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1. Introduction

The world has changed irrevocably since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020. The pandemic has caused a great “reset” around the globe and has profoundly challenged assumptions about how employees engage with work (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann, 2020; Collings, Nyberg, et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021). While obvious manifestations of this reset have been dramatic reductions in global mobility and a massive shift to working from home (WFH), the pandemic also accelerated trends already in motion, including the digitization of work and the transformation of business models, and has brought long-simmering tensions around diversity and inclusion, migration, and sustainability. Beyond their impact on multinational enterprises (MNEs) and their employees, these ongoing changes are also challenging many of the assumptions, boundary conditions, and conclusions of established international human resource management (IHRM) research.

In this paper we take a phenomenon-based approach (Doh, 2015) and present our perspective on what we see as the most critical macro-trends shaping the future of global work, their implications for IHRM, and global work in the context of MNEs. Specifically, we address how these trends have affected the where, how, who, and why of global work. As we highlight implications for organizations and individuals, we offer a set of research questions to guide future research and inform IHRM practitioners.

2. Where is global work done?

The severe restrictions to travel and international relocations which resulted from COVID-19 lockdowns have had a significant impact on employee mobility in MNEs. At the same time, both stay-at-home orders and public health measures ushered in an unprecedented wave of WFH requirements for many employees. Although such restrictions are now in the rear-view mirror, they may have indelibly changed how MNEs approach the issue of where global work is done.

2.1. Changes in global mobility

Predictably, global mobility dramatically contracted at the onset of...
the COVID-19 pandemic. Industry reports indicate that over two-thirds of MNEs delayed all or some international assignments and many international assignees performed their job from a country different to their assignment country (Mercer, 2021). Similarly, 53% of assignees had to return home and continue their work from there (ECA International, 2020). However, MNEs largely viewed such restriction as temporary, with most (86%) global mobility leaders noting that they were only postponing—and not cancelling—new international assignments, with only 20% predicting that the pandemic would result in a decrease in future international moves (PwC Mobility, 2020). Such reports signal an expectation that the pandemic will slow, but not eliminate, global mobility in the future.

Despite the optimism about the return of international assignments and global business travel, these same industry reports suggest that three factors could potentially impede the return to pre-pandemic levels of mobility. One, countries might continue to restrict the visas necessary for relocation (ECA International, 2020). Two, to achieve their environmental sustainability goals, MNEs might limit employees’ air travel, thus increasing the amount of virtual international work (ECA International, 2020). Three, employees might prefer to remain in whatever location they feel most comfortable, fulfilled, and safe (Prudential, 2021) which could, in turn, limit the supply of employees willing to accept international assignments (Collings & Sheeran, 2020).

2.1.1. Implications for MNEs: Changing relationships between global mobility and business strategy

Mobility is intricately linked with the execution of business strategy in MNEs, with almost all (98%) business leaders believing their globally mobile professionals are critical for executing on strategy (Santa Fe Relocation, 2021). Such beliefs align with research suggesting that international business travel is helpful in developing and sustaining trusted social ties within and across units in MNEs (Bozkurt & Mohr, 2011) and that ties fostered through global mobility might be a foundation for a firm’s competitive advantage (Collings, 2014). As such, companies would be best advised to evaluate the value of international assignment programs rather than move too quickly to significantly cut numbers in a post-pandemic environment (Collings & Sheeran, 2020).

While there is general acknowledgement of the strategic role of in-person and in-country interactions through assignments, there are also reports that “more companies are forecasting decreases rather than increases in numbers for most assignment types compared to their pre-pandemic plan” (ECA International, 2020). This is hardly the first instance where the imminent demise of international assignments has been predicted. Yet, it is the first time when, due to either national public health orders or travel and visa restrictions, MNEs have had to function under conditions of restricted mobility for a prolonged period. This raises a practical question regarding the rate at which in-country (vs. virtual) international assignments will return.

Virtual international assignments enable an employee to work from anywhere. As liberating as this may sound, a work-from-anywhere model has tremendous implications for HR and global mobility managers (Caligiuri & Jooss, 2022), notably dealing with compensation and taxation, ensuring compliance with local labor laws and relevant data privacy laws, securing location-specific licenses, and facilitating access to technical solutions for secure remote working, cloud computing and online collaboration tools. These shifts may have a long-term effect on the execution of business strategy in global firms. To refine this question even further, we need to better understand the implications of limiting in-country international assignments, especially for roles for which face-to-face interactions are viewed as necessary to foster trust, establish credibility, and communicate nuanced information. Relatedly, we need to better understand whether control and coordination across subsidiaries within an MNE will change with fewer employees on in-country international assignments operating as the bridge between subsidiaries and headquarters. More broadly, the current environment provides a ripe opportunity to re-examine the main reasons for corporate expatriation (Harzing, 2001), a foundational issue in IHM research.

- How would the choice to have fewer in-country (vs. virtual) international assignments affect key performance outcomes in MNEs? Are there certain roles in which this strategic choice would have a greater impact?
- Would control and coordination between headquarters and subsidiaries in MNEs that opt for fewer in-country international assignments be less effective?
- Are there shifts in the strategic reasons for corporate expatriation?

Another strategic issue associated with the possible reduction in global mobility is leadership development. At a time when researchers (Hitt, Holmes & Arregle, 2021) are calling for managers to possess a higher level of cross-cultural competence, such as being more resilient and tolerant of greater levels of ambiguity, the need for developing effective global leaders has become even more critical. For decades, success in an international assignment was a springboard for a senior global leadership role within MNEs. Even short-term international experiences help employees develop critical cross-cultural competencies such as a tolerance for ambiguity and humility (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2016). But during the pandemic such developmental opportunities were greatly reduced. If this trend continues, MNEs might have a dearth of global leaders in their talent pipelines.

- Will the reduced number of in-country international assignments during the pandemic be associated with a smaller pool of global leaders in the future?
- Are there features of virtual international assignments that could still result in the development of critical cross-cultural competencies?

2.1.2. Implications for employees: Individual preferences and global mobility

A recent BCG survey of 200,000 employees in 190 countries found that most employees globally would like to work from home at least some of the time, with 25% interested in working from home full time (BCG, 2021). With respect to global mobility, there is a tension between the desire to work from home and the need for future in-country international assignees. This reflects a redrawing of individuals’ expectations around where work happens and their willingness to travel for work. A fundamental question, warranting future research, is whether this preference for WFH will limit the number of available future candidates for global mobility.

At the opposite extreme, some employees have an international career orientation which propels them to seek out opportunities to work internationally and makes them reluctant to remain in a job with limited opportunities to work in different cultures (Lazarova, Cerdin & Liao, 2014). With the limited number of international assignments currently available and the future limits on global business travel likely, how will those who actively seek global work be affected? This leads us to some additional research questions:

- Will the preference for working from home limit the future candidate pool of in-country international assignees?
- Will employees with an international career orientation have their roles at a faster rate in organizations limiting opportunities for global mobility?

2.2. Fewer co-located employees

As we note above, the pandemic precipitated dramatically increased levels of WFH. While this trend suggests that employees globally are seeking employment allowing them to work remotely, its magnitude varies across countries (LinkedIn, 2021). Such differences likely vary by culture (e.g., more collectivist and hierarchical cultures might have less remote work), industry or sectors within a given country (e.g., countries with higher levels of agriculture and manufacturing would have less remote work), social and structural features in the country (e.g.,
countries in which citizens live in smaller homes or with more family members might have less interest in remote work) and the like. Regardless of such variations, having fewer co-located employees longer term has important implications for MNEs and the future of work.

2.2.1. Implication for MNEs: Changes to corporate culture

One of the biggest implications of this trend is likely to be on organizational culture. Reinforced and shared from long-tenured employees to newcomers, organizational culture is a collective understanding of values, assumptions, expected norms and behaviors among organizational members. When directed strategically, it can be both an intangible organizational asset and a barrier for competitors due to a difficulty in replication (e.g., Schein, 1985). As much as organizations may be supportive of WFH, a PwC (2020) survey found that 68% of company leaders globally believed their remote employees should be in the office three or more days each week to sustain a strong organizational culture. The intuition of the surveyed leaders notwithstanding, the “3 days” belief warrants future research given our understanding of socialization, cultural variance, and national differences. Organizational cultures, like national cultures, vary on tightness-looseness (i.e., level of variance within the culture, Gelfand, Nisbett & Raver, 2006). Loose organizational cultures, with fewer shared behavioral expectations, might need fewer days of employee co-location to be sustained, while tighter cultures might unravel quickly without significant and sustained co-location.

Understanding the strength of the organizational culture and its influence on strategy execution should be investigated considering the global reduction in employee co-location. There has been a recent call for companies to create agile, innovative, and highly integrated organizational cultures and structures to meet the current demands (Hitt et al., 2021). The need to respond to these current challenges and the nature of a strategically aligned corporate culture as a competitive asset are becoming even more critical, so the mechanisms through which WFH will affect corporate culture should be investigated. The outcome might be nuanced as different organizational cultural orientations, such as clan, adhocracy, market, and hierarchy (Morgan & Vorhies, 2018), may warrant different levels of “face-time” to facilitate the desired corporate culture in MNEs. For example, a clan-oriented culture, with a deeper sense of internal cohesiveness, loyalty, and commitment, might require greater employee interaction but a market-oriented culture, focusing on performance and productivity, might be sustained with fewer employee interactions and greater merit-based HRM practices.

While a wide gamut of socialization tactics can be used to foster stronger corporate culture, many of them are predicated on employees engaging in a common set of experiences, usually together. Compared to collective socialization approaches, individualized socialization tactics tend to be associated with idiosyncratic experiences and less homogeneous perceptions of the organization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). It remains to be seen how organizational socialization, and its related implications for organizational culture, may shape environments where many employees work remotely. This may also play out differently in national cultural settings that vary on individualism and collectivism. As such, some sample questions future research can explore are:

- How will fewer co-located employees affect strategic dimensions of organizational culture?
- Is there an ideal number of days employees should co-locate to ensure a strong corporate culture? If so, would that number increase in more collectivist cultures and decrease in more individualist cultures?

2.2.2. Implications for employees: Motivation and retention

The trend of fewer co-located employees will likely also have important implications for employee outcomes, notably their motivation and retention. Considering motivation, one of the most universally applicable theories is self-determination theory, which suggests that human behavior is motivated by the desire to fulfill three basic psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence (e.g., Deci, Olafsen & Ryan, 2017). Fulfilling these needs has been shown to be related to the perception of meaningful work in countries as diverse as Finland, India, and the USA (Martela & Riekki, 2018). Research has also found that fulfilling these needs at work can lead to higher levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job performance which can have implications for the future of work in MNEs.

Maximizing employee motivation in settings with fewer co-located employees may have possibly created a new set of conflicting challenges. For example, the need for autonomy, reflecting employees’ desire for freedom and control, may have turned the pandemic-fostered WFH practices into a positive and desirable employment structure. Thus, MNEs may need to continue WFH practices in some countries to foster employee motivation. However, while WFH can be motivating from the perspective of autonomy, it might impede fulfillment of employees’ need for relatedness, especially in more collectivist cultures. The new WFH reality might also affect employees’ need for competence, depending on the role within the MNE. For example, employees in complex jobs that did not require collaboration had better performance when working at home (Golden & Gajendran, 2019), a result that would need to be replicated as collaborative technologies become increasingly sophisticated.

Having a better understanding of how remote work can enhance (or thwart) employee motivation is especially important as employees globally are quitting their jobs, a trend which has been termed “the great resignation.” According to recent industry reports, more than half of employees are thinking about leaving their current employer (EY, 2021). While resignation trends are global (Tharoor, 2021), we need to question whether the solutions to increase employee retention are universal (Allen & Vardaman, 2021). Research will need to examine whether differences in collectivism and job complexity will produce differences in employee motivation resulting from co-locating and WFH.

- Are there cultural and contextual factors affecting how remote work facilitates (or possibly impedes) employee motivation?
- How can increases in flexible HRM practices affect employee retention in the various countries in which MNEs operate?

3. How is global work being done?

In addition to accelerating changes regarding where work is done, the pandemic has also hastened changes in how global work is being done on a global scale. We discuss the two dominant trends that influence this dimension of the future of global work: increasing digitization and the changing skills landscape.

3.1. Digitization at pace

The Fourth industrial revolution (4IR), reflected in the creation and deployment of new technologies which merge the physical, digital, and biological worlds, has been disrupting industries and labor markets globally for quite some time. As with the other trends we describe, it has been accelerated by COVID-19 (Gallardo-Gallardo & Collings, 2022). This has resulted in a significant increase of digitization of business. Notably, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella argued that the first two months of the pandemic resulted in digital transformation that would have normally taken two years. Illustratively, by one estimate, the volume of online delivery of goods increased in eight weeks by the same amount as it had grown in the preceding decade (McKinsey, 2020b).

3.1.1. Implications for MNEs: Evolving business models

While firms that are “born digitals” and information and communication technology firms have traditionally led this technological change, the 4IR combined with the pandemic has forced traditional brick and mortar MNEs to also compete through digital transformation (Srinivasan & Eden, 2021), with significant implications. Digital technologies are changing how MNEs create and deliver value to their customers. The
integration of digital technologies into internal organization, administration, operations, and strategy is reflected in MNEs reinventing their business models (Minbaeva, 2021). This change is predicted to impact MNEs’ global value chains (Srinivasan & Eden, 2021). Indeed, the UNCTAD (2020) expects that, in combination, the 4IR and the pandemic will reshape the landscape of ‘going global’ and predicts a retreat from global production in the coming decade. More broadly, this digital transformation will significantly influence the work experiences of individual employees in MNEs who will need to adapt to working in a new way.

There is little doubt that the pandemic has accelerated the automation and robotization of work, largely driven by safety and other concerns, but also owing to the attractiveness of substituting labor with capital (technology) as a risk mitigation strategy (Brakman, Garretsen & van Witteloostuijn, 2021). This technology is also deployed in ways that are labor saving. While pre-pandemic predictions suggested that, in the short to medium term, lower skilled work would be impacted by automation in a limited way owing to the relative cost of these technologies, the reality is that significant automation has unfolded in lower skilled work.

Automation also has significant implications for where work is done as location disadvantages around labor costs may be reduced in higher cost countries. As noted above in our discussion on co-location, the digitization of work processes reduces the linkage between location and work, offering many opportunities for MNEs to access skills and talent regardless of location. For example, skilled workers in emerging markets can compete for jobs in other locations without the need to physically relocate. This can significantly reshape aspects of the global labor market. A key challenge for IHRM will be in designing work and jobs to facilitate collaboration across borders virtually and to develop appropriate HR practices to enable this work.

• How can MNEs balance the costs and benefits of the automation of work to mitigate risk in production and supply chains?
• What is the impact of digitization of work for location decisions for MNE activities?
• How can MNEs design jobs to enable the coordination of work and facilitate high performance in employees and teams regardless of location?
• What are the cultural and institutional factors that MNEs should consider in the digitization of HR?

3.1.2. Implications for employees: Digital exhaust and employee behaviors

For workers, digitization is likely to impact significantly on their experience of work and how they are managed in MNEs, with artificial intelligence and other forms of technology playing an increasing role. For example, Leonardir (2021) identifies the increased meta-data that comprises logs of employees’ online work behavior, which he terms digital exhaust, as a key outcome of the increased digitization of work processes. While individual particles from this digital exhaust offer few insights, when those pieces are combined and examined over time, patterns of employee behavior may emerge, and it may be possible to mine that data to create inferences regarding important variables such as employee engagement or motivation. The transition to digital work during the pandemic has significantly increased the volume of digital exhaust available to MNEs to inform data analysis about employee behaviors. While this provides potential value in terms of understanding key workplace activities and outcomes, it also raises significant questions about inter alia, ethics, privacy, and data protection in terms of how the data translate into predictions by artificial intelligence (Leonardi & Treem, 2020). Given different countries are at different stages of development when it comes to digitization, how national culture impacts on individuals’ openness to the use of algorithms in their management is a timely and important question.

Additionally, MNEs’ capability in data analytics may impact on how these questions play out. Analytics is broadly defined as “the use of analytics, data and systematic reasoning to make decisions” (Davenport, Harris & Morison, 2010: 4). As Minbaeva (2021) notes, analytics can interrupt how systems generally work, and ultimately do harm to the organization. This is again amplified by the fact that HR practitioners often lack key analytical skills limiting the potential of this work (Minbaeva, 2021). Key to the effectiveness of analytics in this context is understanding the optimal mix of analytics and human judgement. A central question becomes how organizations balance the role of digitized HR systems and human intervention to ensure that digitized HR systems do not lead to unintended consequences, such as making poor decisions based on limited understanding of causal relationships around the impact of key HR interventions. This challenge may be particularly acute in the international context where legacy systems in subsidiaries may not fully integrated with headquarters systems. Further, different attitudes to data recording and entry may mean the raw data are inaccurate to begin with. This may reflect varying levels of buy-in of international staff to data and the principles of data analytics.

Additional questions focus on individual’s experience of the tools that enable virtual work and how these tools impact on individual and organizational performance outcomes. For example, Shockley et al. (2021) found that camera usage on virtual meetings was linked to daily feelings of fatigue, generally termed Zoom fatigue, which in turn impacted negatively on employee voice and engagement during virtual meetings. These impacts were greater for female employees and for organizational newcomers. The non-verbal overload that individuals experience on virtual platforms are viewed as a key factor in explaining such findings (McNamara & Bailenson, 2021). However, as yet we have little understanding around how different cultural contexts would impact on phenomena such as Zoom fatigue.

Research should also address important questions around work effectiveness. For example, one study found that the shift to remote work resulted in more static and siloed collaboration networks, with fewer bridges between disparate members of the network (Yang et al., 2021). This was reflected in decreased synchronous communication and increased asynchronous communication. These findings have potentially significant implications for how employees acquire and disseminate new information in MNEs where networks are even more dispersed than in a domestic context.

• How does the increased volume of data on employee behaviors (digital exhaust) impact on employees’ experience of work in MNEs?
• How do different cultural contexts impact on employees’ openness to and perceptions of being managed by algorithms?
• How do different cultural contexts impact on phenomena such as Zoom fatigue and how can MNEs manage virtual communications platforms to minimize impacts on employees?
• What is the impact of virtual collaboration on geographically dispersed networks and how can MNEs maintain knowledge generation and sharing across such networks?

3.2. The changing skills landscape

While digitization has increased the efficiency of many elements of work, organizations globally continue to struggle to meet their skills demands. Eighty-seven percent of executives surveyed by McKinsey reported skills gaps in their current workforce or expected them in the short term (Argawal, De Smet, Lacroix & Reich, 2020). The skill shortage is undoubtedly linked to the digitization of work, as the pace of change significantly reduces the half-life of skills. Some estimates suggest that over the next five to 10 years, some 15% of roles will be eliminated by technology, while an additional 50% will be augmented by technology, shifting the skills demands of those roles (Collings & McMackin, 2021). These changes have fundamental implications for work and employees and challenge MNEs to adopt a much more strategic approach to managing the future of work through a skills lens.
3.2.1. Implications for MNEs: Strategic alignment of skills

MNEs have long viewed skills as key to competitive advantage and accessing and controlling skills globally has been a key driver of resource seeking foreign direct investment (Farndale, Beamond, Corbett-ETchers & Xu, 2022). However, the pace of change of skills means that traditional models of planning for skills acquisition and development and matching skills to an MNE’s requirements may be ineffective, and new ways of workforce planning may be required. As pointed out by Collings and MacMackin (2021), there are three key initial considerations which should inform evolving approaches to understanding skills in organizations. The first is alignment between MNE strategy around digitization and technology and skills strategy. How does the MNE see digitization and technology influencing the nature of work in the organization and how is this likely to play out over the current strategic planning cycle? This provides a basis for planning for talent and skills requirement. However, few organizations have a clear understanding of the current skills and capabilities of their workforce (Gartner, 2020). Second, undertaking a skills audit has been argued to provide a clear baseline of workforce skills and capabilities for MNEs and thus gives invaluable insights into current capability to compete through talent. Third, strategic planning for the future requires an understanding of how jobs and work are evolving. This provides a basis for planning the matching between employees and evolving priorities in terms of MNE strategy. How that matching occurs represents a key question for MNEs. Matching theory provides a useful lens for the consideration of this question (Weller, Hymer, Nyberg & Ebert, 2019). At a macro level, how MNEs engage with government and other stakeholders globally to influence skills policy at national or regional level and how this stakeholder engagement will impact location decisions are important questions (Tregaskis & Almond, 2019). Another potential question concerns how MNE can reorient their planning from a consideration of work at the level of jobs to at the level of skills and what this means for HRM and employees’ experience of work (Jesuthasan & Boudreau, 2021).

- What are the most effective approaches to matching skills and work?
- How can MNEs effectively partner with local and regional stakeholders in ensuring the skills ecosystem in host locations meets emerging skills needs?

3.2.2. Implications for employees: Skill redundancy and re-skilling

The changing landscape for skills within MNEs will have many implications for individual employees. The first implication is that, notwithstanding an increasing focus on reskilling in organizations, there is an increased responsibility for individual employees, in partnership with their employer, to ensure their skills remain relevant (Gallardo-Collings, 2022). Concomitantly, there is a risk that some of the work currently being done in developing economies (owing to location cost advantages) will become redundant as technology makes the work currently being done in developing economies (owing to access and controlling skills globally) will become redundant as technology makes work obsolete. This risk of skills becoming redundant might be more pronounced for employees in emerging economies where work obsolete. This risk of skills becoming redundant might be more pronounced for employees in emerging economies where some demographic composition of the workforce. This trend encompasses two concurrent realities: first, an increasingly diverse workforce and the related heightened attention to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in MNEs, and second, increased migration and related challenges of integrating migrant employees in the workplace. None of these realities is “caused” by COVID-19 but the collective experience of the pandemic has fueled increased attention to long-simmering tensions pertaining to these trends.

4.1. More diverse people

While different dimensions dominate the EDI conversation in different countries, there is a shared agreement that workforce diversity brings both challenges and opportunities, that approaches to EDI should be deliberate, and that investing in EDI initiatives can be beneficial for stakeholders across various levels of analysis (Roberson, Holmes & Perry, 2017). Nonetheless, research remains at a “critical juncture” and is yet to resolve longstanding “paradoxical tensions,” most notably the mismatch between the seemingly widespread support of EDI and the dogged persistence of discrimination (Nkomo, Bell, Roberts, Joshi & Thatcher, 2019). COVID-19, having hit some demographic groups disproportionately harder than others (Bapuji, Patel, Ertug & Allen, 2020), has further highlighted the deep inequalities and injustices both within and across countries. Pandemic disparities, coupled with the sheer pace of social, political, economic, and demographic changes, mean the EDI conversation has moved into discussions of urgent actions intent on producing tangible results.

4.1.1. Implications for MNEs: Macro-level contextual factors

Countries differ in history, relationships with and openness towards other nations, migration patterns, tolerance towards and support of non-dominant groups, all of which results in rather different “diversity make up” and distinct attention (or lack thereof) to EDI matters. For example, female executive representation ranges widely around the world, from 100% of Norwegian companies reporting having at least one female executive, to other major economies—including Brazil, India, Germany, and Japan—where female representation averages under 8%, with over 80% of companies having no female executives (McKinsey, 2020a). Specific local conditions impact on how MNEs engage with EDI issues at the subsidiary level — but what exactly shapes MNEs’ global and national EDI approaches remains severely understudied (Bader, Froese, Cooke & Schuster, 2022). Research on governmental legislation and social programs that support traditionally disadvantaged groups is largely confined to assessing outcomes at the macro level (e.g., employment levels of said disadvantaged groups). In contrast, we know little about how this macro-level context influences management practices in organizations.

The classic MNE localization-standardization dilemma is particularly salient in terms of EDI issues given vast differences in what is prioritized as important across countries. For example, an important consideration is societal attitudes regarding different dimensions of EDI. Consider the challenges faced by MNEs that wish to advance LGBTQ inclusivity in host countries where homosexuality is a cultural taboo or is even illegal. MNEs operating in Africa experienced tremendous difficulties in attempting to align their global corporate values and policies with local values and legislative requirements; those that tried were in the minority and only had limited ability to support local and expatriate LGBTQ employees (Luiz & Spicer, 2021). Given such tensions, designing and implementing EDI practices that move the needle on EDI issues significantly but staying within lines drawn by local laws and sensibilities remains a challenge (Nishit & Ozbilgin, 2007). Indeed, the role which MNEs can play in influencing such laws and sensibilities is a question worth considering.

We must also examine the moderating effect of national context. A McKinsey report (2020a) found that support for gender diversity led to higher financial performance on average but this impact varied across countries — the likelihood of superior performance by companies with gender-diverse executive teams was a high of 47% in advanced economies with high gender parity, such as the US, the UK, and Scandinavia, but it averaged only 17% in economies with lower gender-parity, such as...
Brazil, India, and Nigeria. Such findings echo academic diversity research indicating that contextual factors at multiple levels (including industry, occupation, team characteristics) influence the performance outcomes of diversity initiatives (Joshi & Roh, 2009). They are also aligned with specific research in IHRM documenting that even practices introduced to combat a specific source of discrimination may only have a limited impact on behaviors in the absence of a larger supportive context (Donnelly, 2015). Thus, striving for EDI even in the presence of supportive legislation can only go so far. True EDI is about far more than legal compliance aimed at preventing overt discrimination and requires proactive management and strategic prioritization. To date we know relatively little about how inclusion can be achieved in MNEs operating across different cultural contexts. A pertinent discussion point here is the need to distinguish between organizations engaging in highly visible but performative aspects of EDI (e.g., creating marketing materials featuring diverse workforce) versus MNEs embracing more mundane but potentially far more impactful practices like setting recruitment quotas or instituting recruitment protocols designed to curtail bias in the day-to-day work of recruiters. Our present discussion barely scratches the surface of EDI issues relevant for the future of global work and yet suggests an abundance of exciting research questions:

- How does national context influence the relationship between EDI initiatives and EDI outcomes across diverse MNE subsidiaries?
- How can MNEs achieve the precarious balance of designing EDI initiatives that can both meet corporate EDI aspirations and provide a “fit” to local subsidiary environments with diverging views on EDI issues?
- What are the differences in EDI outcomes in MNEs that are doing substantive EDI work vs. MNEs that engage primarily in performative aspects of EDI?

4.1.2. Implications for employees: Subjective experiences and intersectionality

Looking at the individual level, the experience of EDI issues is subjective, reflecting unique combinations of multiple dimensions of diversity. One line of inquiry could examine the experiences of multicultural or multiracial employees, who often occupy “bridging” roles. As fulfilling as it might be to have one’s identity appreciated by the organization, bridging comes with a risk of feeling personally responsible for solving EDI problems within the MNE. Another risk is that occupying a bridging role can sometimes highlight these employees’ “uniqueness” but not enhance their “belongingness” (Shore, Cleveland & Sanchez, 2018), whilst both are needed for inclusion. Relatedly, despite increasing awareness of intersectionality, limited, if any, research has examined how gendered or racialized inequalities may intersect and affect individual experiences as ‘talent’ within MNEs.

Another promising focus for future research is to better understand the workplace experiences of employees in traditionally disadvantaged groups through periods of intense change brought by social movements, such as #MeToo or Black Lives Matter, and doing so across countries, seeking to discern and explain any patterns that may arise. While both movements began in the USA, they have resonated around the world (McNabb, 2021; Saric, 2021; Silverstein, 2021), often with specific national “flavor” such as the “#MosqueMeToo” movement, originally focusing on sexual misconduct in Mecca but spreading to other predominantly Muslim regions (Amidi, 2018) or the nation-wide reckoning over atrocities committed during Belgium’s colonization of Congo (Siriby, 2020).

COVID-19 has shown that many jobs that were deemed “essential” during pandemic restrictions are neither highly paid, nor glamorous. Such jobs are also often disproportionately filled by more diverse employee groups than jobs in the higher organizational echelons. It remains to be seen if the newly found appreciation of those who are engaged in such essential work will translate to permanent status increase for them. Similarly, it will be important to investigate whether such status increase also spills over into (sustained?) diversity gains at higher organizational levels.\(^1\)

Another interesting line of inquiry is studying reactions to EDI initiatives that do not target the focal employee and examining whether such reactions differ by country - especially in cases where initiatives are launched that are not widely supported by local employees or are simply seen as irrelevant to their lives (e.g., an emphasis on race where racial diversity is still limited such as some Eastern European countries). This also presents research opportunities around personal authenticity and agency and can contribute to research on unintended outcomes of EDI initiatives (Leslie, 2019). Differences in perceptions of and reactions to organizational authenticity in terms of EDI should also be examined, in view of research that employee attributions about why practices are adopted matters greatly for employee outcomes (Nishii, Lepak & Schneider, 2008). Indeed, this area of research still poses more questions than provides answers.

- How are EDI initiatives in MNEs experienced by target- and non-target employees?
- What determines whether local employees feel free to voice their concerns and priorities regarding EDI and what are the outcomes associated with this?
- What determines employees’ perceptions of employer authenticity for EDI and what are employees’ reactions to perceived inauthenticity across countries?

4.2. More migrants

Related to EDI but critically important in its own right is the steady increase of migrants and refugees\(^2\) as a part of the talent pool of many countries (Delios, Perchhold & Capri, 2021). In 2020 there were 281 million migrants, representing 3.6% of the world population (compared to 2.8% in 2000). Migrants now account for over 15% of the population in an increasing number of host countries (ibid). Roughly 10% of migrants are refugees and other forcibly displaced populations, a share that is likely to grow, given the ongoing refugee crisis (Guo, Al Ariss & Brewster, 2020). Although the various mobility restrictions imposed due to COVID-19 have had an impact on migration, there is no expectation that migration flows will abate significantly in the long run (IOM, 2022b). In early 2022, the number of refugees grew by nearly four million in the span of a single month, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine (UNHCR, 2022). Regardless of reasons for migration or the migration path taken, ultimately most migrants end up joining the workforce in their new country (Hajro, Caprar, Zikic & Stahl, 2021).

Social science research has examined many aspects of migration and has advanced our understanding of migrant integration into evolving societies. In contrast, research on migrants in the workforce remains underdeveloped and consists primarily of individual level studies with limited work on how organizations manage migrant workers and on outcomes of migrant related practices (Hajro et al., 2021).

Migrants fare differently across countries, but findings about their workplace integration are not overly encouraging. Migrants bear a “liability of foreignness” (Fang, Samnani, Novicevic & Bing, 2013) and are, on average, less likely to find jobs that match their qualifications and more likely to be paid less compared to native-born workers. Further, the more educated the migrants, the less likely they are to find suitable employment relative to their native-born counterparts, a phenomenon

\(^{1}\) We thank a reviewer for suggesting these pertinent research questions.

\(^{2}\) There is no universal legal definition of a “migrant,” with the term used applied generically to all those who are outside the state of which they are a citizen or a national. In contrast, the meaning of refugee is more specific and refers to those fleeing persecution or conflict in their own country of origin. ‘Migrant’ is thereby frequently used as a neutral term to describe a group of people who have in common a lack of citizenship attachment to their host country (OHCHR, n.d.), an approach we adopt in this paper.
that has been referred to as “the skill paradox” and has been attributed to factors such as the socially constructed nature of labor markets, challenges in recognition of educational and professional credentials, limited local networks, or lack of culturally specific soft skills (Hajro et al., 2021; Lyons, Ng & Schweitzer, 2014). Refugees, who often move under great duress, may be unable to produce proof of educational attainment. They may not know how to apply for jobs and may little access to mentors who can help navigate career options in the new country. Often their limited agency means even those who find jobs may experience underemployment or precarious jobs (Guo et al., 2020; Szkdularek, Nardon, Osland, Adler & Lee, 2021).

Skilled migrants’ experience varies by industry and occupation, given differences in professional institutions and structural barriers that limit entry into certain occupations (Zikic & Richardson, 2016). Fitzsimmons, Baggs and Brannen (2020) examined the influence of immigrant status, race, gender, and mother tongue as barriers to pay and career advancement in a sample of Canadian workers. In line with research on intersectionality, they found that those facing all four barriers experienced the largest disadvantage in both compensation and supervisory responsibility. The fewer barriers faced, the lesser the negative outcomes, with some groups (notably, first generation white men working in their mother tongue) reporting a wage premium compared to the referent group. Highlighting the role of organizational context, the authors noted that being employed by an MNE may improve outcomes for immigrants, non-native language-speakers and people of color, but worsen outcomes for women.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been especially challenging for migrants. Across the world, migrant workers tend to be overrepresented in low-paying and precarious jobs. Those employed in the informal economy faced loss of income, especially during periods of lockdown. Many migrants work in “front-line” jobs, both high-skilled (e.g., medical professionals) and lowskilled (e.g., care workers, supermarket workers). Meanwhile, during pandemic restrictions many were excluded from public benefits such as unemployment insurance or access to mental health support. The pandemic also fueled misinformation about migrants and their contribution to the economy in many countries and created fertile ground for the spread of xenophobic racism, especially against migrants of Asian descent (Itefaq et al., 2022). COVID-19 also created “forced immobility” as they waited for their immigration status to settle, many migrants were stranded, unable to travel, even in cases of family emergencies (IOM, 2022a, 2022b).

4.2.1. Implications for organisations: Workplace integration of migrants

There is almost no research on whether organizations deliberately consider migrant status and whether they introduce any policies and practices targeting migrants, let alone of the impact of such practices (Hajro et al., 2021). Examining such issues is a promising area of inquiry, especially in the face of an increasing anti-immigrant sentiment. A key question is how we can apply what we know from the EDI literature to the inclusion of migrants: are they “just” another “disadvantaged” group to be included in existing EDI efforts or do they face unique challenges that raise additional barriers to professional (and personal) success, given that the migrant experience is far more encompassing than simply getting a job and immigrants often lack any support networks in their host country?

The role of actors beyond employers must also be addressed. For example, Nardon, Zhang, Szkdularek and Gulanowski (2021) studied organizations providing professional employment support to migrants and reported that they can have a profound impact on migrants’ identity construction and identity responses, which in turn shape how migrants approach the labor market. This leads to questions regarding the role of settlement organizations as newcomers find their footing professionally. Similarly, going up a level, there is need for multilevel studies examining the role of multiculturalism in societies and its influence on organizational policies and practices, combined with the impact of individual level attributes on work-related outcomes of migrants.

• What factors contribute to the successful workplace integration and inclusion of migrants? What is the role of employers relative to other actors?
• What are the conceptual boundaries of EDI research when applied to migrants?
• What can increase the visibility – and accessibility – of the migrant talent pool to organisations?
• How can organizations effectively assess the knowledge, skills, and abilities of migrant job candidates and lower barriers to employment suitable for their qualifications?

4.2.2. Implications for employees: Antecedents and outcomes of workforce integration

Transposing this to the individual level, research should examine the individual antecedents of migrant professional “success.” One idea is to draw and adapt ideas from research on work adjustment of expatriates (Hajro, Stahl, Clegg & Lazarova, 2019). For example, what is the role of cultural agility – and specifically the use of cultural adaptation, mini-mization and integration – as migrants (re-) establish themselves professionally (Calliguri & Bonache, 2020)? What role do known coping strategies play (Stahl & Calliguri, 2005)? Are there unique coping strategies that are more salient to migrant work integration?

It has been argued that corporate expatriation represents one end of global work experiences, with refugee experiences anchoring the other end (Szkdularek et al., 2021). Whereas expatriates move willingly, have secure jobs, guaranteed compensation and organizational support, refugees’ journeys are often involuntary and harrowing; they are met with suspicion, and they undergo long periods of delay before they can work legally, during which their skills may atrophy or become obsolete. Refugee experiences are shaped not only by their own predispositions, qualifications, and skills, but also by social, economic, and institutional factors beyond their control. As such, studies should zoom out to uncover the gamut of factors unique to the migrant experience that shape not only employment status, pay, and advancement but also mental health and wellbeing at work. For example, we should examine the role of being immersed in an immigrant enclave (Calliguri & Bonache, 2020) as well as social support, they may also influence the degree to which migrants are willing to integrate in the host society and their workplaces. Another exciting line of inquiry is investigating sources of identity threat as migrants deal with occupational downgrading that is often a part of the migrant career transitions.

• What enables migrant workplace success? What is the combined influence of technical skills, language skills, and cultural competencies and what is the role of organization and societal context?
• What are the best coping strategies as migrants tackle barriers to workplace integration?
• What are the sources of identity threat that migrants deal with in occupational downgrading that is often a part of migrant career transitions? What is the outcome of these identity threats to the migrants’ well-being?

5. Why are changes in global work important?

There are two key reasons why it is important for IHRM scholars and managers to understand and address emerging trends in global work. First, COVID-19 has raised awareness of the importance – and the fragility and precariousness – of humanity’s wellbeing. It has made the health and safety of the global workforce “a top of mind” issue for employers all over the world, like no other event in recent history. Second, together with the steadily increasing extreme climate events, the pandemic has served as the backdrop for growing social pressure for MNEs to demonstrate commitment to sustainability to deal with existential challenges facing the world. These broad priorities are likely to significantly impact on global work and IHRM long into the future.
5.1. Prioritizing health and safety in global work

Despite long-term concern among global health experts about the likelihood of pandemics and a substantial body of research about previous health crises (e.g., Dove, 2005) governments and businesses were unprepared for the shock of COVID-19 (Phan & Wood, 2020). Managing occupational health and safety (OHS) has always been an important requirement for MNEs, particularly considering the well-documented negative consequences of international work such as poor mental health (e.g., depression), and physical and psychological outcomes (e.g., physical injuries, infectious diseases) (De Cieri & Lazarova, 2021). What is new is the magnitude of the threat to OHS and the urgency for responses.

Prior to COVID-19, 2.78 million deaths a year were linked to work-related injury or illness worldwide (ilo.org). Among many OHS problems, lost productivity resulting from depression and anxiety costs the global economy US$1 trillion annually (The Lancet, 2020). Adding to the global burden, by the end of March 2022 over 485 million people had contracted COVID-19, with over 6 million deaths (JHU, 2022). While employees’ duty of care for the acute and long-term health of employees is widely recognized, the scale of health challenges brought by COVID-19 are extraordinary. COVID-19 has shortened life expectancy in many countries, many people will experience “long COVID” (chronic health symptoms), and there is an emerging COVID-19 mental health crisis (Gaspar, Paiva & Matos, 2021). The stark statistics bear important implications for IHRM.

5.1.1. Implications for MNEs: Duty of care for health and safety in global work

In response to the pandemic, governments have implemented various measures to protect public health (e.g., travel restrictions) and economic security (e.g., wage subsidies). To deal with jurisdictional differences in public health policy and health system infrastructure, and the quality of data that is required for risk assessments, many MNEs have prioritized OHS and re-shaped their approaches to global mobility to deliver their duty of care to keep employees healthy and safe. For example, Burrowes, Usoro and Campbell (2021) describe how IBM resourced their response to the COVID-19 pandemic with a globally distributed OHS team designing and delivering a wide range of workplace interventions. Now and in the future, there is a critical need to understand how MNEs can build the capability to manage global mobility and OHS with an integrated approach, like IBM’s, that combines prevention of harm, proactive management, and effective responses to events (Dennerlein et al., 2020).

There is research on managing physical and physiological risks, such as HRM strategies for essential workers (Dove, 2005), and studies on the safety risks that impact MNEs’ investment decisions where individuals’ safety is endangered due to violence or criminality in a specific country (DeGhetto, Lamont & Holmes, 2020). In contrast, the solutions for MNEs in managing mental health, particularly in societies where mental illness is stigmatized, are less well-documented. MNE managers could draw on research such as Dollard and Bailey’s (2021) study which applied event systems theory to examine how management should respond to external shocks. They found that, when top management responded to the COVID-19 shock with a clear message of support for mental health, this response was a powerful positive factor in the protection of employees’ mental health. Future research could examine how MNEs can protect employees’ mental health across a range of cultural and contextual settings. For employees who are required to travel, OHS priorities include risk assessments and guidelines for the safe transition to cross-border mobility, evidence-based communication, and access to telemedicine and healthcare (De Cieri & Lazarova, 2021). For (previously) mobile employees who transitioned to working from home, priorities included risk assessments and re-design of work schedules to support work-family boundaries. For co-located employees, OHS priorities included access to vaccination, physical distancing, health and hygiene controls, and staggered shifts. MNEs are experienced in dealing with some of these OHS matters; for example, vaccination requirements for expatriates are a well-known aspect of global work (De Cieri & Lazarova, 2021). However, in the wake of the pandemic our understanding of the role and responsibilities of MNEs in the roll-out and distribution of vaccinations globally is evolving. Other OHS issues have received less attention to date, such as expectations for MNEs to account for differences in access to healthcare or amount of paid sick leave available to employees working in different countries. While some governments have enacted legislation to deal with short-term crises and some MNEs have provided additional supports for workers’ health during the pandemic, whether these temporary moves will translate into inclusive and permanent policy and practices to provide paid sick leave to the entire workforce remains an open question (Vazquez et al., 2020).

5.1.2. Implications for employees: Protecting health and safety

The shift to working from home has been important in protecting many employees from COVID-19. This experience is likely to have been positive for some, where less travel has brought more time with family and greater flexibility and autonomy (Gaspar et al., 2021). However, there are physical health risks due to long hours spent on computer-based work and mental health risks due to isolation, change of identity, and work-family conflict (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020).

In line with self-determination theory, it is plausible that for individuals the idea of developing capability for post-traumatic growth might offer a worthwhile avenue for attention for MNEs. Future research could explore post-traumatic growth among global workers by evaluating programs that are designed to enable employees to combine cognitive and emotional processing after a traumatic experience. These programs would allow post-traumatic growth to arise from changes in self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and philosophy of life (Tedeschi, 2020). Relevant research questions include:

- How do individuals harness the learning of the pandemic experience and build the psychological readiness to deal with future global threats to health and safety?
- What are the costs and benefits of travel restrictions and global immobility for individuals’ health and safety?

5.2. Progress and roadblocks for sustainability

There are increasing pressures for MNEs, including for IHRM, to demonstrate commitment to sustainability, which encompasses economic, environmental, and humanitarian aspects (Collings, Nyberg, Wright & McMackin, 2021), with mounting urgency for action. Over the past decade we have witnessed many instances of MNEs being less than admirably. The resulting corporate scandals have inspired new waves of stakeholder activism. Concurrently, 193 countries adopted the 17 United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs represent a non-binding agreement, with the aim of achieving sustainability by 2030 (WHO, 2021) and explicitly refer to issues directly relevant to IHRM such as gender equality and reduced inequality, health and wellbeing, decent work and human rights, and climate action. The COVID-19 crisis has exponentially increased calls for MNEs to commit to implementing strategies that can contribute to sustainability, yet many
organisations, and specifically the HR function, have been criticized for being slow to demonstrate action or progress (Stahl, Brewster, Collings & Hajro, 2020).

5.2.1. Implications for MNEs: Delivering sustainable performance

The HR function has been focused on increasing organizational (financial) performance and shareholder value. To contribute to sustainability, this focus should broaden significantly. The implications are multi-layered and complex. For example, making changes to MNEs’ global mobility practices to reduce international travel is a tangible action yet has inherent challenges. While travel and mobility reductions may be viewed as “low-hanging fruit” for companies keen to save money on travel budgets, such decisions have important compensation and taxation implications. MNEs will need to engage in additional creative and impactful measures, going well beyond imposing limits on air travel, to improve their environmental sustainability, and we are yet to see how MNEs’ global mobility strategies will be reshaped in the long run.

IHRM scholars and practitioners also face criticism for being silent, insensitive, or slow to act on humanitarian crises such as human rights abuses and inequality (Bapuji et al., 2020). Although some recent IHRM studies have brought attention to the needs of vulnerable workers (Szkudlarek, Nardon & Tob, 2021), much more could be done to encourage action by MNEs. To improve understanding of the (potential) role of IHRM in all aspects of sustainability, future research could investigate the extent to which IHRM functions in MNEs are actively engaging with strategies such as corporate philanthropy, employee volunteer programs, social projects in local communities, addressing human rights issues, and improving the quality of employment conditions throughout global supply chains (Bapuji et al., 2020; Wettstein, Giuliani, Santangelo & Stahl, 2019). Research could also monitor and evaluate the progress and outcomes of MNE sustainability initiatives. To guide future research, we raise the following research questions:

- What is the most important for MNEs to learn from, and to change, as a result of dealing with global crises and threats, whether they are humanitarian, economic, or environmental threats?
- What should the next generation of IHRM look like with respect to humanitarian, economic, and environmental sustainability?
- What are the most effective ways to monitor and evaluate MNEs’ progress towards sustainability targets?

5.2.2. Implications for employees: Individual responses to sustainability

For globally mobile employees, awareness of environmental impact has been raised by mobile apps that show the carbon emissions impact of their travel plans. Many MNE employees are already being encouraged to find sustainable alternatives to air travel and to submit an environmental impact statement and evidence of the necessity for jetting off to a far-flung location before any travel is approved (Black et al., 2021). Future research could investigate how MNEs and individuals manage tensions between demands for environmental sustainability (i.e., reduced travel) and demands for social connection and global career opportunities.

In addition, increasing awareness of inequalities and financial deprivation exacerbated by the pandemic may have already led employees in MNEs to question their privilege and seek to increase the sustainability of their everyday practices and demand that their employers do the same. For example, employees in MNEs increasingly expect their employers to provide opportunities for local nationals and demonstrate positive humanitarian and economic contributions to the communities in which they operate. This may bring greater focus to organisational purpose and how organizational actions impact on employee commitment and job satisfaction (Collings et al., 2021). This raises the following research questions:

- How do MNE sustainability practices influence employee attraction, motivation, and retention?
- How do cultural differences affect employees’ perceptions and responses to MNE sustainability practices?

6. Discussion

IHRM leaders are working in a global storm that has resulted from the combination of multiple pent-up pressures, the ongoing trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, and unusually heightened geo-political instability (Casson, 2021). Taking a phenomenon-based approach (Doh, 2015), in this paper we outline major trends that will influence global work for some time to come. While we consider them separately, the changes associated with each are interconnected and cut across individual, organizational, and societal levels and each could be a paper in its own right. Rather than answering a single focused research question, we position this paper as a broad call for scholars to examine such critical issues. Illustrating the interconnected nature of the themes discussed, Fig. 1 presents samples outcomes that those changes have had (or will have) on MNEs and individuals. Of course, this list is not comprehensive, and we encourage others to build on these ideas. Admittedly, we are joining a crowded space. There have been dozens, if not hundreds, of COVID-19 related commentaries published in management and business journals, each calling for more research on the “new normal”. This is perhaps a natural reaction of scholars trying to make sense of tumultuous times. Beyond this, we have seen many “calls to action” for management and business researchers, most advocating that research must change, that the “field” (whatever the specific field may be) needs revitalization, that we should reconsider our basic assumptions, use more expansive theories, ask “bigger” questions, tackle “great societal challenges” and focus our energy on “wicked” problems. Realistically, such calls rarely produce a tidal wave of change, not least because of institutionalized practices such as a well-established system of incentives, rewards associated with staying within one’s own lane and entrenched ideas of time (Bozkurt & Geppert, 2021).

That said, the COVID-19 pandemic may indeed prove to be an inflection point. While the world of work was already changing, the pandemic has necessitated reassessing the priorities for individuals, organizations, and society at large. There is little doubt that globalization has been to the fore in these discussions. International travel has been a key means of the international spread of the virus and global wealth inequalities have resulted in truncated vaccine roll out with wealthy nations striding ahead and poorer nations lagging. Additionally, global supply chains have been severely disrupted by factory shutdowns, shipping infrastructure challenges, staffing shortages and reduced air travel (Hitt et al., 2021). As we write this, a brutal war is causing the largest displacement of people in Europe since WWII.

Our motivation for the current paper was to reflect on the trajectory for the IHRM function and global work as this transformation evolves. While we offer some specific research questions, there are countless more to be explored. Given the breadth of issues we cover and the myriad of theories that can apply to each, attempting to pinpoint specific conceptual frameworks to guide future research will at best result in a theory laundry list of limited utility. Instead, we consider key theoretical implications below, using illustrative examples.

Most broadly, the theoretical foundations and research insights that we have taken for “tested-and-true” must be scrutinized. Many of the classic management theories arose in economic, social, and geopolitical conditions that are “fundamentally different and increasingly distant” from the conditions describing the world today (Howard-Grenville, 2021), and assume (often hierarchically) structured organizations, staffed by (mostly) homogenous (and mostly permanent) workforce, operating in (mostly) stable environments, largely unaffected by developments in faraway countries. Given this, few would disagree that our theorizing must do better to capture contemporary phenomena. So, what is it, specifically, that we can do as we move research forward?
First, in applying existing theory, it will be good practice to revisit the theory’s fundamental assumptions and ask whether they still hold regarding the where, how, who, and why of global work. For example, a core assumption in research on managing employment relations is that “employment relations are bounded by space, time, and task-based job descriptions, all based on the employer choices” (Minbaeva, 2021). But such boundaries have become porous or have disappeared altogether. Not only must we examine the impact of such porosity, but we must also ask if it is here to stay, or if new boundaries will emerge in light of the blur between one’s home and workspaces (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000). A child or pet spontaneously showing up during a work call, a common occurrence during lockdowns, might become less endearing over time as some workers move to permanent work-from-home arrangements and new boundaries are established.

Second, the boundary conditions of our theories must be revisited, and new integrative theories may need to emerge. As an example, core propositions of motivation theory and assumptions about individuals’ needs for belonging and autonomy (Deci et al., 2017) are perhaps unchanged. However, the boundary conditions have changed. What does autonomy mean when employees are not co-located? Researchers (and managers) now more than ever should understand what underpins autonomy and belongingness; we need studies to identify and investigate such emerging new boundary conditions. The boundary conditions that create a sense of belonging in employees of the future might be less associated with the amount of time co-workers are in the same place and more associated with the quality of the time they spend together when they are collaborating.

Another example is provided by organizational socialization that has been informed by four theories, each involving the way in which people see themselves fitting in to the work group or organization: uncertainty reduction theory, need for belonging, social exchange theory, and social identity theory (Chao, 2012). Some of the socialization tactics identified (e.g., Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) by these theories would be difficult, if not impossible, in a remote work environment. For example, co-located recreational activities are less likely to occur when employees are working remotely. However, those activities have been identified as opportunities for employees to increase their sense of belonging and reduce uncertainty about the organization (Chao, 2012). With more employees working remotely, would there be a new approach that is equally effective for creating belonging and reducing uncertainty?

There are also opportunities associated with examining the moderating impact of immigrant status in management theories. One obvious example here is assessing the sources and outcomes of social support at the workplace (Cohen & Wills, 1985) in the case of immigrants. Studies...
may examine the most valued types - and sources - of support and their influence on workplace integration and overall life experiences. Related to this, systematic research is needed in examining embeddedness (Lee, Burch & Mitchell, 2014) and its relationship to turnover and career success for immigrant employees (see Halvorsen, Treuren & Kulik, 2015). We also note that while questions related to migrant employees may have appeared on the radar of management scholars only recently, there is a goldmine of relevant insights to be found in the work of migration researchers who have for years studied a wide gamut of issues from acculturation to remittances.

Finally, on the point of boundary conditions, international management has long advocated for contextualizing our research and accounting for the broader ecosystem within which the organization operates (Minaeva, 2021). This is particularly relevant in a time of crisis where many aspects of the context may change simultaneously so accounting for multiple contextual influences, going beyond the obvious suspects of culture or “varieties of capitalism,” and how they interact remains critically important. We echo Filatotchev, Ireland and Stahl (2021) call for adopting a “poly-contextual” approach, stepping outside the “confines” of agency theory, and recasting our research questions within an “open systems” framework, recognizing that contextual factors shape both many of the problems organizations face, and the solutions they have available to them. On that note, we also heed Cooke’s (2018) observation (and warning) that context is rarely assessed objectively; rather, it reflects the particular ideology of the researchers that study it, with important implications.

Third, we should deepen our engagement with other disciplines and examine which of their theories we can borrow and apply. As international business, HRM, and organizational psychology scholars, our perspective emerges from those disciplines. Truly engaging with the complexity of the questions we surface here requires insights from scholars in fields including inter alia, migration and economic geogaphy, sociology, health, sustainability, equality diversity and inclusion, and computing and artificial intelligence. For example, our understanding of health and safety will benefit from an understanding of the biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977; Karunamuni, Imayama & Goonetilleke, 2021), which is based in general systems theory and has been a dominant in health psychology, yet largely ignored to date in management and global mobility research. Take intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) as another example. Although EDI and management scholars’ interest in applying intersectionality theory is relatively recent, the term has been an established part of the parlance of feminist scholars for well over three decades now. There is much to learn and apply from their work about how distinct factors such as nationality, race, and gender may combine to create unique effects for each factor combination. And those interested in perceptions of authenticity of organizational EDI or sustainability practices may survey the marketing literature, particularly work on brand activism (i.e., brands- or organizations- taking a public stance on social and political issues). Thinking of employees as internal customers, one may examine the impact of viewing organizational practices as a reflection of substantive organizational commitments vs. viewing it as “woke washing” (organizations “marketing” themselves as caring about an issue but making only unclear or indeterminate commitments to improve the issue; Vredenburg, Kaprion, Spiry & Kemper, 2020) or “virtue signaling” (i.e. “the conspicuous expression of certain values or virtues” intended to enhance the image of the brand – or organization; Berthon, Lord Ferguson, Pitt & Wang, 2021)

Finally, we wonder whether the outcomes we want to measure and achieve. Are we reaching the point where we view outcomes for individuals to include not only motivation and engagement but also equality and inclusion, and health and safety, and outcomes for organizations to include sustainability alongside productivity? As priorities of individuals change, and macrotrends drive organizations to rethink their strategies not only on global work but on related areas such as global supply chains, we as scholars should also rethink what – and why – we study, and how we study it.

Some of the research questions investigating emerging aspects of global work can be best explored via qualitative and exploratory approaches, whereas others will be served best by big data analytics. Methodological fit – and methodological pluralism — are critical, and so are research designs that account for different stakeholder across levels and contexts. Although such studies are likely to encounter logistical hurdles, they will be best equipped to help us understand the future of global work and IHRM in MNEs. We wholeheartedly agree with Howard-Grenville’s (2021) call for research that offers more than reductionist theory that simplifies complex phenomena and that we should equip ourselves with the “care, courage, and curiosity” that would enable us to do work that is both rigorous and meaningful.

As we engage in this conversation, we recognize that the immense challenges faced by individuals, businesses, and governments are highly nuanced and differ around the world. To that end, we acknowledge our blind spots and encourage a broader range of colleagues from various disciplines and geographic perspectives to move the conversation forward. It is only as we collectively engage in multidisciplinary research, conducted by multicultural teams of scholars: that critical issues and solutions emerge more clearly. Engaging with the phenomena and macrotrends of today, we call on scholars globally to help us understand and shape the future of global work. Finally, IHRM academics can learn a great deal from HR and IB professionals. To address important problems, future research requires guidance from the experience of practitioners. To advance both scholarship and practice, we need conversations and knowledge exchanges that are mutually rewarding and can overcome the science-practice gap.

7. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the ways in which global work has changed, resulting from the trends that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated. To illustrate their effect on research, we provided examples of these changes and how each trend could potentially affect MNEs and individual employees. Our ideas are offered to highlight key changes to motivate future research. These ideas are only as good as our ability to translate them in empirical research which can inform and inspire managerial audiences. There is still much work to be done. Our impact as academics comes from our ability to effectively generate, re-evaluate, and test theories that can predict and guide decisions of the future. This is an important remit at a time when the world of work is changing rapidly. We believe there is substantial scope and opportunity for social scientists to demonstrate our value and to impact organizations’ practices and individuals’ experience of global work. We hope our paper offers a small step toward motivating research around these many important themes.

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