



## **9 Understanding work well-being during COVID-19 pandemic: A study in expatriates and non-expatriates**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study aims at analyzing the relationship between perceived contextual demands, workplace support and work well-being (job exhaustion and work engagement) during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study draws on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model to examine the role of perceived contextual demands and workplace support in explaining degree of job exhaustion and work engagement that employees experience due to the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, this research examines whether the effect of perceived contextual demands and workplace support in explaining degree of job exhaustion and work engagement can be moderated by expatriate status, that is if the employees are living in their home country or abroad on an assignment. Data have been obtained from sample of 219 members of Finnish trade unions, living in Finland and abroad at the time of answering the questionnaire (June–October, 2020). Our model is investigated using multiple linear regression analysis and the results provided support for the association between perceived contextual demands and job exhaustion. While organizational support is related to increased work engagement, supervisor support is linked with reduction of job exhaustion. Expatriate status (expat/non-expatriates) moderates the positive relationship between organizational support and work engagement, indicating that expatriates receiving more organizational support tend to show better work engagement. The study widens the scope and relevance of global mobility studies during pandemic conditions, providing an overview of employee behaviour under crises and gives organizations an opportunity to be prepared for risky scenarios.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a global crisis affecting lives in unprecedented ways. The crisis has brought upon severe consequences on world economy and have produced unique challenges for employees around the world (Kniffin et al., 2021). To maintain business as usual, global organizations had to change their operation strategies by introducing remote work possibilities through teleworking (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). According to a statistic by International Monetary Fund (2020), the global labour market growth has been contracted by more than 4 percent in 2020, indicating millions of layoffs. This shock has exposed employees towards the risk of developing high stress and anxiety.

While the pandemic has affected both domestic and international employees alike, expatriates are arguably more vulnerable to crises being located far away from the comforts and familiarities of their home country (McNulty et al., 2019). Crises can be defined as an unexpected, unpredictable, and undesirable event caused due to an uncertain reason (Lerbinger, 2012). Crises may lead an organization into “disrepute and imperils its future” (Parry-Jones et al., 2017). Such events tend to cause stress, anxiety and reduced well-being among employees (Fee et al., 2013; Lerbinger, 2012). Even though international assignments are perceived as glamorous and attractive, several aspects of the job are associated with extremely high professional and personal challenges affecting expatriates’ health conditions significantly. Apart from health-related impacts of the pandemic, employees’ perceptions about living in a foreign country for work in the time of crisis is a thing for concern. Their perception of the living conditions and the resources available can have poorer consequences for different aspects of subjective well-being. The primary objective of this chapter is to analyse the effect of stressful conditions posed by the pandemic in global work context, especially impact on well-being measures (in terms of job exhaustion and work engagement) using the job demands-resources (JD-R) framework. Another objective of the study is to compare the perceptions of expatriates and non-expatriates on job exhaustion and work engagement.

## **GLOBAL WORK IN TIMES OF CRISES**

The uncertain situations arising from the crisis has affected psychological well-being (Garfin et al., 2020; Satici et al., 2020) and psychological stress and depression among the population (Atalan, 2020). With the increased regulations for limited mobility through travel bans and closed international borders, it can be assumed that expatriates are greatly affected by the pandemic (Caligiuri et al., 2020). This research studies “expatriates” in a broader sense that includes employees assigned by parent organizations (assigned expatriates) and people who have moved to a foreign country for work on their own accord (self-initiated expatriates).

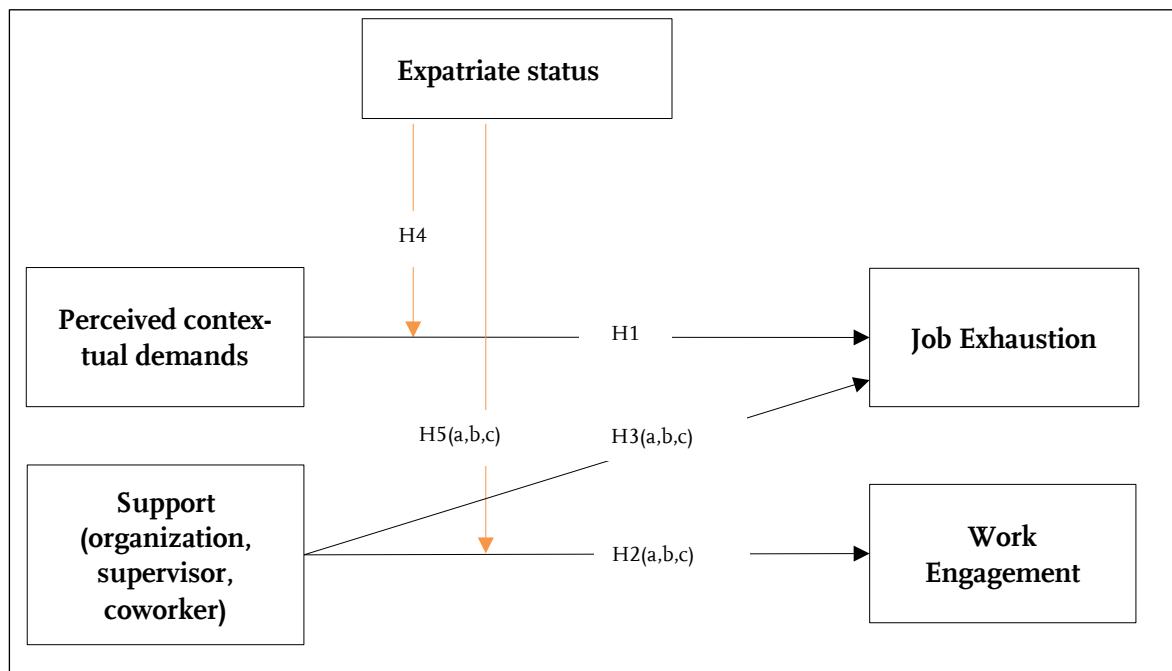
Earlier studies have highlighted that expatriates face a “high-pressure situation” at work (Haslberger et al., 2013, p. 333): learning a new language, familiarizing with the new work regulations, adjusting to the nuances of work culture, adapting to cultural differences, maintaining job performance as well as personal/family integration issues (Shaffer & Harrison, 1998; Stoermer et al., 2020). Additional stress arising from external risky situations such as the pandemic can often lead to reduced well-being for instance, reflecting into their engagement at work (see Walter et al., 2011) and burnout.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### The job demands-resources model

The JD-R model describes every job has its own characteristics, job demands and resources. *Job demands* (e.g., time pressure, emotional workload, problems in physical work environment) may lead to resource loss, such as health problems and burnout, whereas *job resources* (e.g., work autonomy, support from organization etc.) are associated with resource gain leading to well-being and work motivation.

Job demands are aspects of the job that are negatively valued and requires physical and/or psychological effort from employees, leading to ill-health process (Kinnunen et al., 2011). One of the underlying effects of the theory assumes that high job demands can initiate ill-health or health-impairment pathways by depleting crucial energy and lead to negative work outcomes like burnout and poorer health (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Job resources, on the other hand, refers to the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that are of positive effect and is functional to achieve work goals and deal with job demands, (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Having sufficient job resources leads via the motivational process to well-being and positive organizational outcomes like improved work engagement (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). *Figure 3* presents our full model:



*Figure 3: Theoretical model.*

In this study, researchers identify stressful living condition as contextualized demands from living environment and workplace support as job resource for employees. Perceived contextual demands are referred to as the challenging and emotionally demanding situations that expatriates face while living in the foreign locations (see Caligiuri, 2000; Haslberger et al., 2013). These demands include concerns about health and safety infrastructures in the host location where the expatriates experience adverse living environment. Support from work domain or workplace support includes support provided from the host organization, from the supervisor, and from co-workers. The study draws on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) model to understand the influence of perceived contextual demands and workplace support on job exhaustion and work engagement.

Job exhaustion can be defined as the felling of strain and chronic fatigue resulting from arduous and taxing work and is usually conceptualized as a key element of burnout (Maslach et al., 1996). Work engagement is a positive state of mind associated with work related well-being, characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption in work (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Work-related vigour is a key dimension of work engagement (see Maslach et al., 1996; Shirom, 2010) and is studied with special interest in this research. Work engagement act as important resource that individuals working in a challenging environment can apply in adjusting to a new role or maintaining a high-performance level (Hemmasi & Downes, 2013; Vromans & van Engen, 2013).

Employees working in demanding high-risk work environments tend to experience psychological and mental concerns evoking health impairment process in them (Nahrgang et al., 2011). Job demands linked with perceived risks often lead to exhaustion (Leiter, 2005) and this is especially true for the concerns regarding the traumatic events related to COVID-19 pandemic (see Ekpanyaskul & Padungtod, 2021). The concerns of health and safety protocols associated with the high-risk pandemic environment should have a direct and positive correlation with job exhaustion.

*Hypothesis 1:* Perceived contextual demands is positively associated with job exhaustion.

Resources like supportive measures from employees' organizations, supervisors and work network would help maintaining their well-being amid distressing times. Empirical studies have found workplace support as antecedent for work engagement (Saks, 2006, 2019). Adequate levels of workplace support have positive effects on work engagement (see Isakovic & Whitman, 2019) and is an important resource for the employees reflecting their organizational commitment (Kim et al., 2016). Organizational support and supervisor support are found to

have positive association with work engagement in employees (Biggs et al., 2014; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Villotti et al., 2014). Recent empirical investigation has confirmed similar associations in expatriate employees (see Arokiasamy, 2021). Several studies have demonstrated the importance of co-worker support on employee work engagement (Ahmed et al., 2019; Halbesleben, 2010; Christian et al., 2011; Nasurdin et al., 2018).

*Hypothesis 2:* Workplace support – in terms of organizational support (H2a), supervisor support (H2b), co-worker support (H2c) – is positively related to work engagement.

Recent studies highlighted the importance of organizational support on dealing with novel demands at work produced by COVID-19 (Eisenberger et al., 2020). Job resources like workplace support should help in reducing the negative effects of job exhaustion (see Bakker et al., 2004; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). Empirical evidence suggest perceived organizational support helps employees to adjust to demanding situations (see Armstrong-Stassen, 2004; Baran et al., 2012) and is inversely associated with exhaustion (Armstrong-Stassen et al., 1998). Support from supervisor seems to reduce exhaustion by helping employees to cope with adverse conditions (see Charoensukmongkol & Phungsomonthorn, 2021; Tayfur & Arslan, 2013).

Studies have demonstrated the negative relationship between co-worker support and exhaustion such that greater co-worker support is linked with lower levels of exhaustion (Ducharme et al., 2007). We predict that workplace support will be negatively related to exhaustion.

*Hypothesis 3:* Workplace support – organizational support (H3a), supervisor support (H3b), co-worker support (H3c) – is negatively associated with job exhaustion such that in case of deprived workplace support (job resources) may have negative effects on employee well-being, that is, increase levels of burnout.

### **Expatriate status as moderator**

The study also aims to investigate if expatriates and non-expatriates perceive job exhaustion and work engagement differently while experiencing the threats of Covid-19 pandemic. We can draw insights from studies focusing on the impact of crises situations like working in hostile environments e.g., countries with serious concerns for terrorism-related threats or those with political/civil unrest, where regular expatriation-related challenges are multiplied by safety or health concerns (Bhanugopan & Fish, 2008; Wagner & Westaby, 2009). In such

cases expatriates at least have some awareness of the difficulties in the host country and has the opportunity to psychologically prepare themselves before the relocation (see Faeth & Kittler, 2017). However, in the natural crises like the ongoing pandemic, expatriates face extreme uncertainty regarding their work and must deal with the changing situation on their own since the primary focus for any governmental policies are on the general population of the country (see Courtney et al., 2020).

The expatriate status, precisely, if the employees are located in their home countries as compared to in host countries on job assignments can be an important moderator for the relationship predicting work wellbeing. Non-expatriates get the opportunity to work with “familiar resources as well as colleagues and external stakeholders and they live in a well-known social context” (Adams et al., 2013, p. 471) as compared to expatriates. The perceived difference in health and security risks between the home and host country can make significantly different impact on the perception of job exhaustion and work engagement among expatriates and non-expatriate employees.

*Hypothesis 4:* The employment type (expat/non-expatriates) will positively moderate the relationship between perceived contextual demands and job exhaustion such that the demands recognized by expatriates would be higher and moderate the association with exhaustion.

Employees feel motivated to perform at their best even under challenging circumstances when they feel the concern and support from their employing organization (Bakker et al., 2008). This is especially true for expatriates working in a host country, relying on resources from work spheres. During the pandemic restrictions, expatriates enjoying satisfying social relations with coworkers and supervisors can stay engaged with work as they can use the support as psychological resources (Chen, 2019) and increase their work engagement. Closer relationships with supervisors and work colleagues can potentially boost relevant work skills especially for expatriates as they need to ensure their own security and their families' wellbeing in the time of crisis. Guidance from organization in form of structural and informational support along with emotional support from expatriates' supervisors and coworkers can be crucial for expatriates (Kraimer & Wayne, 2004) and might help them stay engaged with their job.

The resources provided to the expatriates and non-expatriates employees can be valued differently while assessing work engagement such that expatriates value the support from their organization, supervisor and coworkers more than their counterparts. Given the need for workplace support for expatriates is higher in

order to stay motivated towards their work, compared to non-expatriates, we assume that expatriates with high workplace support are more likely to stay engaged at work.

*Hypothesis 5:* The employment type (expat/non-expatriates) will moderate the relationship between workplace support – organizational support (H5a), supervisor support (H5b) and coworker support (H5c) - and work engagement.

## METHODS

### Sample and data collection

The data for the study was collected from the members of the Finnish trade unions, Tekniikan Akateemiset (TEK), and EKONOMIT, which represents educated and highly skilled academic engineers, architects, and business school graduates in Finland. Data was obtained during June-December 2020 using a web-based survey questionnaire. Of the 219 participants, 70.3% were male. Respondents reported a mean age of 46.35 years ( $SD = 9.6$ ). About 63.9% of the respondents were expatriates living in their host country at the time of data collection and 36.1% were non-expatriates.

### Measures

*Perceived contextual demands* were measured with two items on a 5-point Likert scale anchored with strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5) using an international context-risk scale specific to international business travellers developed by Mäkelä, Kinnunen, and Suutari (2015). The items have been modified to suit the expatriation context. Sample items read “When working abroad, I face security risks” and “When working abroad, I am exposed to health risks.” The internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha,  $\alpha$ ) is .751.

*Work Engagement* was measured with three items (vigour dimension) of the UWES (UWES-9) scale (Schaufeli et al., 2006) with a 7-point Likert scale to assess the feeling of respondents. The items were rated between a range of (0-6) with “0” (zero) indication they never had this feeling and 6 being always/everyday feeling. The internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha,  $\alpha$ ) is .922. Sample item reads “At my work, I feel that I am bursting with energy”.

*Job Exhaustion* was measured with the five items from Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Scale (MBI-GS; Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996). The instrument has a 7-scale scoring system, ranging from 0 ('never') to 6 ('daily'). Sample item reads “I feel overwhelmed at work.” The internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ) of the scale is good: .85

*Organizational support* was measured with four items on a self-created 5-point Likert scale anchored with very rarely/never (1) and all the time/almost always (5) using a remote work context with the internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha,  $\alpha$ ) is .837. Sample item reads “My organization provides clear information about expectations and regulations”.

*Supervisor support* was measured using three items from General Nordic Questionnaire for Psychosocial and Social Factors at Work (QPSNordic) (Dallner et al., 2000); a General Questionnaire for Psychological and Social Factors at Work. The questionnaire is designed as a 5-point Likert scale anchored with very rarely/never = 1 and all the time/almost always = 5 using a remote work context with the internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha,  $\alpha$ ) is .826. Sample item reads “Do you receive support and help from your supervisor when you need it?”

*Co-worker support* was measured with three items from QPSNordic scale (Dallner et al., 2000). The questionnaire is designed as a 5-point Likert scale anchored with very rarely/never = 1 and all the time/almost always = 5 using a remote work context with the internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha,  $\alpha$ ) is .825. Sample item reads “Do you get support and help for your work from your colleagues when needed?”

Expatriate status have been used as moderator to see if the perception of work well-being and general well-being are different among them. One item in the questionnaire asked if they are on expatriate assignments abroad (i.e., expat =1, non-expat =0) Controls included the demographical variables, like gender (1=male, 0=female), age (years) as well as family situations, that is, having a partner (no/yes). The analysis also controlled for the change in workload during the pandemic period. One item was introduced in the questionnaire to inquire from the respondents if their quantitative workload has changed during the pandemic (“Compared to the time before the coronary crisis, have your quantitative load – increased/same/decreased?” These background variables were controlled for in the analysis to be consistent with evidence reported in several research articles (see Eby et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2009).

## DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

To examine the proposed hypotheses, we performed multiple regression analysis using SPSS. Bivariate correlations between the variables are shown in Table 13.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Age	1									
Family status	.079	1								
Expatriate status	.119	.008	1							

Workload	-.055	-.034	.042	1						
Work Engagement	-.012	-.034	-.096	.011	1					
Organizational Support	.057	.024	-.021	-.029	.399**	1				
Supervisor Support	.005	-.058	.056	-.003	.032	.015	1			
Co-worker Support	-.118	-.044	.012	.025	.004	.021	.129	1		
Exhaustion	-.170*	.175*	.006	.342**	-.059	.040	-.103	-.002	1	
Living Conditions	.035	-.222**	.234**	.116	-.067	-.016	-.180**	-.005	-.184**	1

**Table 13:** Correlation table for the variables included in the study

Hypothesis 1 predicted the relationship between perceived contextual demands and job exhaustion. Our data suggested a statistically significant positive relation ( $\beta = 0.201$ ,  $p = 0.043$ ), which supports our hypothesis H1. Among the three components of workplace support, organizational support is an effective predictor toward increasing work engagement (H2a:  $\beta = 0.343$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), however, supervisor support (H2b:  $\beta = 0.580$ ,  $p = 0.162$ ) and co-worker support (H3c:  $\beta = -0.044$ ,  $p = 0.642$ ) were not significant. Only supervisor support (H3b:  $\beta = -.274$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) was linked with reduction of job exhaustion; organization support (H3a:  $\beta = 0.012$ ,  $p = 0.278$ ) and co-worker support (H3c:  $\beta = 0.002$ ,  $p = 0.935$ ) did not have any significant relation it.

The expatriate status did not moderate the relationship between perceived contextual demands and job exhaustion, so H4 was not supported. Finally, we examined if expatriate status moderated the relationship between workplace support and work engagement, which was partially supported by our data. Interaction between expatriate status and organization support was significant (H5a:  $\beta = 12.897$ ,  $p = 0.046$ ), although expatriate status, did not have any moderation effect on the relationship between supervisor support and work engagement (H5b:  $\beta = -10.90$ ,  $p = 0.25$ ) and co-worker support and work engagement (H5c:  $\beta = -5.1$ ,  $p = 0.44$ ). Expatriates receiving more organizational support tend to be better committed and rooted at their work. The results are summarized in Table 14.

	Path coefficients	t-values	Decision
H1	PCD → JE	2.04*	Supported
H2a	OS → WE	6.223***	Supported
H2b	SS → WE	1.403	Not supported
H2c	CS → WE	-0.465	Not supported
H3a	OS → JE	1.087	Not supported
H3b	SS → JE	-3.225**	Supported
H3c	CS → JE	0.081	Not supported
H4	PCD *ES → JE	-0.733	Not supported
H5a	OS *ES → WE	2.01*	Supported

H5b	SS *ES → WE	-1.155	Not Supported
H5c	CW *ES → WE	-.783	Not supported

**Table 14:** *Hypotheses testing*

Note(s): (1) PCD-Perceived contextual demands, JE-Job exhaustion, WE-Work engagement, OS-Organizational support, SS-Supervisor support, CS-Co-worker support, ES-Expatriate Status

(2) \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

## DISCUSSION

The global outbreak of COVID-19 has affected work-life and have introduced adverse working conditions for many (including increased working hours, work intensification, job insecurity and stress. Living in stressful environmental with risks of being exposed to heightened security and health complexities does have a significant impact on expatriates' satisfaction with life in general. Drawing on the JD-R model and well-being literature, this study investigated the dynamics of contextual demands, resources, and well-being (job exhaustion and work engagement) of expatriate and non-expatriate employees following the outbreak of COVID-19. This study further aimed to compare the experiences between expatriates and non-expatriates` in terms of their well-being.

We find that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, perceived contextual demands, i.e., concerns regarding health and safety measures in the work environment emerges as powerful stressors for employee job exhaustion. Our prediction that organization support will be an antecedent for work engagement was also supported. In contrast to expectation, supervisor support and co-worker support did not predict work engagement. While a majority of studies have demonstrated all three facets of workplace support as antecedents of work engagement, some researchers have indeed reported similar insignificant relationship (see Choo, 2017). One viable explanation for employees not finding supervisor or co-worker support as significant precursor could be because of the unique work situation of the employees during the time of data collection. Majority of the respondents were working remotely from their personal workspaces with limited probably communication with their supervisor and co-workers. The primary communications regarding day-to-day changes in policies and work expectation were probably done at organizational level. Hence, organizational support must have played a crucial role for employees to stay motivated and engaged at work.

Only, supervisor support was found to be instrumental in reducing job exhaustion for employees while organizational support and co-worker support did not have any significant affect. Thus, support from supervisors is found to be most instrumental to cope with job exhaustion. A study by Phungsoonthorn and Charoensukmongkol (2019) identifies supervisors to be the main source of social

support for employees as they possess the authority to provide rewards, protection, encouragement, and motivation to employees when needed. Hence, during the threats posed by the pandemic crisis, it is possible that the support from the immediate supervisor is valued the most by the employees in order to contain their exhaustion.

We found no moderation effects of expatriate status in the relationship between perceived contextual demands and job exhaustion. The extent to which job exhaustion is influenced by perceived contextual demands was not different between expatriates and non-expatriates. The expatriate status affected the influence of organizational support on the level of work engagement but it doesn't have any effect on the influence of supervisor support or co-worker support. This suggests that expatriates primarily relied on organizational guidance to maintain their work engagement during the crisis. In most cases, expatriates have been working remotely in the host country locations, thus the connections with supervisor and co-workers might not be as efficient leaving the organizational support as the most crucial resource.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND MANAGERIAL RELEVANCE

An extension of knowledge in the research framework of perceived risk about living environment, support from organization, work engagement and satisfaction with life in general may provide significant contributions to the talent management responsible for managing international workforce. Based on the results of this study, it is assumed that organizational support plays critical role in enhancing work engagement, thus affecting the work well-being in expatriates.

The study provided an empirical basis for JD-R model to be applicable in examining the relationship between the job demands, resources and well-being in expatriates and non-expatriates during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the findings empirically illustrate that mass disasters and other natural crisis situations posing higher contextual demands requires special attention from employers in order to facilitate customized resources at the workplace, which can play a vital role in maintaining workers' well-being. Global mobility researchers should focus on developing conceptual underpinnings to understand JD-R framework leading the health impairment process specific for international context with crises management as a boundary condition.

## CONCLUSION

As suggested by JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014), the external job context has a profound impact on individual's overall experience especially in a crisis situation (Barello et al., 2021; Sokal et al., 2020). It

has been long known that employees' working on international jobs believe that organization values their contributions and are interested in preserving their general well-being (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Scholars have highlighted the importance of supportive organizational culture in improving work attitude and well-being among expatriates (Bader, 2015; De Paul & Bikos, 2015; Harrison et al., 2004). Organizations introducing supportive policies (like flexible workhours, support with new work environment etc.) targeted towards their expatriate workforce can motivate them to keep engaged at work. Expatriates receiving good organizational support are more likely to show commitments towards their work and stay highly motivated towards delivering their responsibilities even during trying times. In this regard, expatriates receiving positive mental reinforcements from supervisors might feel at ease while working in a positive environment. Supervisors can try to maintain strong communication channels with their subordinate expatriates and provide guidance during a time of need. This could be extremely beneficial for expatriate's satisfaction with life in general.

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