Emergency expatriate evacuation: Literature and research

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Abstract: In volatile and uncertain times, pressure increases on firms to ensure that their operations and staff are secure and safe from threat of physical and psychological danger. Yet in literature examining or describing human resource management policies or practices there is a noticeable absence of how firms might manage the evacuation of international staff in times of crisis, such as terrorist attacks, illness and injury, natural disasters. In this paper, we critically review the relevant literature in relation to risk, disaster and crisis management, and consider the role of human resource professionals in the management of expatriate staff during crises. From this review, we identify questions that may guide research to address knowledge gaps in regard to expatriate evacuation.

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The use of expatriate staff is both a burden and a strategic necessity to multinational enterprises (MNEs). Expatriates are costly, difficult to manage, and often ineffective, yet viewed as critical to the integration and coordination of the firm’s operations (Welch et al. 2009). Traditionally, issues surrounding the well-being of expatriates—at least in the corporate sector—have emphasised their adjustment to the host culture (Ward et al. 2001). Similarly, the issue of repatriating staff has remained focused on post-repatriation adjustment and performance (Szkudlarek 2010). Yet MNEs are increasingly managing expatriates (and other staff) in countries and regions that present substantial health and security risks, which may trigger major threats to business growth and long-term strategy (Suder 2004). According to Dowling et al. (2008: 301), large MNEs, especially those operating in ‘socially and politically turbulent regions of the world’ should have well integrated and coordinated risk management practices. However, while researchers have, over the years, examined strategic implications of major health scares and terrorism, scant academic attention has been given to the human implications of crises (Tan & Enderwick 2006). One critical plank in this relates to a firm’s policies and practices for managing the evacuation of expatriate (and local) staff during crisis events. With the potential triggers for evacuation increasing in both scope and impact (Bhanugopan & Fish 2008), the emergence of technologies like GPS and social media available to firms, and the growing use of ‘non-traditional’ forms of expatriation (Dowling et al. 2008), contemporary approaches to dealing with such crises are likely to be complex and of increasing importance.

In this paper, we review the relevant literature in relation to risk, disaster and crisis management, and consider its application to human resource professionals managing international staff during crises; specifically, the issues of pertinence when preventing or managing the evacuation of expatriate staff. From this, we propose a set of research questions that may guide researchers interested in investigating expatriate evacuation policies and practices.

Defining ‘crisis’

Definitions of ‘crisis’ in the literature differ greatly. In summarising earlier studies, Lerbinger (2012) distils eight characteristics of a crisis event: the event is sudden, unexpected and unwanted; it is high-impact and low probability; it has great ambiguity regarding cause, effect and resolution; it interrupts normal organisational operations; it threatens the firm’s survival; it requires fast decision-making; it may cause problems if no action is taken; and it creates significant psychological stress.

In the business sphere, ‘crisis management’ is seen primarily as a public relations issue, concerning the reputation of the organisation rather than the health and safety of its people (Bernstein 2011). For example, Gilpin and Murphy (2008: 4) identify the ‘central question of crisis management’ as how designated communicators can ‘guide their organisations through crises with the least possible damage to reputation.’ From this perspective, ‘crises’ are seen to include events like consumer
boycotts, regulatory bans, negative media reports, or staff layoffs, as well as rumours of any of these (Laufer & Coombs 2006).

More useful in relation to expatriate evacuation is literature that categorises types of business crises. The aim of identifying these typologies appears to be as a corporate planning tool; while firms may not be able to anticipate all possible crises, plans for families of crisis may be transferrable within a category. From this literature we distil four broad categories of triggers for expatriate evacuation:

1. Medical crises which may range from the evacuation of an individual (e.g. malaria) to a community-wide pandemic (e.g. SARS);
2. Natural disaster crises, including floods, fires and earthquakes, which affect large numbers of people and infrastructure;
3. Irregular man-made crises, including kidnapping, acts of terrorism and violence; and
4. Regular man-made crises, like industrial accidents or non-work misadventures.

Crisis management frameworks commonly assume a linear, phased approach, often reduced to a three-step model involving pre-, during- and post-crisis phases (Smith 1990). Though not without its limitations, we use this model in the following section to identify key gaps in the literature. Given length limitations of the conference paper, indicative citations are provided. The coverage of these phases and their key components varies, reflecting the varied depth of their treatment in the extant literature.

Crisis literature

Pre-crisis

This phase encapsulates events prior to a crisis occurring. Its focus is on reducing the organisation’s vulnerability through preventing crises, and/or through mitigating their impact by responding more efficiently and effectively when they occur (Bazerman & Watkins 2008). Literature regarding this phase is the most abundant, and points to at least five inter-related elements: policy/planning; assessment and screening; training; housing/location; and organisational culture.

1. Policy/planning is the most commonly, and thoroughly, discussed aspect of the pre-crisis phase. Most authors emphasise the importance of firms preparing during ‘non-crisis times’ and suggest a holistic approach that incorporates a range of integrated activities (Lerbinger 2012). A number of authors identify features of a comprehensive crisis management policy, although these are commonly prescriptive and give little attention to strategic or HR alignment, or to the context in which the crisis is unfolding (Crandall, Parnell & Spillan 2010). Notwithstanding this, two crisis preparedness activities are frequently suggested in the literature. The first is a ‘vulnerability audit’, which includes an audit of the internal (e.g. reviewing policy documents, interviewing pertinent employees) and external landscape (Crandall et al. 2010), to anticipate pertinent issues that may trigger a security or safety risk, as well as less immediate threats via ‘what if’ scenarios (Bernstein 2011).

Another crisis preparedness activity is the Emergency Response Plan (ERP), which provides up-to-date advice to employees about what should be done when a crisis occurs. Lerbinger (2012: 36) suggests building into the plan a ‘crisis threshold’ for each contingency in the form of ‘a concrete signal or set of indicators that a crisis is… imminent.’ In some instances (e.g. escalating political uncertainty) this may require a deliberate effort to monitor, through security appraisals or local partners (Ronalds 2010), as a way to integrate a series of weak signals that might indicate the escalation from a ‘developing situation’ to an ‘acute crisis’ (Devlin 2007). One purpose of identifying triggers for evacuation in advance is to reduce the potential for sub-optimal decision making stemming from psychological stresses and cognitive biases, which can be activated during the crisis events (Sweeney 2008).
The research suggests that organisations’ approaches to policy and planning range from comprehensive and in-house through to fully outsourced, to those that simply have no provision for emergency situations. Howard (1991) recounts an instance of the last: despite Saddam Hussein’s deployment of massive troops along the Kuwaiti border prior to the Kuwait crisis, many MNEs failed to prepare for an invasion and some companies deserted their employees immediately following the invasion (they were neither paid nor rescued). It was evident that the ‘deserters’ were primarily small companies with international contracts based on specialised knowledge that lacked HR professionals and/or crisis management/planning. At the other end of the spectrum, international NGOs often employ their own in-house or contracted security experts in the head office and/or designated field locations (Van Brabant 2001).

2. Assessment and screening: While expatriate selection has received substantial attention from researchers, little attention has been paid to assessing the suitability of potential assignees based on existing medical conditions and psychological preparedness for crisis events. While government organisations like the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office exclude expatriates deemed physically or psychologically unsuitable for dangerous regions (Patel et al. 2000), we found no evidence of this within the corporate sector, and no studies examining the nature or effectiveness of these measures.

3. Training. Staff training is recommended so that relevant people are aware of the crisis plan and organisational policies, and have the capability to respond. Suggestions about the contents of pre-departure training appear to be location and profession specific, but include knowledge and skills to help the expatriate prevent crime, terrorism, and medical risks (Hunt 1996; Pearn 1997). Sawyer (2006) reports that companies are increasing personal safety training for expatriates, although there has been little empirical verification for this claim. A range of training possibilities exist, from ‘talking through’ how well policies would be implemented (Bernstein 2011) to putting policy into practice in a controlled environment via crisis drills or simulations (Lerbinger 2012).

4. Housing/location: Literature is limited, but does identify the need to establish links with organisations that can provide ‘managed care’ for expatriates (Hunt 1996). It would appear that various configurations exist, each with benefits and drawbacks. Concentration of expatriates in enclaves makes them physically identifiable but also a concentrated target for irregular man-made crises like kidnapping. Geographical dispersal or community embedding makes staff less identifiable, but possibly harder to assemble in the event of crisis.

5. Organisational culture: Finally, it is suggested that firms build a culture that support crisis preparedness. This includes cultivating employee vigilance, a management style that encourages dissemination of information, and the use of relevant technologies like an integrated internal database, online access to external databases, and a diagnostic database (Goldstein 1995; Lerbinger 2012).

Based on this overview, we suggest two avenues of interest for future research into the pre-crisis preparation and planning of firms: What factors prompt some organisations to invest in screening and training of expatriates for crisis-resilience? What attributes/characteristics of organisational culture are associated with highly crisis-prepared organisations?

During the crisis
This phase includes the process, communication and other actions involved in managing the crisis. In the corporate sector, the organisation’s financial and reputational impacts are the focus of the bulk of the research, especially relating to communication (Jordan-Meier 2011). Our focus is on literature concerned with the expatriates’ health and safety, and their relocation so these can be
managed in a stable environment. In reviewing this literature we identify three themes: the role of crisis management teams (CMT); the processes and logistics associated with the crisis; and communication and inter-agency coordination.

1. Crisis Management Team: The CMT is tasked with actively managing the crisis. Literature that discusses CMTs is commonly case-based, reviewing the role and function of a CMT during a particular crisis (Lerbinger 2012). The emergency response plan (see above) should identify the team’s membership, responsibilities and contact details, as well as the mechanisms by which the team is activated (Crandall et al. 2010). The CMT should have a designated commander and command centre, typically in the organisation’s head office (Crandall et al. 2010). Members are recommended to possess the ability to work as a team, handle pressure, make balanced decisions, listen carefully, and manage the uncertainty and changing nature of the situation (Chandler 2001). The volatility that exists during crises increases the risk of cognitive and informational biases, and miscommunication among CMT members (Coombs 2007). For these reasons, it is suggested that the CMT be carefully selected, comprise members from different business units, and receive targeted team-based training, especially relating to communication during the crisis (Coombs 2006; McKinney et al. 2005). While ‘rational decision-making’ heuristics are available (Janis & Mann 1977), current research recommends less prescriptive and more emergent decision-making approaches (Gilpin & Murphy 2008).

2. Processes and logistics: Evacuations related to medical crises are prominent in the literature with studies indicating that 3–10 per cent of expatriates require evacuation during their assignment for health reasons, depending on the cohort and location factors (Boggild et al. 2007). The most common evacuation method appears to be aeromedical evacuations (Leggat, 2005), where evacuees are usually transported to either the nearest hospital or their home country (Peytremann et al. 2001). Although agencies such as the military assume responsibility for aeromedical evacuation services, Leggat (2005) found that many firms shift the onus of evacuation onto the expatriates and pay them cash in lieu of a fully insured evacuation plan.

Much of the crisis management literature into the logistics of evacuation focuses on generic health and safety issue like relocating staff away from imminent danger (e.g. evacuating facilities). We found no studies addressing the specific challenges of managing these processes for expatriate staff, like geographic distances from the CMT and head office, operating across different time zone, or managing evacuations within different cultural, linguistic or regulatory environments. We also found limited literature relating to the role that expatriates, especially those in leadership positions with responsibility for host-country staff or plant, may be asked to play in emergency circumstances, despite the noted importance of on-the-ground leadership (Burke and Cooper 2008). For instance, Wardle’s (2006) study of the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombing showed that during the (tourism industry) crisis expatriates were required to perform a range of hands on crisis management roles despite a lack of preparation or planned role, suggesting either a policy absence or a breakdown between policy and practice.

Nonetheless, the literature does reinforce a range of (often common sense) occupational health and safety issues that international human resource managers must ensure are planned for and implemented at the local level, including having well-rehearsed, site-specific procedures to exit the facility, assemble at a meeting point, and account for all employees (Coombs 2006; Gershon et al. 2011). Han et al. (2006) emphasise the heightened challenges of mobilising evacuees in emergency situations where congested and dangerous routes may be encountered. The importance of ensuring that policy aligns with good practice is underscored by Haynes et al. (2009) who note that poor mass-evacuation policies, particularly with relation to natural disasters, may in fact increase injury and fatality rates among evacuees. Finally, while our attention is on managing expatriate
3. Communication: The literature highlights the importance of being able to maintain two-way contact with those caught up in the crisis, keeping people informed with updates, including family members outside the crisis zone (Drabek 1999), and tactics to facilitate this; for instance, loading the mobile phone of staff with relevant contact details before departure (Lerbinger 2012), or using pre-arranged code words to communicate sensitive information (Howard 1991). At present, discussions of the use of cutting-edge technology and social media tend to focus on its role in unearthing or responding to ‘reputation’ crises (Bernstein 2011). The role of these as means of information collection or communication in the lead up to, and during, more extreme crisis events has gone unexamined. Analysis of communication via a ‘situation room’ or ‘crisis management centre’, which often operates around the clock, commonly identifies the contribution of such arrangements to the effectiveness of evacuations (Burkle et al. 2005). Finally, Lerbinger (2012) suggests keeping a log that includes information received, and decisions and action taken, in order to improve objectivity in decision-making, and to use during post-crisis debriefings.

The literature on policies and procedures during the crisis phase suggests a need to further explore three avenues: What assignment features influence evacuation policy and practice? What are the characteristics of organisations’ crisis management operations? How do organisations utilise social media and leading edge technology in responding to evacuation crises?

Post-crisis
The post-crisis phase commences once the crisis event has passed; in this case, once the expatriate has been evacuated from the crisis area to a stable and predictable environment. Just as the international HRM literature has tended to overlook later stages of the expatriate lifecycle, the post-crisis phase has received the least attention from crisis management researchers. Notwithstanding this, our literature review suggests a thematic focus on two activities: post-crisis care to affected individuals, and organisational learning arising from the crisis.

1. Individual post-crisis support: Literature has tended to focus on supporting individuals to deal with psychological trauma of crisis events. Issues that might be confronted by evacuees are anxiety-related reactions with long-term psychological and physiological consequences, including sometimes chronic morbidity (Hirshon et al. 1997). These conditions may apply not only to the event victims, but also to others who may have entered the crisis zone afterwards to assist (‘entry victims’), those who had strong ties to the affected area (‘peripheral victims’), such as other in-country expatriates (Dudasik 1980), as well as people within the organisation who may feel guilt associated with encouraging the expatriates to accept their position (Taylor & Frazer 1980). An early model of the psychological impacts of disaster focused on the period of ‘impact’, during which primary stressors relating to the disaster are activated, a ‘recoil’ period when secondary stressors may replace primary ones, and finally the ‘post-traumatic’ period during which the individual confronts the effects of the disaster on his/her life (Tyhurst 1950). Thus, long-term treatment or counselling may be required (Hehenkamp & Hargreaves 2003). Individuals may benefit from a range of post-crisis support mechanisms, including diagnostics (e.g. ongoing health check-ups, mental health assessments), education and monitoring (Raphael 1986).

2. Organisational learning: Finally, practitioners and researchers alike highlight the importance of using the crisis experience as a learning opportunity (Crandall et al. 2010), and instilling these experiences into the firm’s institutional memory (Bazerman & Watkins 2008). The challenges of learning are exacerbated by the tacit nature of much of the knowledge required of crisis managers. While issues around business continuity may not be directly relevant, well
organised approaches to ensure evacuees’ work and social readjustment after crisis situations may ameliorate some psychological stresses associated with evacuation (Sánchez & Goldberg 2003).

We propose two avenues for future research into the post-crisis phase for firms: What role has HR in post-crisis support for evacuees and other affected personnel? How do organisations capture insights from evacuation incidents to enhance evacuation practices?

**International HRM and emergency evacuation: A research gap**

In addition to the questions we suggest for future research into emergency evacuation during each of the three crisis phases, there are four broader avenues for exploring the crisis policies and practices of firms: Which aspects of crisis management (pre-/during/post-crisis, medical/natural disaster/irregular/regular) do organisations emphasise? How does the type of organisation (sector, industry, size) influence evacuation policy and practice? How does prior exposure to risk or experience with emergency evacuation influence evacuation policy and practice? In what ways does location of headquarters and host entities influence evacuation policy and practice?

The body of literature reviewed above has a number of limitations. Much of it is prescriptive and practice-driven, and robust conceptual models or frameworks are yet to be developed. Howard (1991: 30) points out that firms often view safety and security issues from a narrow ‘occupational health and safety’ perspective, and argues that HR practitioners should view crisis management more strategically as an issue of ‘social and ethical corporate responsibility’, including taking a stronger role in emergency evacuation. Twenty years on, the literature confirms there has been little response (Czinkota et al. 2010). Our review resulted in a dearth of research into emergency evacuations from a HR perspective, reflecting a general lack of practice among corporate MNEs (Mitroff & Alpaslan 2003). Like much of the management research, HR researchers tend to associate crises with financial or reputational problems; for instance, expatriate assignment failure (Chew 2004). Research that comments on emergency evacuation or evacuee repatriation does so tangentially without embracing it as a topic for detailed research (Downes, Thomas & Singley 2002). For instance, studies of expatriate training in MNEs, though nowadays comprehensive, are silent about developing assignees’ emergency response capabilities (Mendenhall & Stahl 2000). Howard (1991) is an exception to the absence of HR literature, noting some of the issues that require tactical and strategic involvement of HR specialists to support evacuees including: relocation; housing; children’s schooling. She argues that human resource professionals are ‘key players’ in emergency evacuation efforts ‘because the scope of the need goes far beyond the purview of the security department of each corporation’ (Howard 1991: 32).

The lack of research and crisis preparedness is somewhat surprising, given the rhetoric of MNEs related to global talent management, and the importance of expatriates to this process (McDonnell et al. 2010). The emergence in recent years of specialist firms offering employee assistance programs (EAPs), including some like International SOS that specialise in risk and emergency support, may have led firms to rely on outsourcing this aspect of the expatriate management processes, despite calls for firms to be more proactive (Meunier 2007). Our review highlights the context-specific nature of many of the ‘best practice’ approaches and suggests that the most effective crisis management methods may be customisable to suit the individual expatriate (e.g. age, physical and psychological fitness, decision-making abilities), the position, the location (e.g. access to, and quality of, infrastructure), the context, and the nature of the crisis. Moreover, implicit in much of the research is the importance of a holistic approach, with the most effective programs being those that are integrated within different aspects of the firms’ operations and expatriate lifecycle management. For these reasons, ‘off-the-shelf’ outsourced crisis management models may be less effective in practice. We suggest future research into the outsourcing of crisis management could investigate: what are the consequences of outsourcing emergency evacuation arrangements
to external providers? What shapes the product and service provision of external providers? A comparison of firms employing different configurations of crisis management models (e.g. outsourced, in-house) is likely to unearth organisational characteristics and on-the-ground conditions in which different models may be more (or less) effective.

It is noticeable that much of the literature reported above that is most directly relevant to evacuation of staff comes from studies outside the corporate sector, and in particular from the international development sector (Stoddard, Harmer & DiDomenico 2009). This may not be surprising. Recent studies show increased incidence of violence and other evacuation triggers against international NGO staff (Stoddard & Harmer 2010). In the corporate world, these types of crises are less common and so corporate interest in the security of staff is fickle, such that it ‘rises and falls with the surges and lulls in terrorism and other potential dangers’ (Howard 1991: 33). While the exchange of business and HR practices between the corporate and NGO sectors is limited, these international NGOs—more conditioned to managing staff in high risk locales and dealing with crises and evacuations more regularly that most corporate MNEs—may provide fruitful information sources for researchers and practitioners alike.

Finally, we feel it important to conclude by pointing out that organisational efforts to address perceived weaknesses in the way they manage the safety and security of expatriates, including evacuation policies, are likely to encapsulate a wide-scale change management process requiring careful planning, executive support, and adequate resources. These factors may act as a deterrent to organisations. Of particular note is the trade-off between expenditure of present resources (usually financial and manpower) for an uncertain future benefit (Bazerman & Watkins 2008). In this regard, the challenges parallel similar ‘people’ issues, like staff development and training, that HR professionals have confronted for years.

References


