Location Dangers during and after COVID – Identifying and Managing Threats in Hostile Environments

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COVID-19 has made health-related threats abundantly clear. This is one threat to the health and well-being of global workers that affects everyone. However, the hostile environment that was created by this international pandemic and other physical threats such as crime and violence camouflage other types of dangers that might be easily overlooked. These include psychological threats – dangers to individuals' mental health – and institutional threats such as uncertainty, volatility and bias in regulations that impede us to carry on with "business as normal". This article characterizes different hostile host environment and explores what organizations and individuals can do to successfully master associated challenges for the post-pandemic time.

Understanding hostile environments: Beyond crime and violence

Going on an international assignment and managing expatriates undertaking these international work experiences is already a complex process in itself. When adding the additional concern of dealing with hostile locations, this can become an even more challenging situation. Assignments to "hardship locations" are already quite familiar to multinationals where threats such as conventional crime and terrorism require an appropriate strategy. However, there are other, overlooked types of threats that a host environment might pose to expatriates and their employer organizations that also require a thorough assessment by HR and global mobility departments.

Through research undertaken by an EU-funded global mobility (GLOMO) project it has become clear that individuals and organizations view hostile environments differently and attribute varying importance on preparation, management and coping strategies to deal with dangers effectively. Individuals view their host environment in a broader sense and are highly affected by more subtle aspects of difficult environments such as the unwelcoming mindset of the local population. The gap between individual and organizational perceptions compromises a nuanced understanding of what these adverse locations really consist of. The actual challenge lies in trying to assess the different facets of hostile or unwelcoming environments, and appropriately prepare for the threats they might pose.

The research clearly identifies that organizations and individuals need to incorporate dangers to the health and well-being of assignees that go beyond physical threats such as crime or terrorism. Psychological threats such as feeling unwelcomed by the host country society or facing different hostile attitudes can highly impact an expatriates' sense of belonging or negatively affect their mental health. At the same time, institutional threats such as unwelcoming country-level regulations (such as those resulting from BREXIT and its "hostile environment policy") might impact expatriates even before they embark on an assignment. This includes whether or not going to a host country that they see as institutionally hostile to them.

What shapes the experiences of international assignees and their families? This is a question that needs to be asked when trying to truly assess the quality of a host

environment to expatriates. Beyond accounting for statistics and national-level issues such as crime rates and propensity for natural disasters, it is also important to learn from the expatriates' experiences in adverse host countries.

What can be done to manage these host countries' threats?

Companies have a long history of preparing individuals for physical threats through seminars or through response to terrorism or crime trainings. In addition, organizations provide security measures in the form of gated, secure housing, body-guards or other security personnel, geo-tracking and emergency response planning and/or passive security initiatives such as bullet-proof cars.

By combining both objective data and individual perceptions of it, organizations can go beyond a simple focus on physical threats and include psychological and institutional elements in their HR and global mobility policies. Having a more holistic approach to account for the specific issues expatriates tend to face in more hostile locations will allow organizations to improve the management of their assignees, and allow for a better expatriation experience both from the employee and the company's side. The GLOMO research clearly shows that offering local mentors, coaching and counseling sessions are some example options for dealing with some of the non-physical threats. In addition, the training of host teams or assignees themselves can improve mutual understanding and avoid some cultural misconceptions.

International Working without Moving Abroad.

If we look at current discussions on "the future of global mobility" after COVID from the perspective of expatriation to hostile environments, this might bring additional opportunities for dealing with threats that an assignment might pose to expatriates. Some threats could be eased, or even avoided altogether, if assignees do not need to physically relocate to their assignments host countries – especially the so feared physical threats.

At the same time, the decreased and remote contact with their host countries, its culture and networks, might also bring additional challenges for expatriates and their employer organizations. Some of the key problems of virtual international working lie in knowledge transfer and the needed trusting understanding and cultural cohesion that organizations rely on to operate successfully. Another of the articles in this series on GLOMO research will cover these issues in more depth. The balance between remote, hybrid, in situ and flexible working arrangements will shape the future of global mobility and the responses that are needed to address issues of hostile work environments in the post-pandemic world.

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