
A Dimensional Framework for Qualifying Virtual Expatriate Work

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Abstract:

Purpose: Virtual expatriation is increasingly emerging as a common form of virtual global work. Despite this interest, the concept of virtual expatriation remains conceptually ambiguous and poorly defined, with prior research largely focussing on virtual mobility and personal characteristics while integration of job design and organisational practices remains limited. Consequently, it remains unclear which types of work can be classified as virtual expatriate work. Addressing this gap, this study adopts a qualitative theory-building approach to identify and conceptualise the dimensions of job design and work conditions that qualify work as virtual expatriate work.

Design/methodology/approach: Drawing on semi-structured interviews with human resource professionals, managers, and employees, the study uses qualitative methodology to analyse the data.

Findings: The findings revealed six interrelated dimensions to qualify work as virtual expatriate work. These dimensions are integrated into a conceptual framework with shift from personal to work related characteristics.

Practical Implications: The study clearly showed that overseeing virtual expatriates differs from managing other categories of virtual employees. Therefore, managers can also draw on this study to more effectively manage virtual expatriate work by deliberately cultivating relationships and designing appropriate control structures.

Originality/value: This study contributes to research on virtual expatriation, extends job design theories to virtual and international context, and advances international human resource management by providing a basis for designing and clarifying virtual expatriate roles.

Keywords: Virtual expatriation, job design, international human resource management, global virtual mobility.

JEL codes: F22, J61, M16, J24, O15.

Paper type: Research paper.

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1. Introduction

With the increasing scale of remote working in international environment the concept of virtual expatriation is increasingly used in the literature and practice, however, remains ambiguous and poorly defined (Bucher *et al.*, 2025; Lauring *et al.*, 2024). Available studies consider virtual expatriation as a form of remote work or a replacement of traditional expatriation without deep analysis of how this job is designed and governed (Lauring *et al.*, 2024). In the literature there is no evidence on which criteria allow to distinguish virtual expatriate from typical virtual work.

Therefore, there is a need to look through the lens of job design and working conditions, as virtual expatriation is not limited only to virtual mobility or where the job is performed. The job design of virtual expatriates needs to be examined in light of the scope of their international responsibilities and cross-border tasks, the structural interdependencies between headquarters and foreign units, the allocation of working time across borders, the relevant regulatory and employment frameworks, and the approaches used for integration and performance assessment.

As virtual expatriation is a property of job design, not only of individuals, this study shifts the focus from characteristics of virtual expatriates to the job design of virtual expatriates, where work is a primary unit of analysis. The main question is “what job characteristics qualifies employee to be considered as virtual expatriate.

By conceptualising the framework to qualify the work as virtual expatriate work, several research questions were formulated:

RQ1 – Which specific aspects of job design and working conditions qualify a role as virtual expatriate work?

RQ2 – Which dimensions of job design can be identified from the perspectives and experiences of virtual expatriates, their supervisors, and HR representatives?

RQ3 – In what ways do tasks, organisational structures, and configurations of time and space distinguish virtual expatriate work from other types of international remote work?

In the literature there is no validated tool that will allow to qualify work as virtual expatriate work (Lauring *et al.*, 2024). Qualitative research aimed at differentiating these dimensions appears to be the most suitable approach, because using quantitative methods at this early stage would necessitate relying on arbitrary definitions and importing scales from the fields of remote work or traditional expatriation, which could lead to low measurement accuracy.

Qualitative interviews allowed to capture real organisational practices and identification of recurring work design patterns. Moreover, it allowed to understand how different actors (employees, HR managers, supervisors) define and implement virtual expatriation in practice.

The qualitative approach enabled the inductive identification of dimensions for structuring the work of virtual expatriates, grounded in empirical evidence. This serves as the foundation for developing the “Framework of qualifying work as virtual expatriate” tool and for subsequent quantitative studies, including scale validation and the examination of interdependencies. The overall research procedure guarantees both coherence and relevance.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Virtual Expatriation in International Organisations

Due to global crisis caused by Covid-19 pandemic many employees of global organisations were forced to work from home (Ganguly *et al.*, 2025; Jooss *et al.*, 2020; Karl *et al.*, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2023). As a result, organisations implemented a range of technology-based solutions to maintain their operations and sustain their business activities (Bucher *et al.*, 2025; Tomčíková *et al.*, 2021).

It became clear that adopting a virtual way of working brought numerous benefits, most notably enabling faster and more cost-effective collaboration across the globe. As a result of these developments, the concept of virtual global mobility (VGM) arose, referring to the replacement of in-person international work interactions with electronically mediated communication tools (Bücker *et al.*, 2020; Selmer *et al.*, 2022; Wicht and Holtbrügge, 2023). VGM moves work to people across borders using technology for same purposes as traditional expatriates.

Virtual global workers likewise teach or build business applications and gain experience through hands-on practice, with the only difference being that they perform these activities remotely. Certainly, they experience time zone issues (Colazo and Fang, 2009) (Nurmi, 2011), social disengagement, lower trust with local staff, challenged intercultural integration (Wicht and Holtbrügge, 2023), however many employees have learnt to deal with most issues while working virtually and they do not have problems with productivity and wellbeing.

The accelerated digitalisation and rise of virtual and hybrid work arrangements (Lazarova *et al.*, 2023) provoked the discussion in the literature whether specific forms of traditional global work assignments (GWA) can be replaced or complemented by VGM (Selmer *et al.*, 2022) and how VGM can substitute physical relocation for different types of expatriates (Mello and Tomei, 2021).

In the literature there are different types of GWA and employees occupying this type of work can be characterised in various ways (Jooss *et al.*, 2020; Mäkelä and Kinnunen, 2018). The most common distinction is between expatriates and global travellers (Selmer *et al.*, 2022). The first category comprises corporate expatriates and self-initiated expatriates, while second group includes short-term assignees, flexpatriates, international business travellers, and international commuters (Selmer

et al., 2022). Corporate expatriates are usually assigned by their organisation to undertake a specific task or accomplish an organisational goal in host country, they usually travel overseas with family, and their assignment last several years (Mäkelä and Kinnunen, 2018; Mello and Tomei, 2021).

Self-initiated expatriates are people who relocate abroad on their own initiative rather than being assigned by an employer. They finance their own move and typically do not have a predetermined end date for their stay (Cerdin and Selmer, 2014). They relocate to a country of their choice not only to pursue their career development, but also cultural and personal.

Short-term assignees are employees on international assignments that last longer than a typical business trip but are shorter than a traditional expatriate posting. They spend in host country usually less than one year (Bücker *et al.*, 2020; Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004). They maintain their family and personal life in their home country (Mäkelä and Kinnunen, 2018). Flexpatriates undertake brief international assignment to multiple foreign locations at the request of an employer, usually for 1-2 month to accomplish short-term job or other irregular specialised tasks in various international environments (Bücker *et al.*, 2020; Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004).

International business travellers make frequent and short and international business travels, usually 1-3 weeks, to visit foreign markets, work on projects. Also they travel without family (Welch *et al.*, 2007). International commuters reside in one country and work in another. They work unaccompanied by family members on a semi-permanent or permanent basis for two or three years with daily for weekly or another time interval travels (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2017). They have a job across border with limited intensity of international contacts (Bücker *et al.*, 2020).

GWA is increasingly influencing and reshaping traditional global work assignments by transforming the ways in which technology-mediated communication substitutes for, complements, or reconfigures physical mobility (Selmer *et al.*, 2022). Corporate expatriates may serve as crucial bridges between headquarters and host country employees in VGM. Digital communication tools allow them to coordinate ongoing tasks and exchange knowledge.

Self-initiated expatriates in top positions abroad may be less suitable for VGM due to their weaker familiarity with corporate policies. Short-term assignees may see some of their assignments replaced by VGM, while flexpatriates and international business travellers are more likely to have their travels reduced through VGM.

International commuters could particularly benefit from VGM as it can replace their physical mobility (Shaffer *et al.*, 2012). While VGM is also amenable to the multi-dimensional movement of global work, it may not always be a suitable replacement for physical mobility (Selmer *et al.*, 2022).

Building on the research on VGM scholars have recognised that VGM do not merely substitute physical mobility but may also constitute qualitatively new forms of international assignments. While research on VGM has focused primarily on how digital technologies reshape existing GWA, it has become evident that some international roles emerge without a direct physical analogue. These roles involve sustained cross-border responsibility, coordination, and accountability, yet are enacted entirely or predominantly through virtual means.

Within this context the concept of virtual expatriation has emerged as a distinct analytical category. Virtual expatriation is not a traditional expatriation with reduced mobility or extension of virtual teams, virtual expatriation is a form of international assignment in which expatriate role is performed without long-term physical relocation (Lauring *et al.*, 2024) but with enduring embeddedness.

So far, the studies revealed, that virtual expatriates are those who are physically located in the headquarter in home country, but from organisational or operational point of view, they are embedded to a foreign subsidiary (Holtbrügge and Schillo, 2008a). They can be sent on different assignments, which can last even longer than one year to do their leadership or technical tasks, or short-term assignments for brief and temporary projects (Holtbrügge and Schillo, 2008b; Lauring *et al.*, 2024; Welch and Fenwick, 2003).

Several studies suggest that most of their collaborative activities occur in digital settings; consequently, virtual expatriates—like other remote employees - depend on online communication technologies to engage with clients, business partners, and coworkers. They tend to use more formal digital channels, including email and online meetings. Lauring *et al.* (2024) suggest that their assignments should last minimum six months to ensure maintenance and durability of their role. They propose also that they should be engaged in several physical visits per year to the host country but not exceeding 30 days per year (Lauring *et al.*, 2024).

Early conceptual works suggest that virtual expatriation entails unique challenges related to coordination, control, integration, and career development, which are not fully addressed within existing VGM frameworks. As such, virtual expatriation has increasingly been discussed as a novel form of international work, warranting separate conceptual and empirical attention (Bucher *et al.*, 2025; Lauring *et al.*, 2024). However, with the emerging trend of research on virtual expatriate, this concept remains ambiguous and poorly defined (Lauring *et al.*, 2024).

The author of this study concurs with the findings of the resent research. However, even though virtual expatriation shares several characteristics with other forms of virtual and international assignments (Lauring *et al.*, 2024), virtual expatriation should not be conceptualised as a variant of existing arrangements solely through location criteria, assignment length, or communication media. Virtual expatriation represents a distinct type of international assignment with its own defining features

dependent on how the work itself is organised and governed. The extent to which tasks are internationally embedded, structurally dependent on foreign units, temporally configured across borders, and supported through appropriate relational and evaluative mechanisms varies substantially across virtual expatriate roles.

These differences suggest that virtual expatriation should be treated through the lens of job design and working conditions.

2.2 Job Design and Working Conditions in Virtual International Contexts

Classical approaches to job design have traditionally focused on task characteristics, such as decision and execution autonomy, work planning autonomy, tasks variety, task significance, task identity, feedback (Hackman and Oldham, 1976) largely assuming stable organizational structures, co-located work, and uniform employment conditions.

The other work characteristics also have been analysed, such as knowledge, social, and contextual features (Duradoni *et al.*, 2022), as well as how job, tasks, and roles are structured (Tims and Bakker, 2010). These frameworks have proven highly influential in explaining motivation, performance, and wellbeing in predominantly domestic and physically co-present work contexts (Duradoni *et al.*, 2022; Hackman and Oldham, 1976).

Recent research has begun to address job design in virtual and remote work contexts (Nagori and Lawton, 2024; Parker and Grote, 2022), however, these studies have primarily examined domestic or organizationally bounded forms of virtual work. Job design in virtual contexts is often conceptualized independently of international structures, assuming relatively homogeneous employment conditions, shared organizational frameworks, and limited exposure to cross-national regulatory differences.

These insights highlight the importance of temporal flexibility, digital communication, autonomy, and boundary management in shaping work experiences in virtual settings (Grant *et al.*, 2013; Wang *et al.*, 2021).

However, such approaches are insufficient for capturing the realities of virtual expatriation. Virtual expatriate work is characterized by cross-border task interdependence, multi-country structural dependencies, temporal dispersion across time zones, and exposure to heterogeneous regulatory and employment regimes (Bucher *et al.*, 2025). These features extend beyond the assumptions underlying classical and typical virtual job design models and cannot be adequately explained by focusing solely on individual task characteristics or localized working conditions.

Accordingly, job design must be rethought in ways that explicitly incorporate the international, virtual, and structurally embedded characteristics of virtual expatriate

work. This approach calls for redirecting attention away from broad job characteristics toward how work is structured within environments defined by transnational coordination, complex regulatory demands, and relational distance, thereby offering a more suitable theoretical basis for explaining virtual expatriation.

In the literature there are established frameworks, limited but strategic, that can contribute to explain the landscape of virtual expatriation. Among empirical studies, Job Demands-Resources theory (Liu *et al.*, 2023), Social Identity Theory (Mumtaz, 2024), and the distance framework (Wicht and Holtbrügge, 2023) provided the most substantive theoretical grounding for job design for virtual expatriates.

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory emerged as a foundation for understanding language proficiency and job-crafting behaviours in virtual contexts, specifically examining how expatriates with high host-country language proficiency adopt approach crafting while those with low proficiency resort to avoidance crafting (Liu *et al.*, 2023).

Social Identity Theory provided the conceptual basis examining how digitally mediated communication affects expatriate identity through weakened emotional interactions and analysing social categorization processes in host country national support for virtual assignees through the lens of construal level theory (Lauring *et al.*, 2024). The distance framework represented a notable theoretical extension, applied to compare virtual and traditional assignees' abilities to bridge multiple forms of distance (Wicht and Holtbrügge, 2023).

This application introduced a new theoretical perspective by systematically disentangling distance-bridging abilities across geographic, cultural, functional, language, emotional, and temporal dimensions (Wicht and Holtbrügge, 2023). Event System Theory was employed to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic transformed global work routines, with researchers arguing that this exogenous event prompted fundamental reconfiguration of structural and relational dimensions of global work (Jooss *et al.*, 2022).

Additional concepts were likewise employed to clarify the structure of virtual expatriate job design. Actor-Network Theory was utilized to understand how ERP system implementations created obstacles in cross-cultural communication networks, with e-Leadership theory serving as a moderating framework for successful leadership in virtual global workspaces (Tahirkheli, 2022). Equity Theory was tested in the specific context of global virtual teams, revealing that traditional equity predictions fail in virtual environments where work is intellectual, geographically dispersed, and difficult to observe directly (Tavoletti *et al.*, 2024).

These studies bring a new theoretical contribution (Lauring *et al.*, 2024; Liu *et al.*, 2021; Tahirkheli, 2022; Tavoletti *et al.*, 2024; Wicht and Holtbrügge, 2023) to job

design of virtual expatriates, however there is no explicit consistent theoretical frameworks of job design for virtual expatriates.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Context

The empirical material for this study derives from 15 semi-structured interviews with polish HR specialists, line managers, and employees engaged in virtual global assignments within multinational organisations. The respondents were asked an open question; the interviewer did not suggest any possible answers and the questionnaire itself used a cafeteria-style format. The interviewer had to classify the answer into one of the available response types, which facilitated processing and at the same time did not suggest any answers.

The participants represented diverse sectors, including the IT, banking, automotive, transport, and food industries, within international organisations. Participants were selected by purpose-sampling based on their international exposure and virtual assignments. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted via online communication tools such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or Google Meet. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised. Data were collected between November 2023 and September 2024.

Table 1. *Formal interviewee characteristics.*

ID	Status	Gender	Age	Education	Industry	Company size
MAN1	Manager	Male	30-40	Higher education	IT	More than 500
MAN2	Manager	Female	40-50	Higher education	Transport	More than 500
MAN3	Manager	Male	40-50	Higher education	IT	More than 500
MAN4	Manager	Male	30-40	Higher education	Transport	Less than 500
HR1	HR Director	Female	40-50	Higher education	Food indust	More than 500
HR2	HR Director	Female	50-55	Higher education	Automotive	Less than 500
HR3	HR Director	Female	50-55	Higher education	Banking	More than 500
HR4	HR Director	Female	30-40	Higher education	Banking	More than 500
HR5	HR Director	Female	40-50	Higher education	Food indust	More than 500
EMP1	Employee	Female	20-30	Higher education	IT	More than 500
EMP2	Employee	Male	20-30	Higher education	IT	Less than 500
EMP3	Employee	Male	30-40	Higher education	IT	More than 500
EMP4	Employee	Male	30-40	Higher education	IT	Below 500
EMP5	Employee	Female	30-40	Higher education	IT	More than 500

Source: Own study.

3.2 Methods

Following the grounded theory approach (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), the author combined inductive coding with iterative abstraction. The process was supported by MAXQDA 2024 qualitative analysis software.

In the first stage, the open coding procedure was applied to identify first-order concepts, key phrases directly reflecting the voices of the participants (e.g., “Performance criteria vary by manager”, “Limited formal and informal integration rituals”, “Home office increases comfort and focus”). Next, through axial coding, conceptually similar statements were grouped into second-order themes to represent theoretical dimensions (e.g., “Relational safety buffer”, “Autonomy and responsibility”, “Equal opportunities”).

This stage involved a continuous comparison across all statements to eliminate redundancy. In the third stage, the author clustered related themes into higher-level constructs to represent broader theoretical patterns, and finally aggregate dimensions were developed (e.g., “Leadership and relational safety”, “Mechanisms of Virtual Expatriation”) (Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

The entire coding process was refined through peer debriefing and cross-checking to ensure credibility and consistency (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were applied:

- (1) Triangulation of data sources (managers, employees, HR representatives) provided multiple perspectives;
- (2) Iterative comparison between empirical data and emerging theory minimised researcher bias;
- (3) Thick descriptions and representative quotations were retained to preserve the voices of the participants;
- (4) Peer validation with qualitative experts and intercoder reliability checks in MAXQDA ensured analytical robustness.

This rigorous analytical process led to the identification of five aggregate dimensions and nineteen second-order categories for the entire study. The data presented in this article are part of a broader qualitative research project aimed at developing a model of virtual expatriation as a catalyst for organisational sustainability.

The article presents second-order concepts selected to build 6 dimensions to quality work as virtual expatriation work. Each dimension represents a recurring pattern of job design that distinguish virtual expatriate assignments from other forms of international remote work.

4. Findings

The dimensions of virtual expatriate job design were derived inductively from the interview data. Each dimension reflects a recurring job design pattern that differentiates virtual expatriate assignments from other types of international remote work. The key question qualifying second-order concept as dimension was: Does

this concept describe the characteristics of work design and working conditions at the level of a specific task/role? Below is the list of dimension and qualifying aspect:

- International task embeddedness (task content)
- Cross-border structural dependence (organisational structure)
- Temporal-spatial work configuration (time and rhythm of work)
- Regulatory and employment condition complexity (formal conditions)
- Relational and integration design (integration and relations)
- Evaluation and control architecture (evaluation and work control).

The proposed dimensions were derived by reconfiguring second-order concepts identified in the qualitative analysis into higher-level work design dimensions that qualify work as virtual expatriate work, while preserving the original second-order structure of the data.

Several second-order concepts are not treated as dimensions, as they represent infrastructure and organisational outcomes. First group considered as infrastructure includes HR Processes and Practices, such as Recruitment and selection, Online onboarding and training, Repatriation and post-assignment career paths. The second group, named Organizational Sustainability Outcomes, such as Career development and innovation, Satisfaction and wellbeing, Effectiveness, Commitment and retention, Equal opportunities, Virtual mobility and environment, determines the results, not qualifying dimensions. Moreover, it is organisational context and the job characteristic itself.

4.1 International Task Embeddedness

This dimension is derived from 2nd-order concept, named Intercultural collaboration and communication, describing the extent to which international teams are integrated, and how well cultural adaptation is incorporated in task implementation.

Thus, this dimension reflects whether an employee's main responsibilities are truly international in nature, rather than merely spread across different countries. The key aspects are:

- responsibility for foreign markets/projects
- decision impact beyond home country
- accountability to international stakeholders

If the role does not include international task embeddedness, it is simply remote work, not expatriation. International tasks are essential, without them position can't be regarded as a virtual expatriate work. Virtual expatriates not only carry out their work from a distance, but also manage projects with international scope, coordinate the activities of units located in different countries, and are evaluated based on overall global performance.

4.2 Cross-Border Structural Dependence

This dimension is derived from 2nd-order concept, named Lack of standardization and structure clarity which refers to ambiguous reporting lines, different interpretations of policies, and multiple decision-making centres.

Thus, this dimension reflects the extent to which successfully completing the task relies on coordination among countries. The key aspects are:

- reliance on globally distributed teams,
- matrix reporting across borders,
- interdependence with foreign units.

Virtual expatriation exists only when work can't be completed locally. Their work is embedded in multinational structures, depends on decisions, interpretations and resources outside the employee's country. They do not operate autonomously within a single system, but function between entities, countries and logics. This structural cross-border dependency is crucial for the classification of work.

4.3 Temporal-Spatial Work Configuration

This dimension is derived from 2nd-order concept, named Work experiences and wellbeing, and describes, the rhythm of work, time load, and functioning in different time zones.

Thus, this dimension captures how work time and space are structured internationally. The key aspects are:

- time-zone load,
- scheduling asymmetry,
- need for temporal flexibility.

Temporal strain is a defining feature of virtual expatriate work. Their work is subjected to time zones in different countries, the daily routine is irregular, they need to constantly adapt to shifting time demands. It is important to underline that this dimension refers to a configuration of time and workspace, not wellbeing itself. The work of virtual expatriates is designed globally on a temporary basis, rather than locally on "9-to-5" basis. This distinguishes virtual expatriation from standard remote work.

4.4 Regulatory and Employment Condition Complexity

This dimension is derived from two 2nd-order concepts, named Regulations, rules and governance, and Benefits and allowances system. These concepts describe legal restrictions, employment conditions, as well as the structure of benefits system.

Thus, this dimension captures the extent to which work is shaped by cross-national legal and policy constraints. The key aspects are:

- home-office entitlements,
- data security regulations,
- labor regulations,
- location choice.

Virtual expatriates operate under multi-jurisdictional constraints. It involves more than simply working remotely; employees in this role operate within a complex, multi-layered regulatory framework governing virtual expatriate work, which varies from one individual to another.

4.5 Relational and Integration Design

This dimension is derived from three 2nd-order concepts, named Relational safety buffer, Individualized support and feedback, Supportive style tailored to employee maturity. These concepts indicate that relations are not natural and needs to be maintained.

Thus, this dimension captures how social and relational aspects of work are structure. The key aspects are:

- access to key actors
- presence/absence of integration rituals
- leader-mediated inclusion
- visibility mechanisms

Virtual expatriates need to be deliberately integrated - their invisibility poses a systemic risk. Relationships don't develop automatically; they are shaped by the leader as well as by various organisational rituals and meetings. A virtual expatriate role must be deliberately designed for active integration; without this, it risks resulting in invisibility and isolation.

4.6 Evaluation and Control Architecture

This dimension is built on two 2nd-order concepts, named Performance appraisal and Autonomy and responsibility, which describe methods of control their work, scope of responsibility, and autonomy-evaluation relations.

Hence, this dimension captures how performance and accountability are designed for virtual international work. The key aspects are:

- outcome-based vs presence-based evaluation
- frequency and personalization of feedback

- alignment between autonomy and monitoring

This represents the control architecture for virtual expatriate work, which calls for a distinct approach to control and evaluation, since conventional systems do not adequately capture cross-border contributions and frequently overlook the performance of virtual expatriates.

5. Integrative Framework: Qualifying Work as Virtual Expatriate Work

Drawing on the qualitative findings, the author incorporates the identified dimensions into a conceptual framework for defining and classifying work as virtual expatriate work. The job can be considered as virtual expatriate work if it is characterised by the coexistence of the following dimensions:

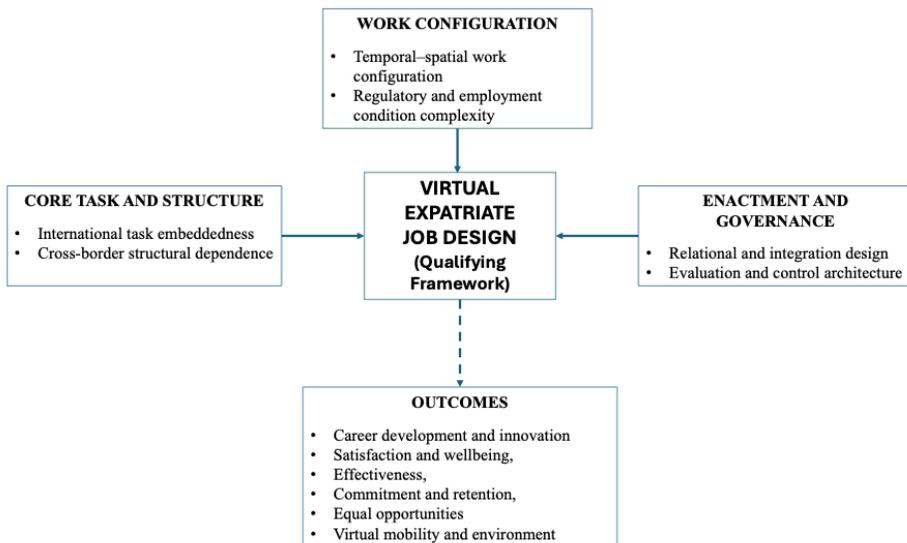
- International task embeddedness
- Cross-border structural dependence
- Temporal-spatial work configuration
- Regulatory and employment condition complexity
- Relational and integration design
- Evaluation and control architecture

These dimensions are complementary and function with different aspects of work. Dimensions might be divided further into three blocks which refers to different layer of the job design:

- Core task and structure, including International task embeddedness and Cross-border structural dependence describing what is being done and in what structure
- Work configuration, including Temporal-spatial work configuration and Regulatory and employment condition complexity - describing under what conditions the work is performed
- Enactment and governance, including Relational and integration design and Evaluation and control architecture describing how the work is carried out and accounted for

Presented blocks and dimensions do not overlap and fully cover characteristic of virtual expatriate work. Figure 1 presents the integrative framework, illustrating how the six dimensions jointly qualify work as virtual expatriate work by capturing task characteristics, structural embeddedness, work configuration, and governance mechanisms. Taken together, these dimensions establish a basis for future quantitative studies focused on creating and validating a measurement tool for virtual expatriate work. Beyond the dimensions that define work as virtual expatriate work, the qualitative analysis also uncovered several outcomes linked to these types of work arrangements.

Figure 1. Integrative framework for qualifying work as virtual expatriate work.



Source: Own research.

These outcomes include commitment and retention, career development and innovation, satisfaction and wellbeing, effectiveness, equal opportunities, as well as virtual mobility and environment. Importantly, these themes were not framed as qualifying dimensions, since they do not capture attributes of work design itself, but instead represent how individuals and organizations respond to the specific configuration of virtual expatriate work.

The framework therefore separates the criteria that define when a job can be considered virtual expatriate work from the consequences that these kinds of work arrangements may produce over time. This distinction allows for a clearer theoretical separation between work characteristics and their outcomes, while also providing a foundation for future research on how different patterns of virtual expatriate work design relate to key individual and organizational results. Accordingly, this framework concentrates on determining when work qualifies as virtual expatriate work, while outcomes are discussed to illustrate the broader implications of these arrangements rather than to alter the definition of the construct itself.

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This research offers multiple contributions to theory. Firstly, this study makes a substantial contribution to the field of virtual expatriation research. The author redirected the focus from the personal characteristics of virtual expatriates to the

way their jobs are designed, making the work itself the main unit of analysis. Thus, virtual expatriation should be seen as a feature of how jobs are structured, rather than solely as a characteristic of individual employees. The central question is: “Which job characteristics must an employee have to be regarded as a virtual expatriate?”

The author identified virtual expatriation as a novel form of international work, warranting separate conceptual and empirical attention. Moreover, the author proposed specific dimensions to define what constitutes virtual expatriate work - addressing the missing conceptual component - and clearly differentiated virtual expatriation from other forms of remote work assignments and virtual global mobility.

Secondly, this study advances job design theory by framing virtual expatriate job design as a configuration of interrelated dimensions rather than as a collection of separate features. Whereas traditional models overlooked factors such as cross-border embeddedness, temporal dispersion, and regulatory complexity, the model presented here addresses and closes this gap.

Finally, the study contributes to international human resource management (IHRM) research by connecting job design with IHRM and emphasizing job design in an international setting. It provides clearer insight into why conventional HRM practices are not suitable for virtual expatriate work.

The IHRM literature is enriched with a new conceptual framework for categorizing international roles and designing roles for virtual expatriates.

6.2 Methodological Contributions

This study also makes a methodological contribution. To begin with, it constitutes a theory-building stage that comes before scale development. It shows that scales should not be directly adopted from the existing remote work or expatriation literature. The interviews enabled the identification of practice-based dimensions and helped prevent the use of arbitrary definitions.

The proposed framework represents an early, pre-scaling phase and therefore provides a robust foundation for subsequent operationalisation. Moreover, the study changed the level at which the phenomenon was examined, shifting the focus from the individual (the expatriate) to the job itself (work design).

Virtual expatriation is a feature of the position rather than a trait of the person. The same role may, but does not have to, include virtual expatriation. Conducted study has methodological consequences resulting with greater measurement precision and lower risk of misclassification.

6.3 Limitations Implications for Future Research

The current study is positioned at a theory-building stage. Subsequent research could concentrate on empirically testing this theory by creating and validating a quantitative measurement instrument that classifies work as expatriate work according to the proposed dimensions. These identified dimensions can then be further operationalized within a multidimensional scale.

Future research could investigate hypotheses in connection with the identified outcomes. For instance, possible relationships might involve virtual expatriate work design and variables such as commitment, career development, and job satisfaction.

Overall, the study establishes a conceptual and methodological basis for more advanced research on virtual expatriation by outlining clear dimensions that define work as virtual expatriate work and indicating how such work can be investigated in future studies.

The study also has several limitations. First, it is qualitative in nature and focused on theory development, which means statistical generalisation is not possible. In addition, the research is geographically restricted, so future work could expand it to other regions, as well as to specific industries and organisations.

7. Practical Implications

The proposed study carries several significant practical implications for HR professionals, managers, and the organisation.

HR professionals can categorize international positions using the proposed dimensions to differentiate virtual expatriate roles from other forms of virtual global work. They can then tailor HR practices to the specific characteristics of virtual expatriate assignments, rather than applying uniform solutions to all employees regardless of their work arrangement.

This classification makes it possible to identify risks arising from unequal benefits or differing regulatory frameworks, thereby helping to maintain consistency in employment conditions. The proposed dimensions serve as a foundation for HR policies, functioning as a diagnostic tool to determine whether a given position truly qualifies as a virtual expatriate role. As a result, HR policies and practices can be more closely aligned with the actual nature of virtual expatriates' work rather than simply being based on the job title.

The study clearly showed that overseeing virtual expatriates differs from managing other categories of virtual employees. Therefore, managers can also draw on this study to more effectively manage virtual expatriate work by deliberately cultivating relationships and designing appropriate control structures.

Importantly, they help lessen the sense of invisibility and the workload pressures that stem from varying time zones and structural dispersion. The manager of virtual expatriates acts as an architect of the work environment for these virtual expatriates.

Finally, the study offers practical guidance for organisations on how to design virtual expatriate roles. Such roles can be structured as combinations of the identified dimensions, and not every position must score at the highest level on each dimension. What matters most is making well-informed decisions regarding the design and management of virtual expatriate work.

For example, when a position involves a high degree of international task embeddedness, it should be associated with reduced control from the headquarters. Tasks situated in an international context call for local expertise and cultural adaptation, and in such settings, direct operational control from the head office is not effective. The manager overlooks on-the-ground specifics; centralized control can slow decision-making and ultimately result in distant micromanagement.

This represents an intentional move in emphasis from the process itself to the final outcome. Conversely, when work autonomy is high, a formal control mechanism is required. High autonomy is marked by flexibility in organising tasks and scheduling time.

Thus, the work performed by virtual expatriates can be largely unseen and challenging to supervise. In the absence of clear control mechanisms, their autonomy can lead to ambiguous expectations, causing virtual expatriates to become invisible and increasing the risk that their contributions will be undervalued. Overall, the study offers significant practical implications.

8. Conclusion

The study establishes a new basis for understanding research on virtual expatriation and moves this field forward by defining the key dimensions that characterize work as virtual expatriate work. The presented study represents an important step toward conducting more precise research on virtual expatriation and developing more effective organizational practices.

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