

Article

Navigating Disruptive Events to Strengthen Global Managerial Resilience

Miriam Moeller¹, Jane F. Maley², Heidi Wechtler³, Tao Bai¹, Linglin Zheng¹

¹ University of Queensland, Australia, ² Sabanci University, Turkey, ³ University of Newcastle, Australia

Keywords: global manager, expatriation, resilience, disruption, event

<https://doi.org/10.46697/001c.75449>

AIB Insights

Vol. 23, Issue 3, 2023

The proliferation of global crises has sparked MNCs' interest in developing global managerial resilience to withstand economic, health, and climate crises. While resilient employees are more adept at recovering from unexpected or disruptive events, guidelines on how to develop global managerial resilience remain obscure. Drawing from practitioner and academic sources, we speak to international human resource and mobility leaders in MNCs offering recommendations on how to anticipate and manage disruptive events across individual, family, organizational, and exogenous layers across the expatriation experience. Doing so nurtures a pipeline of globally mobile talent able to thrive in complex international work environments.

INTRODUCTION

Recent shifts in economic, environmental, health, and societal landscapes have introduced unprecedented levels of disruptions into global assignment experiences (Dau & Moore, 2020). This, in turn, has left global managers exposed to extreme levels of uncertainty, which requires immediate resolution; otherwise, it may trigger anxiety and burnout often leading to turnover. For this article, we define 'global managers' as international assignees who are physically relocated from one country to another and exposed to one or multiple disruptive events that are either perceived or experienced by them. Typically, multinational companies (MNCs) entice global managers to accept overseas assignments by leaning into their desire for elevated status, novelty, and autonomy by using generous financial packages, predeparture visits, training, and employee assistance programs as a lure. The connotation is that global personnel will be taken care of.

These ostensibly 'tokenistic' approaches to expatriation are not intended to support global managers in developing resilience vis-a-vis disruptive events. By managerial resilience, we are referring to a global manager's ability to thrive despite facing adversity while on assignment. As defined by Lengnick-Hall and colleagues (2011) resilience is the ability to develop situation-specific responses to exploit disruptive events and can be thought of as an ability to adapt to change, deal with whatever comes, not give up, or be able to focus and think clearly when under pressure.

In this article, we speak to MNCs and their international human resource and mobility leaders to offer actionable

advice on how to anticipate and manage disruptive events across individual, family, organizational, and exogenous layers during expatriation and how to facilitate the development of global managerial resilience such that it enables sustainable expatriation opportunities (Schmitz, Ommen, & Karlshaus, 2023).

We argue that events typically become salient to global managers when events are disruptive in the sense that they are unexpected, novel, and/or carry unprecedented complexity (Morgeson, Mitchell, & Liu, 2015). Regardless of the longevity and intensity, disruptive events always challenge global managers to process new information. As a result, global managers reflect on the disruptive events which evokes changes to existing behaviors as a coping mechanism to adapt to a changing work environment.

GLOBAL MANAGERS' MULTILEVEL MODEL OF DISRUPTIVE EVENTS

[Figure 1](#) presents a framework comprising a multilevel model of disruptions during expatriation. Inspired by Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, the idea is that to achieve the broadest meaning of global managerial resilience (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011), global managers ought to be aware of and demonstrate resilience across four layers wherein disruptive events may occur during expatriation. We preface that not all disruptive events will be perceived or experienced by all global managers. We describe a subset of these challenges next – across individual, family, organizational, and exogenous layers.

a Contact author: m.moeller@business.uq.edu.au

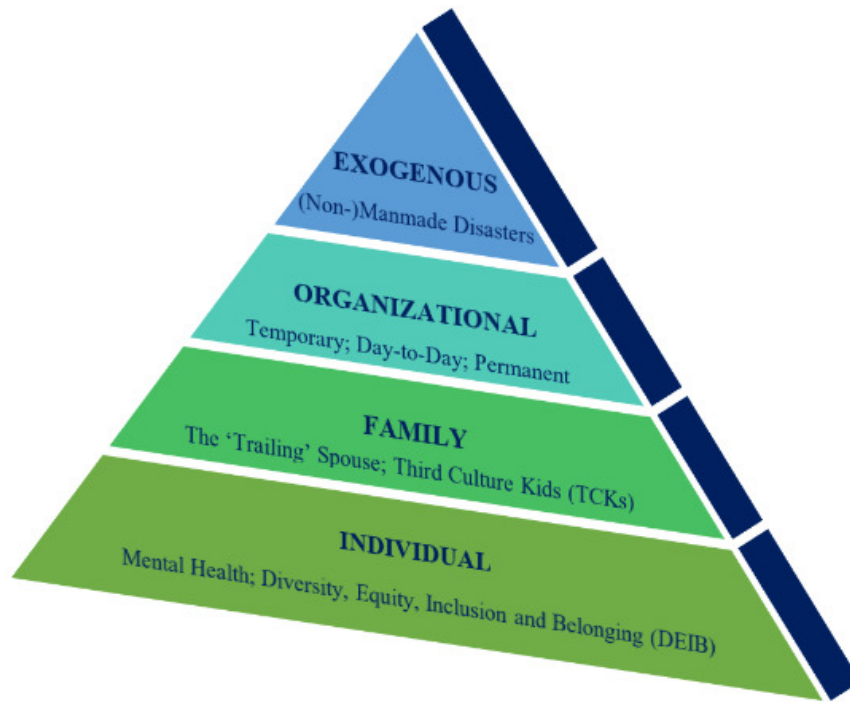


Figure 1. Examples of Global Managers' Multilevel Model of Disruptive Events, adapted from Maslow's Hierarchy

LAYER 1: INDIVIDUAL-LAYER DISRUPTIVE EVENTS

According to the 2022 State of Workforce Mental Health report, 85% of employees have had at least one mental health issue over the past year, and anxiety levels are up 14% since 2020. Provided that international relocations are known to be highly disruptive events (Branicki, Steyer, & Sullivan-Taylor, 2019), the probability of heightened stress and anxiety in global managers due to coping with novel relocation adversities – both for those whom they manage and themselves – is high. Notwithstanding the stigmatization that may come with seeking help in the first place, the 2017 World Health Organization reports 23,000 psychiatrists in China (1.7 per 100,000 people) compared to 12 per 100,000 people in the United States. This statistic suggests that not only may access to psychologist services while located overseas be severely limited (Clay, 2019), but an inability to access support at all, or in a timely manner, can leave global managers at greater risk and lead to ramifications such as depression.

A separate yet well-known challenge for MNCs concerns the broad spectrum of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) matters (Newbury, Rašković, Colakoglu, Gonzalez-Perez, & Minbaeva, 2022), including but not limited to gender, disability, and LGBTIQ+ disparities, each of which manifests differently across assignment locations. For instance, lesbian, gay, and bisexual expatriates may feel fearful, or at minimum sceptical, during international assignment relocations, due to the sometimes hostile stance taken by host countries in relation to their sexual orientation (Moeller & Maley, 2018). MNCs' lack of support in response to how LGB global managers make sense of their new environment will negatively impact their assignment

experience and discourage the wider LGB talent pool from undertaking international career opportunities.

LAYER 2: FAMILY-LAYER DISRUPTIVE EVENTS

Intra-family concerns are powerful stressors for global managers' psychological well-being, increasing the likelihood of host country withdrawal intentions, as was the case in a recent study in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Koveshnikov, Lehtonen, & Wechtler, 2022). Fact is that partners (also known as 'trailing' spouses) are invested in global managers' life. MNCs are expected to provide adequate support for a range of family unit contexts and minimize stress and withdrawal intentions. Support mechanisms that are conscious of the diversity and individuality of the partner's experiences would be considered valuable and meaningful. Likewise, children's education plays a significant role in developing family resilience. For instance, when local or international schools in host countries lag in standards on inclusive education practices (Min, 2021), it may generate physical, emotional, and cognitive strains on global expatriate families. A sudden and/or novel neurological diagnosis such as autism or ADHD, for example, pushes families into a space where they must first make sense of a new reality, with the added pressure of having to navigate this new reality in a host country context which can be vastly unfamiliar to them. Such revelations inevitably add stress to the family. Without going so far as saying that the global managers' attention may temporarily be diverted from the assignment, the longer-term effects in relation to satisfaction and intent to stay need to be considered.

LAYER 3: ORGANIZATIONAL-LAYER DISRUPTIVE EVENTS

The changing nature of work accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic dictates global managers to be receptive to changes in roles, tasks, and assignment durations. This is to say that disruptive events may stop or transform organizational routines and require global managers to adapt to the emergence of new work routines. For example, temporary disruptions, such as abrupt cessation of assignment due to changes in business priorities, could trigger a less than seamless repatriation phase. Day-to-day disruptions involved the managing of cordial relations with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds across remote, in-person, and hybrid collaborative working models. Comparatively minor changes such as a valuable global team member turnover may pose another day-to-day disruptive event, as it ceases global managers' ability to engage with a team member with a trustful and reliable working partnership established. Meanwhile, permanent disruptions involve changes to systems that cover more broadly policies, practices, and processes. During times of uncertainty, MNCs tend to radically restructure (Maley, Moeller, & Ting, 2020), which can affect remuneration packages and global managers' financial security. Often, changes require considerable time to become the new routine. When changes keep fluctuating, global managers would need to become more sensitive to adapting to these changes.

LAYER 4: EXOGENOUS-LAYER DISRUPTIVE EVENTS

We distinguish between manmade and non-manmade as two types of shock events or disasters that impact, directly or indirectly, the physical, emotional, and cognitive safety and well-being of expatriate communities. Manmade disasters markedly refer to acts of terrorism, kidnapping, and war, but also civil or military unrest, economic crises, and industrial disasters. During the Persian Gulf Crisis, expatriates in Saudi Arabia were enticed to relocate with large compensation packages later finding their daily life exceedingly restricted due to surrounding danger (Feldman & Thomas, 1991). The unpredictability of exogenous events often leads to sudden and unplanned actions, as is the case with the mass exodus of MNCs and thus expatriates from Russia (Woo & Grove, 2022).

Non-manmade disasters range across pandemics and natural disasters which are typically tied to climate-related extreme weather events. Border closures due to COVID-19 or suspension of air travel due to other climate events can cause temporary or longer-term separation of families. MNCs must be wary that exogenous events such as the Fukushima nuclear accident can also trigger unintended consequences such as the departure of human capital (i.e., global managerial talent elsewhere) from a firm located in another country. This is known as the "butterfly effect". Importantly, while events can originate at any layer of the multilevel model of disruptions framework, their effects can remain within that layer and transcend through the remaining layers (Morgeson et al., 2015). For instance, a terrorist attack (i.e., exogenous-layer disruptive event) may

impose modifications to a security system (at the organizational layer), which in turn may impose further verification steps for global managers accessing computer systems (at the individual layer).

DEVELOPING GLOBAL MANAGERIAL RESILIENCE IN RESPONSE TO DISRUPTIVE EVENTS

We discuss the individual workplace resilience (IWR) framework wherein resilience refers to a dynamic quality required to recover from a disruptive event and to develop such as to ensure preparedness for future disruptive events. Kuntz and colleagues' (2017) transformational approach views resilience as a person's capacity to seek out resources to successfully manage challenges. Capacity refers to the ability, not necessarily the confidence, resolve or motivation (Lengnick-Hall & Beck, 2005), and therefore we claim that – through effective organizational support – a capacity evolves into a resilience capability. Disruptive events, however, weaken global managers' resilience capacity to capability transformation in the sense that disruptive events challenge their cognitive (i.e., positive outlook, level-headedness, and tolerance for uncertainty), behavioral (i.e., learning from success and failure), and contextual (i.e., connecting cognitive and behavioral responses) capacity (Lengnick-Hall & Beck, 2005).

According to the resilience capability view (e.g., Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011), effective resilience is embedded in the first order 'learned' construct dimensions of 1) personal agility, 2) preparedness, 3) a broad resource network, 4) adaptive learning, and 5) managerial intervention. [Figure 2](#) illustrates the five critical stages of developing IWR in response to the multilevel model of disruptions during expatriation. Each step in the model is interdependent.

The starting point in the model is individual agility (Stage 1), which includes anticipating opportunities. It is centred on what can be done linking with preparedness (Stage 2), which refers to a learned resourcefulness applied to respond to unprecedented challenges. For example, global managers who build their awareness of host country values, will feel empowered and better prepared to respond to potentially hostile work environments, such as in the case of LGB expatriates (Moeller & Maley, 2018). Likewise, global managers who gather information about host country security services and prepare for the repercussions of potential natural disasters provide them with the resourcefulness to navigate such novel and complex events in advance.

Access to a broad network (Stage 3) is critical in creating conditions that support resilience development. It means that resilient global managers should develop and nurture personal network relationships with others who can share essential resources that help navigate disruptive events. Whether networks are self-initiated or MNC sponsored, connecting with others (i.e., a colleague, a mentor or coach, a friend) who have had experience with one of multiple disruptive events means global managers absorb insight often before disruptive events may occur. For example, MNCs

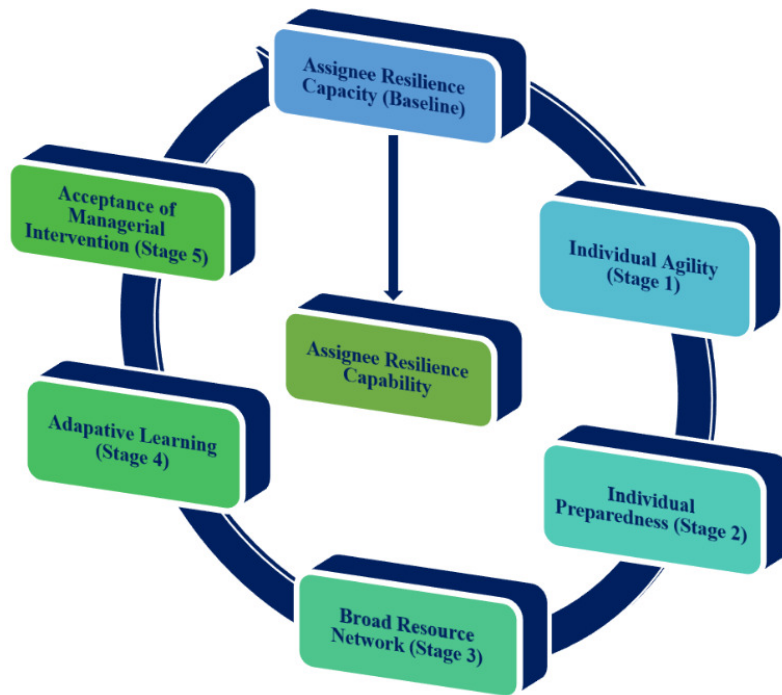


Figure 2. Five Critical Stages to Develop Global Managerial Workplace Resilience Capability in Response to Layers of Disruptive Events

that stress social cohesion along with re-enforcements of support and self-help networks to spouses and dependents also strengthen global managers' capability to bounce back from shock events or disruptions.

In recent ground-breaking research, You and Williams (2023) focused on how business relationships affect resilience capacity in the context of Chinese business service firms and found the relational capacity also to be significant (i.e., competence, innovation, trustworthiness, identity constraints, and asymmetry relationships). The authors show how a complex interplay between relationship capacity attributes determines resilience capability.

Broader networks (Stage 3) often stimulate adaptability (Stage 4). Adaptability is allied with adaptive learning (Kuntz et al., 2017), meaning that resilient individuals use relationships with others to secure resources that support adaptive learning (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). Stage 5 draws on individuals' amicability towards managerial interventions. Resilient individuals accept managerial interventions (Branicki et al., 2019). For example, MNCs can also develop IWR by extending cultural agility training and exogenous disruptions by designing both preparatory/proactive (e.g., terrorism scenario planning) as well as protection/reactive strategies (Fisher & Hutchings, 2013) for what are classified as dangerous assignment destinations. MNCs can assist global managers more generally by extending work resilience inventory assessments (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007) and app-based resilience interventions (Avey, Newman, & Herbert, 2022).

In sum, we argue that when resilient assignees can adapt effectively to a changing work environment riddled with novel and complex disruptive events, it facilitates global managerial adjustment, and retention, and invites receptiv-

ity to subsequent assignments. [Table 1](#) offers a reflection and action tool for global managers to continuously reflect upon and improve their own as well as others' behaviors and actions towards major global mobility challenges.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Miriam Moeller (MBA, PhD University of Mississippi) is Senior Lecturer of International Business at UQ Business School, University of Queensland, in Brisbane, Australia. Her research focuses on international human resource, talent management, and diversity induced challenges across these topics. Her research has appeared in top-tier academic journals such as *Journal of International Business Studies*, *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *Journal of World Business*, and *International Journal of Management Reviews* among others.

Jane F. Maley is a Sabanci University based academic with over 20 years of international management experience. While her research incorporates several areas of management, her main focus is global mobility and cross-cultural management. She has published over 50 journal articles in outlets such as the *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *Journal of Business Research*, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *Personnel Review*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Conflict Management*, *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *Human Resource Management Journal*, and *Thunderbird*.

Heidi Wechtler holds a PhD in International Management

Table 1. Stage-wise key global managerial recommendations

CRITICAL STAGES	GLOBAL MANAGERIAL RECOMMENDATIONS
1. PERSONAL AGILITY – ABILITY TO STAY NIMBLE.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anticipate challenges and contemplate what can be done
2. INDIVIDUAL PREPAREDNESS – RESOURCEFULNESS, INGENUITY, AND CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formulate unconventional but compelling responses to extraordinary or unprecedented challenges, noting that resourcefulness improves with familiarity and repetition
3. BROAD RESOURCE NETWORK – NETWORKING TO GAIN ACCESS TO RESOURCES.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Form broad range of personal network relationships with those who can share essential resources
4. ADAPTIVE LEARNING – ABILITY TO REACT TO DEMANDING INCIDENTS WITH ADAPTIVE ACTIONS AND PROMPTNESS.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage with networks to secure resources, learning new information, and ensure fast adaption
5. ACCEPTANCE OF MANAGERIAL INTERVENTION – AMICABILITY TO MANAGERIAL INTERVENTION.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Influence receptivity of self and others' attitudes and behaviours through meaningful HR management systems.

from Macquarie University, Sydney (Australia) and is a Senior Lecturer in Management at the University of Newcastle (Australia). She has carried out research related to various fields including expatriation, diversity management, employee selection, and turnover. Her work appears in outlets such as *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Leadership Quarterly*, *Journal of World Business*, *International Business Review*, *Management International Review*, *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *Management Organization Review*, and *Journal of Business Research*.

Tao Bai (PhD Tsinghua University) is a Lecturer in International Business at the Business School, The University of Queensland. His research interests include multinational firm strategy, non-market strategy, and the intersection

between these, with the focus on emerging market as a field of research and practice. He has published articles in the *Strategic Management Journal*, *Journal of World Business*, *Long Range Planning*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Management International Review*, and *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* and among others.

Linglin Zheng (BBA Honours, University of Newcastle) is a PhD student at UQ Business School, University of Queensland, in Brisbane, Australia. Her research interest includes disaster management and international business and has published in the *Journal of World Business*.

Submitted: January 15, 2023 EDT, Accepted: May 04, 2023 EDT



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

REFERENCES

- Avey, J., Newman, A., & Herbert, K. 2022. Fostering employees' resilience and psychological well-being through an app-based resilience intervention. *Personnel Review*, ahead of print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/pr-08-2021-0612>.
- Branicki, L. J., Steyer, V., & Sullivan-Taylor, B. 2019. Why resilience managers aren't resilient, and what human resource management can do about it. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 30(8): 1261–1286.
- Clay, R. A. 2019. Psychotherapy in China. *Monitor on Psychology*, 50(9): 26.
- Dau, L., & Moore, E. 2020. A global disruption requires a global response: Policies for building international business resilience for this and future pandemics. *GRI Whitepaper Series*, 2020–11. <http://globalresilience.northeastern.edu/category/publications/whitepaperseries/covid19-special-investigation-report-2020-11>.
- Feldman, D. C., & Thomas, D. C. 1991. From desert shield to desert storm: Life as an expatriate in Saudi Arabia during the Persian Gulf crisis. *Organizational Dynamics*, 20(2): 37–46.
- Fisher, K., & Hutchings, K. 2013. Making sense of cultural distance for military expatriates operating in an extreme context. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 34(6): 791–812.
- Koveshnikov, A., Lehtonen, M. J., & Wechtler, H. 2022. Expatriates on the run: The psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on expatriates' host country withdrawal intentions. *International Business Review*, 31(6): 102009.
- Kuntz, J., Connell, P., & Näswall, K. 2017. Workplace resources and employee resilience: the role of regulatory profiles. *Career Development International*, 22(4): 419–435.
- Lengnick-Hall, C. A., & Beck, T. E. 2005. Adaptive fit versus robust transformation: How organizations respond to environmental change. *Journal of Management*, 31(5): 738–757.
- Lengnick-Hall, C. A., Beck, T. E., & Lengnick-Hall, M. L. 2011. Developing a capacity for organizational resilience through strategic human resource management. *Human Resource Management Review*, 21(3): 243–255.
- Luthans, F., Avolio, B. J., Avey, J. B., & Norman, S. M. 2007. Positive psychology capital: Measurement and relationship with performance and satisfaction. *Personnel Psychology*, 60(3): 541–572.
- Maley, J. F., Moeller, M., & Ting, A. F. 2020. Sustainable expatriate compensation in an uncertain environment. *Journal of International Management*, 26(3): 100776.
- Maslow, A. H. 1943. A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4): 370–396.
- Min, K. X. 2021. Voices of youth: Make the classroom a more inclusive space for neurodivergent students. *The Straitstimes*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/forum/voices-of-youth-make-the-classroom-a-more-inclusive-space-for-neurodivergent-students>.
- Moeller, M., & Maley, J. F. 2018. MNC considerations in identifying and managing LGB expatriate stigmatization. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 20(2): 325–342.
- Morgeson, F. P., Mitchell, T. R., & Liu, D. 2015. Event system theory: An event-oriented approach to the organizational sciences. *Academy of Management Review*, 40(4): 515–537.
- Newbury, W., Rašković, M., Colakoglu, S. S., Gonzalez-Perez, M. A., & Minbaeva, D. 2022. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in International Business: Dimensions and Challenges. *AIB Insights*, 22(3). <https://doi.org/10.46697/001c.36582>.
- Schmitz, M. A., Ommen, E., & Karlshaus, A. 2023. Sustainable Expatriate Management: Rethinking International Assignments. *AIB Insights*. <https://doi.org/10.46697/001c.74200>.
- Woo, S., & Grove, T. 2022. Expats quietly leave Russia over financial and safety worries. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/expats-quietly-leave-russia-over-financial-and-safety-worries-11646736757>.
- You, J., & Williams, C. 2023. Organizational resilience and interorganizational relationships: An exploration of Chinese business service firms. *European Management Review*, 1–19.