonache, 2016; Edström and Galbraith, 1977). Other scholars have further developed these three purposes into 1) teaching business applications (global employees as knowledge senders), 2) developing organizational applications (global employees as contributing to organizational maintenance and growth), and 3) learning by doing (global employees as knowledge recipients) (Hocking *et al.*, 2004). To the extent that VGM work refers to work traditionally done by expatriates, it can be conceived as ‘teaching business applications’, ‘developing organization applications’ and ‘learning by doing’ – all of which are undertaken across physical distance by the use of technology mediated communication.

In comparison to face-to-face work carried out by expatriates, the use of virtual interactions will have both advantages and disadvantages for the individual and for the organization. The main advantages are related to cost savings and flexibility for the organization as well as the possibility for the individual to stay in one’s home community (Jimenez *et al.*, 2017). Disadvantages, include weaker interpersonal relationships that could, for example, result in lower levels of trust between the virtual expatriate and the local staff (Breuer *et al.*, 2020) as well as the need to overcome time zone gaps that could lead to extended working days and the consequent impairment to work life balance (Nurmi, 2011). Some of the disadvantages can be alleviated by managerial and organizational initiatives. For example, researchers have argued that organizations can use a ‘follow the sun’ principle to deal with time zone issues (Colazo and Fang 2009), and social disengagement can be somewhat improved by organizing physical meetings at strategically important points in

time (Richter *et al.*, 2021). Hence, it can generally be argued that individuals and organizations can learn to deal with most issues connected to virtual work so that they do not come to represent serious problems to productivity and wellbeing (Lauring *et al.* forthcoming; Maznevski and Chudoba, 2000).

Some challenges that are connected to the context of virtual work are particularly relevant to VGM. For example, the role of adjustment to working across cultural boundaries could be affected by working at a distance. Here, research has shown both advantages and disadvantages connected to virtual work. For example, on the one hand, intercultural integration can be challenged by online collaboration due to a general withdrawal from social involvement (cf. Konradt *et al.*, 2003; Mortensen and Hinds, 2001). On the other hand, however, social categorization may not play the same negative role in virtual interpersonal interactions as compared to collocated interpersonal settings (Han and Beyerlein, 2016). This can be related to the findings by Kirkman *et al.* (2002) who demonstrate that remote work can actually reduce process losses associated with stereotyping, politics, and power struggles compared to the physical workplace. Similarly, Stahl *et al.* (2010) found that cultural diversity was, to a lesser extent, the cause for conflict in dispersed work groups. Hence, there are both positive and negative consequences of VGM in relation to intercultural activities that include expatriates' teaching of business applications, development of organizational applications and learning by doing.

Implementation of VGM

So far we have argued that virtual global work is complex and multifaceted. In this section, we consider two aspects of global work that have implications for the role of VGM. First, we propose that VGM will influence various types of global work assignments differently. Second, we

contend that the purpose of a global work assignment will determine whether VGM can be a suitable replacement for actual, physical global mobility.

Implications of VGM for the evolution of global work assignments

Employees occupying global work assignments can be categorized in various ways (e.g., Jooss *et al.*, 2021; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012; McNulty & Brewster, 2017a). We build on the classification by Shaffer *et al.* (2012) who distinguish between expatriates and global travellers. The first category comprises Corporate Expatriates and Self-Initiated Expatriates while the second group includes Short-Term Assignees, Flexpatriates and International Business Travelers. Because international commuters have generally been subsumed within the flexpatriate category (e.g., Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004b), Shaffer and colleagues did not view it as a separate type of global work assignment. However, with increased remote work, international commuters may be an important phenomenon. Therefore, we follow Jooss *et al.* (2021) to include this as a separate category.

Expatriates:

Corporate expatriates can be defined as employees who are assigned by their business organization to another country, usually for several years, to undertake a specific task or achieve an organizational goal (Harrison *et al.*, 2004). Applying VGM, parent country national corporate expatriates in the host country location could serve a crucial bridging role between headquarters staff and host country national employees. However, it is possible that this bridging role is limited when it comes to the transfer of tacit knowledge, which likely requires face-to-face interaction (e.g., Reiche, 2011).

Self-initiated expatriates are individuals who initiate and usually pay for their own expatriation. Not being transferred by organizations, they move to a country of their choice for

work purposes, often with no definite time frame in mind (Cerdin and Selmer, 2014; Doherty *et al.*, 2011; Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010). The use of foreign self-initiated expatriates as leaders and important decision makers in host locations may, however, diminish with VGM. They may also be less familiar with corporate policy and therefore be less versatile than parent country national corporate expatriates in charge of foreign subsidiaries.

Global travellers:

The trend of using global travellers may also change as a result of VGM, but there may be differentiations between the types of global traveller. *Short-term assignees* are employees on international assignments longer than a business trip but shorter than a typical corporate expatriate assignment, usually 3–12 months, to one or a few countries, typically without family (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004a). Short-term assignees, who typically undertake longer assignments than the other types of global travellers, may be most in need of a physical presence at the foreign host location and, consequently, may be less likely to be replaced by VGM. Flexpatriates and international business travellers differ from short-term assignees in that they generally undertake consecutive multiple country assignments. *Flexpatriates* are employees who undertake brief international assignments, typically of 1–2 months, to multiple foreign locations, usually without accompanying family (Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004a) and *international business travellers* are employees who make frequent international business visits to foreign markets, units, projects, etc., generally for periods of 1–3 weeks to multiple countries without accompanying family (Welch *et al.*, 2007). International business travellers, who usually just need to stay for very short periods of time at the foreign location, may be more easily replaced by VGM. However, the replacement of flexpatriates by VGM may be somewhere in-between short-term assignees and international business travellers. *International commuters*, who reside in one country and work in another country, generally

commute to just one foreign location on a daily, weekly, or another time interval basis (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2017). With their mobility generally restricted to one country and the burden of their commuting times and costs, commuters may see VGM as a viable alternative to physical mobility. Given the rise of hybrid working patterns (Shankar, 2020) this points to a replacement of some but not necessarily all travel activity.

Drawing on the collective expertise and experience of the entire organization of a multinational corporation (MNC), in the parent country as well as worldwide, the individuals involved in VGM activities may not be identical to the group of staff who would have worked abroad before the pandemic. The VGM implications for global work assignments are summarized in Table 1.

*** Insert Table 1 about here ***

Although the discussion so far has implied that global workers' physical global mobility in contemporary MNCs takes place only unidirectionally, from the parent country to the host country location(s), this is seldom the case in practice. Mobility may occur in all directions. For example, expatriates embark on lateral, consecutive moves as global careerists (Dickmann and Andresen, 2018; Näsholm, 2014), many MNCs apply reverse transfers of foreign subsidiary employees as inpatriates (Froese *et al.*, 2016; Moeller and Reiche, 2017; Reiche, 2011) and third country nationals from one foreign subsidiary may transfer to another subsidiary (Harzing *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, global travellers may also originate from foreign regional headquarters or even single subsidiaries abroad (e.g. Welch *et al.*, 2007). While VGM is also amenable to the multi-dimensional movement of global work, it may not always be a suitable replacement for physical mobility. In the next

section, we consider how the purpose of the global work assignment may influence the applicability of VGM.

Global work assignment purposes and VGM

As mentioned, deciding to replace personal physical international interactions with VGM could depend on the purpose of the global work assignment in the forms of teaching business applications (global employees as knowledge senders), organization applications (global employees as contributing to organizational maintenance and growth), and learning by doing (global employees as knowledge recipients) (Hocking *et al.*, 2004).

Teaching business applications:

This first category, teaching business applications, is generally suitable for VGM. Many universities have, in some form or another, converted to on-line teaching and found that although virtual teaching may be less effective than face-to-face interactions, it can still produce acceptable results (Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn, 2020; George, 2020; Klein *et al.*, 2021).

However, the adoption of VGM may depend on the type of business application involved.

Managerial know-how applications involve a transfer of managerial expertise, which is often a temporary need when managing the start-up phase of an international business (Gong, 2003; McNulty and Brewster, 2017b). Hence, VGM seems suitable as an alternative to international business travellers and other short-term assignments. *Professional know-how applications* concern the transfer of specialized technical know-how that represents a distinctive competency of firms; specialist global employees typically make up for a shortage or absence of such know-how at the host location (e.g., Chang *et al.*, 2012). VGM seems to be a suitable replacement for assigning these specialist employees. *Professional know-how training* is applied through the transfer of global

employees' experience-based knowledge and skills to others at the host location. This can be accomplished through formal instruction but also by teaching strategically valuable tacit knowledge to either fellow expatriates or local nationals (Selmer, 2004; Collings and Isichei, 2017). In this case, VGM may be suitable for formal instruction but less useful for the transfer of tacit knowledge, which may be better achieved by assigned corporate expatriates. *Technology innovation transfer* is associated with the relocation of newly developed technology incorporating both product and process-related knowledge; it is based on a process of replication throughout a firm, often by staff transfers (e.g., Kim *et al.*, forthcoming). VGM may again be suitable in such situations but should, most likely, be complemented with transfers of specialist global employees. *Corporate image promotions and external relations* are usually pursued through external business relations and marketing activities, which may take place during the initial internationalization period or else on an ongoing basis (e.g., Harzing *et al.*, 2016). Although VGM seems a suitable tool for promoting the corporate image, it may be less useful in establishing business relationships with external parties. In this latter case, a physical presence at the foreign location **may** be more appropriate.

Organization applications:

For the second purpose, organization applications, VGM may only be partly suitable. As with business applications, there are various organization applications that may differ in terms of the extent to which VGM is a viable alternative. The first type of organization application is *co-ordination* and *networking*, which can be achieved through personal inter-unit networks, mainly through long-term corporate or self-initiated expatriates (Stoermer *et al.*, 2021). In particular, parent-country national expatriates can be crucial bridges between headquarters staff and host country nationals (Reiche *et al.*, 2009). Hence, to achieve this objective, VGM may be less suitable. Other organization applications are *culture transfer* and *socialization*, which are important tasks,

especially for parent country national expatriates and the socialization of subsidiary staff that is achieved over time (Lee *et al.*, 2021). Although expatriates *in situ* may most efficiently attain this objective, virtual interactions may also be effective, making VGM partly suitable in this case.

Policy transfer and *control* involve bureaucratic control in MNCs, either by centralization through a more direct headquarters control over subsidiaries or more indirectly through introducing policies and procedures (Lee *et al.*, 2021). While VGM may have a role to play by transferring information about the details of bureaucratic control, the effective application may be best ensured through physical presence of an expatriate at the host location or through frequent visits by international business travellers. Finally, *best practice systems transfer* is a strategic practice for the firm to apply its own specific ways of information processing and other functions, enabling it to efficiently and consistently achieve global economies-of-scale (Belderbos and Heijltjes, 2005). This often occurs through the assignment of experts who facilitate organizational learning (Renshaw *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, while VGM may be used to transfer information about such strategic practices, their application may require the attendance of a corporate expatriate at the foreign subsidiary.

Learning by doing applications:

For this third category of global assignment purposes, learning by doing, VGM may be less suitable since the intention is to give global employees international experience. In particular, this objective may require the physical presence of expatriates as well as global travellers in the host environment. After visits to other countries or after repatriation, global employees with experience in a certain host country could apply suitable teaching objectives through VGM more effectively than other methods (Froese, Stoermer, Reiche and Klar, 2021). The two objectives in this category, *international business* and *professional experience* as well as *global company perspective* reflect the two previous categories about business and organization applications. Although global

employees may learn some aspects through virtual interactions with local representatives, it will not be equivalent to a physical presence at the foreign host location. Considering the local non-work context in which business operations are embedded, it may be especially important to have global workers on the ground. In the following section, we will discuss the potential consequences of VGM in terms of implications for practice and future research.

Discussion: Implications for practice and research

Our analysis has so far revealed great promise for VGM. Although considerable research has been devoted to VGM in the context of global virtual teams (e.g., Jimenez, et al., 2017), it has received scant attention relative to alternative global work roles. In relation to managerial practices, implementing VGM may involve direct and more distal replacement effects as well as shorter- and longer-term effects. For instance, reducing assignments for teaching business applications or organizational maintenance might trigger more local talent investment and a higher willingness to ‘trust’ locals to undertake certain activities and to fill certain control functions. So, while this might trigger more VGM work initially, it might mean a shift towards fewer global workers (i.e. more locals filling these roles).

Our discussion above has shown that the organizational effects of VGM may be far-reaching. VGM is likely to substantially affect international HR configurations (Dickmann and Müller-Camen, 2006; Farndale *et al.*, 2015) in that the very structures and global strategies might need to be adjusted to account for the new ways of doing international work. For instance, more VGM may affect the power that the head office wields – local operating units may enjoy more devolved autonomy and task authority – the culture and control mechanisms in organisations and with it the degree of trust and cohesion (cf. Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1998; Lee et al., 2021). In terms of human resource policies and practices, talent sourcing, local and global talent development

approaches and global career patterns are likely to be modified to take account of the new ways of global competition.

Individuals working on global challenges will also be substantially affected. Not only will the physical mobility patterns have been modified in their organizations, the required knowledge, skills and abilities to conduct VGM successfully are substantially different as explored above. Given that some of the success factors of global virtual work include early face-to-face meetings to foster trust, shared group norms and respect (Jimenez et al., 2017; Maznevski and Chudoba, 2000) and that not all business travel or short-term assignments will cease, hybrid forms of global work will continue to exist. Thus, individuals will continue to physically cross national borders for work and will continue to have to acquire 'global business acumen' – only now it may consist of a broader set of global capabilities. Pre-COVID-19, the negative effects of global mobility received wide attention, including working in hostile environments (Bader *et al.*, 2021), or discussing issues such as willingness and capability for global mobility (Froese *et al.*, 2013). A world of work with a large share of VGM still needs to explore issues of individual willingness, capability, VGM effects and how to cope with these.

Future research directions

Accordingly, to implement, support and maintain VGM in global organizations, exploiting the competitive strategic advantages of global virtual work, training and mentoring, staffing and recruitment and organizational control are all important interventions and support functions. A future research stream examining such interventions to assist VGM would be essential for the future. Another issue involves the health, wellbeing and work-life balance of the individuals involved (e.g., Anderson and Kelliher, 2020; Escudero-Castillo *et al.*, 2021; Raj and Bajaj, 2021). These concerns may also have relevance for VGM and constitute another stream of worthwhile

future research. Finally, although MNCs have been the main focus of this paper, other types of organizations may also implement VGM. Academic institutions, international sports organizations, performing arts institutions, organizations within international health and aid work as well as religious institutions, etc. are examples of global organizations that, during the current pandemic situation, have applied some form of virtual work and may continue to do so in the future. Hence, another stream of future research may include how such organizations can make use of VGM.

The first stream of proposed future research concerns organizational measures to implement, support and maintain VGM. It would be essential to investigate different methods for training, mentoring and coaching individuals involved in and otherwise affected by VGM. Associated with that is the need to explore the nature and type of role transitions that individuals engaging in VGM experience and to find out if and how VGM role transitions differ from other forms of global work. Related to that would be the mapping and in-depth analysis of the temporal and dynamic interface between VGM and physical global mobility. In terms of staffing and recruitment, it would be important to know more about (potential) employees. Therefore, studying cultural, generational, and functional differences in employee preferences and capacities for VGM would be crucial. Regarding organizational control, it would be essential to examine the creation and character of possible organizational risks by applying VGM. For example, such risks could include less cultural cohesion within an MNC and loss of control and coordination in host-country locations.

The second suggested stream of valuable future research includes health, wellbeing and work-life balance and VGM. While the wellbeing impact of travelling less might see some positive development (cf. Mäkelä and Kinnunen 2018) it is clear that working from home may trigger many work-life balance and boundary conflicts (Putri and Amran, 2021; Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2021). It would be important to explore short-term effects, such as outcomes of the 'always-at-work syndrome' since they may cover a whole spectrum of detrimental effects of VGM. Likewise, it

would also be vital to investigate such effects in the long term. Employee health concerns of being involved in VGM activities, whether real or imagined, would be a prime option to uncover.

The third proposed stream of future research about VGM concerns global organizations other than MNCs. The list of such organizations is long and the specific topics for suitable investigation may overlap with what has been mentioned regarding the above proposed two research streams. Here, a few distinct global organizations such as academic, performing arts and religious institutions can be mentioned. For universities, forced to suddenly embark on online teaching (e.g., Peimani and Kamalipour, 2021; Skulmowski and Rey, 2020), knowledge exchange (teaching and research) is typically not limited to any organizational context or circumstances. For example science and humanities concern knowledge of a more general character. Hence, it would be important to investigate if and how universities can make use of the best and most prominent academic teachers in the world and the resultant consequences for their current academic staff. Needless to say, research is already disseminated through a globalized electronic product, very much consistent with the concept of VGM. In addition, institutions of the performing arts have long tried various ways to share their performances electronically (e.g., Reichl *et al.*, 2016). For example, opera houses have resorted to disseminating their performances electronically through video streaming, through their own or other (international) platforms. It would be fascinating to explore the wider and long-term consequences of such video opera versions to performers as well as to opera houses featuring them. In a similar way, many religious institutions have turned to electronic output (e.g., Golan and Martini, 2019). For example, Catholic Mass is now transmitted from the most renowned locations throughout the world, and most likely also from the parish church (e.g., Parish, 2020; Przywara *et al.*, 2021). Hence, it would also be of interest to examine the general outcomes of such a development for believers, clergy and the church alike.

Conclusions

Since World War II, we have witnessed a massive trend of increasing physical global mobility where individuals – be they expatriates or global travellers – have crossed international borders to conduct work. We are now observing the emergence of a counter-trend: instead of moving people to their work we often see work moving to people. Our article has explored some of the advantages and disadvantages of such global virtual work. Given the various purposes of global work we charted the suitability of VGM to fulfil these organizational objectives. But, as often in life, there are a range of intended and unintended consequences of change. On a broad organizational level, changes in global human resource configurations, power, communication and cultural effects are highly likely and will have to be assessed and carefully managed by global organizations (cf. Lee et al., 2021). In addition, reshaping the world of global work has many other effects and opportunities. Moving work to people through VGM may allow individuals to choose how much travel they want to undertake and where they want to live and work.

This raises the question: is the persistent change to more virtual work just a temporary phenomenon induced by the COVID-19 pandemic or is VGM here to stay? Based on the analysis above, we contend that VGM-related developments represent a change of trend. That means that long-term corporate expatriates could become necessary core players in VGM activities. In turn, the increase of the number of global travellers may be halted or reversed since their teaching objectives will be partly attained by VGM activities. It is also noteworthy that moving work to people instead of people to work through VGM does not necessarily change any business goals. However, it changes the way that global organizations pursue these goals and it may have profound changes in working patterns, talent development investment and recipients, as well as possible changes in organizational power structures over time. We are also convinced that VGM activities will grow and further develop due to a continued rapid development of communication and coordination

technologies. VGM will likely also become increasingly attractive to more industries and larger international business segments because it may become increasingly cost-efficient and could even generate revenues by creating new business opportunities.

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Table 1: Global Work Assignments and VGM Implications (adapted from Shaffer et al., 2012).

Assignment Types	Categories	VGM Implications
Expatriates	-Corporate Expatriates Employees working for business organizations, who are sent overseas on a temporary basis to complete a time-based task or accomplish an organizational goal	<i>Possibly more (long-term) Corporate Expatriates to</i> -Avoid or lessen the damaging influence of cultural diversity in virtual work. -Act in a bridging role between headquarters and host country national employees, although with some limitations to their bridging role
	-Self-Initiated Expatriates Individuals who initiate and usually finance their own expatriation and are not transferred by organizations. They relocate to a country of their choice to pursue cultural, personal, and career development experiences, often with no definite time frame in mind	<i>Fewer foreign Self-Initiated Expatriates in top positions abroad</i> -As leaders and decision makers, Self-Initiated Expatriates may worsen the damaging influences of cultural diversity in virtual work. -Less familiarity with corporate policy and therefore less versatility than Corporate Expatriates
Global Travellers	-Short-Term Assignees Employees on international assignments that are longer than business trips yet shorter than typical corporate expatriate assignments; usually less than one year	<i>Somewhat fewer Short-Term Assignees</i> -Some of their assignments will be replaced by VGM via experts/specialists
	-Flexpatriates Employees who travel for brief assignments, away from their home base and across cultural or national borders, leaving their family and personal life behind	<i>Fewer Flexpatriates</i> -Some of their travels will be replaced by VGM via experts and specialists
	-International Business Travellers Employees who take multiple short international business trips to various locations without accompanying family members	<i>Much fewer International Business Travellers</i> -Most of their travels will be replaced by VGM via experts and specialists
	-International Commuters Employees who reside (with their families) in one country and travel to another country to work, with commutes occurring on a daily, weekly, or another time interval basis.	<i>Much fewer International Commuters</i> -at least in terms of physical mobility -VGM may increase the number of employees who commute virtually