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Looking back to look forward: Disruption, innovation and future trends in international human resource management

Elaine Farndale^{a,*}, Sven Horak^b, Rakoon Piyanontalee^c, Sheila M. Puffer^d, Maja Vidović^e^a School of Labor and Employment Relations, The Pennsylvania State University, 508d Keller, University Park, PA 16802, USA^b The Peter J. Tobin College of Business, St. John's University, 101 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003, USA^c School of Labor and Employment Relations, The Pennsylvania State University, 508c Keller, University Park, PA 16802, USA^d D'Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University, 313 Hayden Hall, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, USA^e RIT Croatia, Don Frana Bulica 6, Dubrovnik 20 000, Croatia

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ABSTRACT

Recent global challenges, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, have underscored the critical role of human resources in international business, pushing disruptions and innovations to the forefront of international human resource management (IHRM) research and practice. This special issue editorial provides a timely and in-depth examination of the evolving IHRM landscape, reflecting on the profound changes brought by the pandemic and investigating the transformative potential of AI-driven innovations in shaping an uncertain future. Through our exploration, we challenge several dangerous assumptions that global leaders must navigate and propose a forward-looking research agenda for the IHRM field. Our analysis highlights five key themes: (1) demographic shifts and diversity, (2) evolving patterns in globalization and global mobility, (3) the complexities of managing global workforces, (4) emerging dynamics in international careers, and (5) the role of multinational enterprises (MNEs) and international small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Together, these themes offer a comprehensive framework for advancing IHRM research and practice in an increasingly complex and dynamic global environment.

1. Introduction

When we compare popular international human resource management (IHRM) research questions from recent history with those of today, we can quickly see that, while some priorities have shifted dramatically, others remain steadfastly important. In this special issue editorial, we take up the challenge to explore past priorities, see how they have changed with the severest of disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and explore future innovations that the latest technology disruption, artificial intelligence (AI), might reveal.

At the turn of the millennium, Schuler et al. (2002) broadly set out a research agenda for IHRM that included how multinational enterprises (MNEs) could balance localization and globalization, manage cross-cultural interactions, link IHRM activities to overall firm performance, and understand the role that institutions play in MNEs' reality. These topics are now broadly covered in the IHRM literature and are familiar to scholars and practitioners in the field. Building on these

insights a decade later, the implications for practice, as identified in the US-based Society for Human Resource Management's workplace 2011 forecast, became more nuanced. They included the importance of demographic changes in the workforce globally, the role of emerging economies (e.g., India, China, and Brazil), the need for cross-cultural competency to support global mobility, and increasing global talent competition (Schramm et al., 2011). Bringing us up to date, and perhaps most telling of the reality in which we now live, Ererdi et al.'s (2022) review shifted our focus to IHRM in uncertain environments, such as natural disasters, war, and economic crises, noting that we need to develop our understanding of the multiple layers of context in which MNEs operate. Commensurately, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, affecting almost every aspect thinkable within the IHRM domain (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Hamouche, 2023). Writing now toward the end of 2024, we talk about the pandemic in the past tense but with the uncertainty of whether this is truly a past phenomenon, and with only marginal insight into the long-term effects on the world of work.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: euf3@psu.edu (E. Farndale), horaks@stjohns.edu (S. Horak), rbp5475@psu.edu (R. Piyanontalee), s.puffer@northeastern.edu (S.M. Puffer), maja.vidovic@croatia.rit.edu (M. Vidović).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2024.102362>

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The pandemic brought with it a sudden shift to help both employees and employers cope with and recover from the immense disruption experienced, while simultaneously navigating an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Horak et al., 2019). The ensuing discussion among IHRM scholars centered on the implications for global mobility, the integration of technology, and the future of work at large (Caligiuri et al., 2022; Collings et al., 2021; Ererdi et al., 2022). However, before the dust had even started to settle, 2022 saw the launch of ChatGPT, a generative AI tool, which, along with similar tools, some believe has the potential to once again majorly disrupt the practice of people management on a global scale.

In the following sections, we further describe some of these fundamental disruptions and innovations that have substantially impacted IHRM practice and research. We summarily address the core impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the international world of work, followed by a discussion of how AI might similarly be expected to shape fundamentally how HRM is practiced globally. As disruptive events upturn the world of IHRM, a paramount challenge is how to turn these disruptions into innovations for success. We address this question by exploring IHRM challenges pre-pandemic, post-pandemic, and in the new era of AI. In doing so, we uncover some of the dangerous assumptions that global leadership may make in attempting to adjust to the 'new normal'. Finally, we lay out five core themes, which we argue should form the basis of the future IHRM research agenda: (1) demographic shifts and diversity, (2) evolving patterns in globalization and global mobility, (3) the complexities of managing global workforces, (4) emerging dynamics in international careers, and (5) the role of MNEs and international small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

2. The past, the present, and the future

As has become well-known in IHRM, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of remote work and virtual assignments, forcing MNEs to adapt their global staffing strategies (Caligiuri et al., 2024). This shift led to a growing interest in virtual expatriation, with international assignments carried out remotely (Jooss et al., 2021; Welch et al., 2003). The VUCA characteristics of the pandemic also highlighted the importance of crisis management and the need for greater flexibility and resilience in IHRM practices (Roumpi, 2021; Stokes et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2023).

Similarly, the pandemic underscored the complexity of managing international careers, with increased emphasis on virtual mobility, cross-cultural competencies, and digital literacy to achieve MNE performance (Bader et al., 2022; Caligiuri et al., 2020; Fernandes et al., 2022). Besides the obvious implications for MNEs, international SMEs similarly faced unique challenges in leveraging IHRM for competitive advantage, grappling with resource constraints, and the need for strategic agility in global markets (Ayoko, 2021). The dynamic relationship between headquarters and subsidiaries consequently evolved, with technology fostering more integrated and responsive global operations, emphasizing knowledge sharing, cultural intelligence, and collaborative innovation to navigate the uncertainties of the global business environment (Li & Bathelt, 2020).

How the pandemic changed our thinking is well captured by John M. Bremen, the managing director of human capital and benefits at Willis Towers Watson (as quoted in Harbert, 2021, para 1): "The week that trillions of dollars of market value came out of the global economy because people could not work and consume and live normally—that really ended any debate over the value of [the] HR [function] to the enterprise. HR's seat at the table was solidified permanently." This reaffirmation of the HR function's importance coincided with socio-economic trends such as the Great Resignation in the USA, whereby millions of Americans quit their jobs due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Cohen, 2021). Such trends affirm that the 'people are our greatest asset' tagline was a true reality. Consequently, the field

of IHRM reached a critical juncture as it grappled with the profound changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic but still needed to position itself for the future. We propose in this editorial that how the IHRM field of practice continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic disruption will largely be led by another major disruption, this time in the technological field: AI. The opportunities for innovation are immense as the VUCA context creates new challenges and opportunities for scholars and practitioners alike.

The role of technology, especially big data and the emergence of AI in IHRM practice, has become increasingly important (Budhwar et al., 2022). AI use more broadly spans from improving efficiency in HRM processes to enabling sophisticated data analytics for talent management decisions (Budhwar et al., 2022; Vishwakarma & Singh, 2023). AI and machine learning can be leveraged to optimize global staffing decisions and predict expatriate success (Malik et al., 2021; Wheeler & Buckley, 2021). AI can also facilitate the management of remote teams and the support and development of global talent, overcoming cross-cultural language barriers and facilitating cultural adjustment during longer stays abroad (Collings et al., 2021; Sahakians & Dorner, 2021). These new technologies are thus expected to play a pivotal role in reshaping recruitment, selection, performance management, and employee engagement on a global scale given the potential that the predictive and generative capabilities of AI offer for more personalized and proactive HRM interventions (Budhwar et al., 2022; Horak et al., 2024).

As one example, with the role of AI in IHRM still in its infancy, a comprehensive survey of HR leaders examining AI adoption in talent acquisition found that organizations are increasingly embracing technology in talent acquisition, particularly through virtual recruitment and selection (sourcing, candidate screening, interviewing, and evaluation) (Horak et al., 2024). However, 42 % of the study's respondents stated that their organization does not currently use AI in their talent acquisition approach, citing challenges in integrating AI technology into existing technology systems and a lack of understanding about the efficacy of AI-based tools. Despite its significant potential, current AI adoption remains limited, but considering the potential cost savings and efficiency gains, integration and adoption barriers will probably soon be overcome (Budhwar et al., 2022; Horak et al., 2024; Rehman et al., 2022; Yildiz & Esmer, 2023). The challenges organizations now face lie in how they move forward with the many opportunities but also risks involved.

3. Global leadership, AI, and IHRM: dangerous assumptions

This special issue was created to 'look back to look forward', exploring the disruptions and innovations that might influence the IHRM world of tomorrow. The issue includes six articles, all focusing on disruptions and innovations in areas such as global mobility, digital innovations, international careers, and MNE headquarters-subsidiary relationships. However, we draw your attention first here to the article in this issue by Adler, who presents a perspective piece that pushes us to question fundamentally what we think we know about global leadership given the rapidly changing and extremely challenging macro contexts in which organizations are operating and we are all living today. Adler proposes an inescapable truth: that we need to *unlearn* as much as learn to be able to respond to novel contexts, but she questions whether we are ready to turn our back on 'convenient falsehoods' to uncover 'inconvenient truths'.

This notion of unlearning aligns with our focus on disrupting the status quo to foster innovation. Adler's work raises critical questions about how new contexts reshape our understanding of global leadership and whether we are ready to let go of established practices in IHRM. Specifically, she challenges us by asking: "Are we willing to ask big questions that have the potential to make a significant difference in the world?" (Adler, this issue). What might those big questions be, and do we have the humility to unlearn convenient falsehoods to report what is

accurate rather than what we wish were true? Building on this challenge to question convention, we explore five potentially dangerous assumptions related to AI in IHRM—assumptions that are often culturally ingrained and will need to be addressed by future global leaders.

The first dangerous assumption that some leaders might make is that the practice of IHRM will return to the pre-COVID-19 pandemic norm. This is convenient to assume, as returning to ‘normal’ must be easier than reinventing the workplace. However, this is a convenient falsehood, as other disruptions have also been occurring alongside the extended period of societal recovery. We have highlighted the disruptive advent of technology innovation, especially AI, evidencing how the context in which organizations operate globally continues to change, largely independent of any organizational or national leaders, and with brief consideration of any natural or manmade disasters that may concurrently occur.

Consequently, we posit that IHRM practice needs to identify which work functions can be automated (nonhuman functions, e.g., visa processing), which ones should remain performed exclusively by humans (e.g., interpersonal interactions), and which functions can be augmented (human-assisted by AI, e.g., cross-cultural adjustment training). Various types of AI tools can be applied to HRM activities, such as natural language processing combined with chatbots, and analysis of voice and facial expressions in video interviews to predict job performance (Hemalatha et al., 2021). In *The Humachine*, Sanders and Wood (2024) predict that forward-thinking leaders will find ways to create synergy between AI technologies and humans to leverage organizational capabilities. The challenge to global leadership is to achieve collective intelligence at the enterprise level “to more effectively direct and utilize the highest capabilities of humans that cannot (yet) be automated—empathy, making ethical decisions in situations of ethical dilemmas where no decision provides a perfect outcome” (Sanders & Wood, 2024, p.3).

A second dangerous assumption that global leadership in MNEs may make is that all workers in organizations across cultures relate to the disruption and innovation that AI causes in the same way. The propensity to trust varies across societies based on underlying shared beliefs and mindsets (Ferrin & Gillespie, 2010), potentially leading to people from different cultures being more willing to trust AI-driven processes. However, a perceived threat for some workers, such as those doing routine jobs in call centers or accounting functions, is that AI may eliminate their jobs through automation. This gives rise to ethical decision-making regarding the responsibilities of an MNE to its workers across the world. It is important to recall that in the previous wave of globalization, such activities were outsourced, primarily for cost savings, to the very locations where AI may eliminate many of these tasks in part or completely.

A third, related dangerous assumption that those keen on automating recruitment processes might make is that job applicants globally will universally welcome online platforms in the hiring process. Just because AI can provide this efficient service does not guarantee that it will be effective. Studies have already identified challenges regarding worker voice when work is being managed by an algorithm (Wilkinson et al., 2022). However, we know less about how such platforms disrupt the traditional relationship between the hiring organization and the source of applicants, an alternative to going through talent/staffing agencies that screen applicants for their suitability. Online employment platforms give applicants control over how they present themselves, with opportunities for misrepresentation of personal characteristics and work experience (Taylor et al., 2024). Such disruptions to the norm create situations that involve ethical issues and require greater scrutiny by employers.

A fourth dangerous assumption that global leadership may fall into if they are not aware of variations in global data privacy is that attitudes related to the use of AI in IHRM will be consistent across countries. At one extreme, the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) imposes privacy restrictions on data collection by social media companies.

At the other, repressive governments collect sensitive personal and corporate data for control and surveillance purposes. AI is disrupting MNEs’ thinking about the options available when faced with different restrictions on their HRM data. What if MNEs want to adopt a universal policy toward data protection but face different scenarios imposed by different countries? What options do MNEs have when working with authoritarian societies where AI may be used secretly for surveillance in the hands of political groups without independent auditing? Decision-makers involved in the adoption of AI technologies in IHRM could look at strategies available to MNEs in dealing with regimes experiencing rising nationalism. Edman et al. (2024) suggest that nationalist sentiments limit the ability of MNEs to hybridize dissimilar practices, increase the risk of local discrimination, and build resistance to foreign ideas among organizational members. These authors conclude that MNEs can avoid, mitigate, or leverage nationalist sentiments to their advantage.

A fifth dangerous assumption for global leadership to make in IHRM is that AI can work independently without a human in the loop, even for some of the more transactional activities. Humans need to be involved to place ethics at the forefront of decision-making and policymaking. Consequently, De Cremer and Narayanan (2023) call for ethical upskilling to complement digital upskilling in the AI era. They assert that “it is not from intelligent technologies that we should expect more responsible behavior, but rather from the choices that people make with respect to those technologies” (De Cremer and Narayanan, 2023, p.1040). They suggest managers should be trained to gain awareness of the moral dilemmas created by these technologies and to become adept at making responsible choices that consider all stakeholders. They argue that these objectives can be accomplished by “learning to manage their biases and moral flaws and to respond proactively to systemic forces that threaten to turn the power of intelligent technologies toward immoral ends” (De Cremer & Narayanan, 2023, p. 1040). They recommend research on how “employee-AI interactions shape ethical decision-making processes, and what types of responsible leadership and ‘ethical infrastructures’ (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003) are needed to facilitate responsible use of intelligent technologies in organizations” (p. 1040). De Cremer and Narayanan (2023) also advocate for redesigning governance mechanisms and organizational structures to further the responsible use of AI. All these activities are within the purview of responsible global leadership and IHRM policies and practices.

Sixth, we challenge global leadership not to make the dangerous assumption that SMEs are inferior to MNEs in how they are adapting to the disruptions and innovations taking place on the global stage. Traditionally, leaders have looked to globally dominant MNEs to seek best practices in IHRM, given that SMEs are typically at a relative disadvantage regarding the availability of resources. With the disruptive advent of AI, we might assume that SMEs have fewer resources to acquire access to sophisticated tools for IHRM applications. However, perhaps SMEs will be more agile in developing AI tools and offering them to support the operations of major MNEs as SMEs can have the advantage of greater flexibility. For instance, SMEs are typically not signatories to or bound by global agreements or pacts. MNEs are sometimes treated like states, as with the United Nations human rights agreements, and MNEs can voluntarily agree to abide by such agreements. International corporate investment agreements, more typically engaged in by MNEs rather than SMEs, can also have stipulations. The relative flexibility of SMEs could shed light on more localized and particularistic ways of implementing AI in IHRM practices that could be sources of innovation to be adopted by MNEs.

4. Core themes for future IHRM research

Global leadership clearly faces many challenges regarding the future world of work with AI following the substantial disruption brought about by the pandemic. Research therefore has a critical role to play in helping to ensure the future success of international business. We

address here the themes that emerged from our exploration of the past, present, and future of IHRM research against the backdrop of the VUCA context. We propose that the IHRM field is facing five core challenges: (1) demographic shifts and diversity, (2) evolving patterns in globalization and global mobility, (3) the complexities of managing global workforces, (4) emerging dynamics in international careers, and (5) the role of MNEs and international SMEs. We explore each theme in depth in the following sections, moving from the past to the present to the future. A summary of the resultant research questions can be found in Table 1.

4.1. Demographic shifts and diversity

Just a decade ago, a critical point of discussion was how the various dimensions of diversity have different prominence across country settings based on traditional values around characteristics such as gender, age, and race, as well as different degrees of heterogeneity in societies largely based on historical migration patterns (Shen et al., 2009). The diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) space was therefore identified as particularly challenging for MNEs because of the multilevel factors that come into play, ranging from global influence from international standards (e.g., through the United Nations), through regional or national regulations and cultural values, as well as organizational strategies that overarch team values and individual employee mindsets (Scroggins & Benson, 2010). Consequently, there was an emphasis on the need to consider the coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures on firms to adopt DEIB practices in any given country context coming from these multiple levels of influence (Ferner et al., 2005).

Today, the context for MNEs is no easier, and arguably has become increasingly complex. Whether induced by conflicts or motivated by economic opportunities, changing patterns of migration have altered the ethnic makeup of many countries' workforces. For instance, the prevalence of the non-Hispanic White racial group in the United States fell from 63.7 % in 2010 to 57.8 % in 2020 (Jensen et al., 2021), while some 9 % of the population of the European Union was born outside of its member states (European Commission, 2024). Such migration transforms workplaces into multicultural hubs of diverse ethnic groups and compels firms to adopt more advanced diversity management strategies (Kirton, 2020; Koopmans et al., 2005; Shore et al., 2009). There is a need for future research to explore how MNEs are managing the changing patterns of migration and workforce diversity, given the multiple layers of context that affect DEIB strategy development and implementation.

Looking to the future, as diversity management investigates issues around equity, inclusion, belonging, and access, we propose that AI is especially relevant to the IHRM discipline with its emphasis on

managing a global and culturally diverse workforce. It has been suggested that AI has the potential to enhance the sense of belonging and inclusion within organizations and promote organizational fairness (Walkowiak, 2023), although there is still much to be discovered about digital technology in HRM (Bucher et al., this issue). Hiring decisions often entail subjective biases, and careful consideration must be given to ensure that these biases are not perpetuated in an AI-driven environment (Fosch-Villaronga & Poulsen, 2022).

AI-enhanced hiring systems leverage vast datasets to provide insights that were previously inaccessible. Consequently, an AI-driven hiring approach can advance diversity initiatives by employing algorithms specifically designed to mitigate bias (Hemalatha et al., 2021; Malin et al., 2024). By integrating diversity considerations into algorithmic design, organizations may substantially diminish unconscious biases that have historically impeded recruitment endeavors. AI possesses the capability to detect disparities in diversity hiring and propose strategies for improvement, thereby facilitating a more inclusive recruitment process. As a result, companies may enhance their employer value proposition and execute their strategies with greater efficiency and effectiveness (Daugherty et al., 2020).

To achieve these outcomes, the HR function must play an important role: first being aware of potential biases, consequently helping to identify when bias is occurring in algorithmic management, and finally being involved with technology experts to mitigate negative outcomes. Future research should focus on how these roles can be achieved in reality and quickly, to keep up with the pace of technological developments.

4.2. Evolving patterns in globalization and global mobility

A decade ago, the implications for IHRM of the important role of emerging economies in the globalization of MNEs were starting to be recognized (Thite et al., 2012). Since then, geopolitical tensions have risen, profoundly reshaping the field of IHRM as organizations grapple with heightened uncertainty and societal challenges. Political polarization within nations is transferring to the workplace, increasing the need for diversity (of thought) management. Simultaneously, conflicts and sanctions are affecting the availability of human resources as migration patterns are changing (for example, in the Russia-Ukraine war or the Israel-Hamas military conflict). Consequently, organizations need to develop dynamic capabilities to manage adaptability in the face of geopolitical instability and polarized societies (Cooke et al., 2024).

IHRM research has started to identify the complexities of managing global mobility and expatriate assignments against this backdrop of

Table 1

Future research questions addressing important disruptions and innovations in IHRM.

Demographic shifts and diversity

- How are MNEs managing amidst the changing patterns of migration and workforce diversity given the multiple layers of context that affect DEIB strategy development and implementation?
- How can HR professionals help to identify and reduce potential bias in algorithmic management across IHRM practices globally?

Evolving patterns in globalization and global mobility

- How and why do perceptions related to the advent of digital technologies and the right to work from home vary across national contexts?
- What are the national-level institutional and cultural factors that impact the acceptance of algorithmic management, and how might the reactions of workers subject to such systems vary across nations?
- Can AI take the place of the cross-cultural competencies learned through international experiences among future MNE leaders?

The complexities of managing global workforces

- Is the promise of AI to forecast a candidate's future success within a diverse and international workforce playing out in reality?
- What is the potential for AI to identify a candidate's suitability in terms of skills, personality traits, or even other attributes for a particular team while considering the nuances of cultural diversity?
- What impact does the adoption of AI have on creating a more level playing field in IHRM practices, avoiding human subjectivity in different cultural and institutional contexts?

Emerging dynamics in international careers

- How do multilevel contextual influences (at the individual, organizational, national, and global level) interact to affect international career behaviors?
- What role might MNEs play in addressing migration flows, either by addressing problematic issues in the home country, or deploying talent facing challenging circumstances in the home country as expatriates to subsidiaries in other locations?
- How might personalized and culturally aware AI systems change how individuals and organizations make decisions regarding international careers?

The role of MNEs and international SMEs

- How do MNE headquarters exert control over subsidiary HRM policies in extreme VUCA contexts?
- What are the implications for MNEs of a power balance shift of workers and management that may result from AI becoming more integrated in collective bargaining?

geopolitical disruption (Lee et al., 2024). Geopolitical pressures also necessitate a more institutionally responsive approach to HRM by MNEs operating in these VUCA environments (Karst et al., 2024). Similarly, polycrises—overlapping and compounding global crises—are prompting a reevaluation of the contexts and institutional frameworks within which MNEs operate, requiring more resilient and context-specific HRM strategies (Wood et al., 2024). These tensions highlight the importance of geopolitical awareness and adaptability in managing cross-border human resources amid an uncertain global landscape (Belhoste & Dimitrova, 2023), which should be a focus of future research.

Relatedly, traditional notions of expatriation have been changing. The number of self-initiated expatriates from emerging to advanced economies has grown (Andresen et al., 2020), but it has quickly become apparent that these self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) often face the challenge of brain waste, where their skills and knowledge were underutilized in the host country, often because of language issues or the non-transferability of academic credentials (Carr et al., 2005). Nevertheless, SIEs could acquire new skills, knowledge, and networks during their international experience (Cao et al., 2012; Dickmann et al., 2018), enhancing their human capital and career prospects both in the host country and upon their return to their home country (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). The extent to which SIEs could realize these benefits, however, was known to depend on the transferability of their acquired skills and the receptiveness of their home country's labor market (Jokinen, 2010). Future researchers were consequently encouraged to explore the long-term career implications of SIEs from emerging to advanced economies and the role of IHRM policies in facilitating the successful reintegration of returning SIEs (Ho et al., 2016; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Mello et al., 2020).

Jumping forward to the post-pandemic years, following the major disruption in the VUCA environment that had halted almost all forms of expatriation, research and practice were forced back to square one to question fundamentally the phenomenon of globalization. In practice, deglobalization of the movement of people, i.e., pulling back on global mobility, was becoming a reality (DHL, 2024). Even before the pandemic, many countries had already witnessed a shift toward the closing of national borders, largely related to growing immigration concerns (Farndale et al., 2021).

In the same way that the COVID-19 pandemic became a natural experiment for employers and workers globally, another event with the potential to be similarly disruptive at least within the European Union (EU) is the EU law enacted in 2024, which requires member countries to accept migrants or face fines (Gozzi, 2024). Integrating migrants into work organizations necessitates innovations in virtually all HRM activities given the challenges of diversity already discussed. From an international perspective, MNEs operating in the EU would be expected to comply with this law and hence need to make strategic decisions about whether to harmonize their policies on migrants across their global operations.

The pandemic and geopolitical disruptions meant that the time was ripe for digital technologies that enabled many people to work from home (WFH) rather than relocate to other countries. This phenomenon raises many questions about how WFH could operate in different national contexts (Chamakiotis et al., 2024). For example, to what extent is WFH viewed as a right or a privilege? How does this play out in egalitarian vs. equity-based societies? What are the policy implications for MNE employers? How do attitudes toward hybrid and liminal practices for work-life boundaries affect global HRM policies? In one study comparing Scandinavian countries with Canada (both representing advanced economies), differences are already emerging (Austen, 2024). In Scandinavian countries, workers did not object to post-COVID calls by employers to physically return to work since the social infrastructure was in place to handle child and elder care. In contrast, Canadian public service employees with less social infrastructure engaged in labor negotiations in 2024 to gain more discretionary influence on WFH while their government employer was insisting on three days a week in the

office. The differences when looking at a broader range of economies might be expected to be even more nuanced and represent an interesting topic for future research.

A related and growing phenomenon pertains to workplace consent and autonomy. AI, as an advanced digital technology, can enable workers to be managed by an algorithm rather than a human manager, further supporting the ability of people to work remotely. A study of the ride-hailing industry in the USA, for example, found that workers welcomed the technology and perceived themselves as skillful agents meeting corporate objectives (Cameron, 2024). However, we need to question whether this outcome would apply to more hierarchical or high power distance cultures often characterized by greater reliance on management. Similarly, future research might explore whether this type of autonomy could lead to self-interested behavior to the detriment of corporate goals.

The challenges for future research and practice lie in a very delicate balancing act between the benefits of global mobility, the opportunities that digital technologies and AI offer, and the institutional constraints to managerial practice in this domain. In this special issue, the in-depth qualitative study of global mobility leaders by Mello et al. provides insights into how global mobility has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic through the interplay of multiple layers of context. Their study uncovers the increasing importance of considering the needs of individuals alongside industry norms and organizational priorities as extant operating contexts are disrupted. Also in this special issue, Bucher et al. conduct a systematic literature review to explore the changing role of digital technologies in global mobility. The authors argue that we need to *unlearn* (a theme proposed by Adler, also in this issue) the traditional expatriate assignment and learn anew what global mobility looks like through a digital lens.

Going forward, we contend that there will be an ever stronger need to question why people should be relocated around the globe in MNEs given the well-known cost and risk implications versus creating virtual global teams. Perhaps the rationale remains that senior executives and leadership teams need to have international exposure to develop competencies to remain competitive, or can we leave such competence in the future to AI? As Bucher et al. (this issue) note, the scenario of WFH is being enacted on a global scale with many 'would-be expatriates' working remotely, raising the possibility of an armchair understanding of other cultures from a distance rather than an in-depth, immersive experience.

4.3. The complexities of managing global workforces

In the 2010s, global talent management was recognized as one of the key drivers of an MNE's ability to succeed in the face of competition. Research highlighted the evolving complexities in global talent management driven by the (de-)globalization trends and demographic shifts already discussed, ultimately leading to talent shortages. Tarique and Schuler (2010) presented an institutional framework in which global talent management was described as being influenced by regional alliances, international partnerships, and labor market dynamics, emphasizing the importance of IHRM activities such as developing an employer brand, recruiting internationally minded workers, and managing workforce engagement. Building on this, Schuler et al. (2011) identified the key global talent management challenges—talent shortage, talent surplus, talent at the wrong place, and talent at the wrong price—and pinpointed which IHRM policies and practices might best address specific challenges. These factors still play a role today in ensuring global talent management contributes to bottom-line performance (Fernandes et al., 2022).

As noted, this global reality has since been disrupted by innovations in virtual work, arguably representing one of the most universally impactful changes in the world of work in recent years (Jooss et al., 2022). The role and organization of virtual work and working together in international virtual teams were regarded as crucial for coordinating

international business activities during COVID-19 and remain relevant in a global post-COVID-19 business environment (Tavoletti et al., 2022). Consequently, digital technologies have emerged as a key enabler for IHRM in navigating the challenges posed by the pandemic, facilitating remote work, virtual assignments, and the management of geographically dispersed teams (Jooss et al., 2021).

Having shifted to virtual and hybrid workplaces, new challenges to managing global workforces have emerged, but AI is offering some innovative solutions. A core area where AI can add considerable value to MNEs is through predictive analytics. Increasingly sophisticated AI tools are emerging, enhancing their capacity to forecast a candidate's success within a diverse and international workforce. With access to expansive datasets on candidates and the broader workforce, AI can more accurately predict a candidate's career trajectory, cultural fit, or potential synergy with specific international teams or projects (Mahajan et al., 2022). Future research should explore the extent to which this promise is becoming a reality.

Given the noted diversity inherent in cultures across global teams, AI-enabled predictive analytics may have the potential to identify a candidate's suitability in terms of skills, personality traits, or even other attributes for a particular team, while considering the nuances of cultural diversity. This approach could address the common issue of new hires feeling out of place, which often results in premature departures, ultimately promoting better team cohesion. Consequently, this could not only enhance the quality of relationships within teams but also boost motivation and performance across culturally diverse groups, ultimately leading to more effective and harmonious IHRM practices (Allal-Chérif et al., 2021). Future research could help to uncover how this might play out in practice.

Hemalatha et al. (2021) concluded in a study of high-tech companies in Chennai, India, that the use of AI technologies in recruitment sped up the process and was cost-effective. Additionally, they noted that AI reduced human bias in screening resumes and matching candidates by eliminating "discrimination, emotional factors, [and] prejudice" (ibid, p. 62). The authors do not, however, appear to address the human subjectivity that potentially enters into creating the algorithms. We believe their conclusions may reflect the cultural context in India, where recruitment and selection tend to be based more heavily on informal institutional pressures of nepotism and other types of favoritism. Thus, we suggest future research could explore the adoption of AI in cultures with stronger formal institutions, where AI may play a stronger role in creating a more level playing field, avoiding human subjectivity.

4.4. Emerging dynamics in international careers

Around a decade ago, cross-cultural competency emerged as a hot topic in international careers research (Schramm et al., 2011). The field has since shifted toward a broader consideration of contextual influences, highlighting the complex interplay between individual, organizational, national, and global level factors that shape international career behaviors (Baruch et al., 2016).

At the individual level, research has examined the impact of personal characteristics, such as personality traits (Wang et al., 2013) and cultural intelligence (Ang et al., 2007) on international career decision-making and adjustment (Shaffer et al., 2006). Organizational-level factors, including organizational support (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001) along with career development practices and repatriation policies (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2001), have also been found to influence international career behaviors. Moreover, macro-level contextual factors, such as cultural differences, economic conditions, and institutional environments, have been recognized as affecting international career patterns and outcomes (Parry et al., 2021).

In this special issue, Ott et al.'s (this issue) systematic literature review explores how and why different extreme global contexts disrupt an individual's behavior in pursuing an international career. They conclude that more localized contexts (such as industry, host country,

organization, and team) are largely missing from the extant literature, creating promising avenues for research. Today, despite this growing body of research, there remain interesting opportunities to investigate the complex interrelationships between these multilevel contextual influences, setting the scene to adopt a more integrative approach to studying international career behaviors (Farndale et al., 2017).

An interesting current example of multi-level contextual influences comes from self-initiated US expatriates leaving the USA to work abroad for political, financial, or personal reasons. This expatriate phenomenon includes "Blaxit" whereby African Americans move to places where they feel they can live more authentically and with fewer societal restraints than in the USA (Blaxit, 2024). In light of such decisions, future research could consider the extent to which MNEs might have an obligation or self-interest to try to retain such talent, either by addressing issues in the USA or deploying those expatriates to their subsidiaries in other locations.

As international careers have become increasingly complex to manage at the individual and organizational levels, innovations are emerging from the application of AI that might also support MNE development. AI has the potential to enhance training and development initiatives on a global scale, offering dual benefits for employers and employees (Lin et al., 2014; Vrontis et al., 2021). First, as the organization's AI system processes a broader range of data and scenarios from diverse cultures and markets, it refines and personalizes the AI algorithm. This exposure to global contexts not only enhances the sophistication of the algorithm, but also enables it to provide more nuanced training and development recommendations. These personalized and culturally aware insights elevate the AI system to a unique asset, positioning it at the core of the organization's strategy for managing social complexity, enhancing skills, and fostering career growth across a diverse workforce.

Second, AI can deliver a tailored candidate experience, customized not only to the individual's traits and job preferences but also to their cultural background and international career aspirations. This encompasses personalized job recommendations that account for global mobility, customized interview feedback, and individualized training and development plans that respect cultural differences and personal interests. This approach not only enhances the candidate's experience but also aligns with global HRM strategies, ensuring that talent development is both inclusive and adaptive to the demands of the globalized business environment (Malik et al., 2021; Allal-Chérif et al., 2021). Future research might explore how personalized and culturally aware AI systems are developing and changing how individuals and organizations make decisions regarding international careers.

4.5. The role of MNEs and international SMEs

The control of subsidiary HRM policies by MNR corporate headquarters has remained a central topic in IHRM and international business research over the decades (Ferner et al., 2012). It has been well-established that this control is influenced by various factors, including institutional differences between home and host countries and the various approaches to industrial relations (Almond et al., 2005). Institutional differences, such as variations in employment laws, cultural norms, and economic systems, were found to constrain the transfer of HRM policies from headquarters to subsidiaries (Kostova & Roth, 2002).

The extent to which headquarters exert control over subsidiary HRM policies in extreme VUCA contexts was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, although few insights have emerged in the literature, leaving this topic ripe for future research. Most current literature continues to focus on the extent to which institutions remain steadfast, and hence IHRM practices remain unchanged. Applying institutional theory, country differences in employee selection practices are persistent and increasing—a refutation of any notion of convergence across countries (Biemann et al., 2023). In a corroborating study, Zhang and Wang (2024) found steadfast hiring differences across European Union

countries. Employers in higher social trust countries, such as Nordic countries, selected employees much more frequently on the strength of their foundational skills, in contrast to employers in southern European countries who selected more on advanced skills.

Most recently, interest in the role of labor unions as institutions affecting MNE operations has been increasing. For example, an ABC News report (Ordóñez, 2023) covered BMW workers in the USA considering whether to unionize. The report noted the growing power of workers because of labor and skill shortages, and thus an opportune time to move toward unionization. In contrast, workers at BMW's German operations take union membership as a given. It is managed through different organizational structures, in this case, the principle of co-determination in which elected works councils have mandatory membership in corporate supervisory boards. Hence, different cultures have different conceptions of the meaning and role of unions in monitoring corporate headquarters' control of HRM practices in the host country, and these differences can create complications for MNEs. In this special issue, Fenton-O'Creevy and Gooderham highlight how home and host country institutions interact to affect MNE corporate headquarters' control of subsidiary HRM policies. They uncover why corporate headquarters approaches may still need to innovate across contexts, specifically when local labor unions play an active role in monitoring MNE headquarters' control of HRM practices.

Focusing on the future, AI is expected to affect union-employer relations as it is introduced into the collective bargaining arena. AI tools have been developed to assist workers in collecting their own job data, analyzing their work problems to determine how widely they are shared, and developing solutions. The designer of these tools sees them as leading to "a fair and ethical gig economy—one with fair wages, humane working conditions, and increased job security" (Savage, cited in Kuzub, 2024, para. 2). The implications of the expectations of the power balance shift of workers and management resulting from AI will become important policy issues for MNEs and are worthy of future research.

Shifting attention away from large MNEs, an important but neglected IHRM context is SMEs, which comprise the vast majority of organizations globally, yet have received relatively little attention in the IHRM literature (Farndale et al., 2023). Case studies can provide a rich context for understanding the idiosyncrasies of inter-organizational relationships in smaller organizations. In this special issue, Menzies et al. present an exploratory qualitative study of Australian-owned SMEs operating in China. They uncover how commitment-based HRM was adopted by Australian firms to manage both internal and external stakeholders, given the challenging cultural and institutional differences that exist between the Australian and Chinese contexts. However, a combination of both commitment and collaboration-based HRM practice configurations was found to be the most effective in delivering more radical innovation. A study by Xu et al. (2024) also explored a small Chinese social organization building trust with a large, powerful Chinese government organization through informal institutions, which they achieved most effectively through office visits, favors, and a key liaison. The authors note that such trust is "particularistic, exclusive, limited in transferability, discrete, and information based" (ibid, p. 1). There are obvious lessons to be learned from this SME context also for MNEs: instances arise whereby MNEs need to interact with community organizations in local contexts, who need to interact with local government organizations through informal mechanisms. Thus, such case studies can provide insights into how small organizations interact to build trust with government bodies and how they interpret the meaning of that trust.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, it is clear that the domain of IHRM is both complex and constantly evolving with an abundance of research opportunities and leadership challenges. Given the range of disruptions and innovations that this editorial and the articles published in this special issue have considered, where does this leave the field of IHRM? In a systematic

review of the IHRM literature, Cooke et al. (2019) were already pushing us to avoid elitism in the field, commenting on the need to expand the IHRM research agenda to include MNEs from countries other than the economic powers, as well as unskilled and semi-skilled expatriates rather than the usual focus on management expatriation. Similarly, Ererdi et al. (2022) argue that we need to be more holistic in our research by including the multiple layers of context in which MNEs operate.

Prior extensive reviews of the IHRM literature have uncovered the need for scholars to be braver and pose the big questions that challenge the field (Sanders & De Cieri, 2021). Here, we have done so by stepping back to see the big picture that has emerged over the last decade or so during times of substantial disruption and innovation in the world of work globally. We propose that global leadership and the IHRM field are at a pivotal point in managing the dramatic VUCA contexts that have been emerging and continue to do so. The COVID-19 pandemic has already disrupted our world, which is leading to novel innovations in response as we push forward. AI is currently disrupting the nature of work and the relationship between people and machines. Geopolitical conflicts, nationalism, and autocratic regimes are disrupting the systems of globalization that have been in place for the past three decades or more. Other pressing issues in the global workplace that require swift scrutiny and innovative solutions are now waiting in the wings. Ethical decision-making by global leaders, including IHRM professionals, that avoids dangerous assumptions will be essential for setting the course toward embracing innovations while avoiding the pitfalls of conducting and managing business on a global scale. Future research must guide this process by grounding studies in sound theory, combating convenient falsehoods, and aligning research topics with the rapidly emerging challenges in a dynamic global context.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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