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Adjustment of German Expatriates’ Work Practices in Japan during the Covid-19 Pandemic^{*}

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Based on the grounded theory, this paper analyses the behavior of German expatriates in Japan. For this, a qualitative inductive study was undertaken where two general themes were observed: German expatriates’ adjustments of work practices in Japan and work practices outside Japan. The findings indicate that during the lockdown as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, work adjustment in Japan brought a sense of physical isolation from the local office and expatriates reported difficulty in handling their roles. Expatriates also complained about an overflow of online meetings. There were further concerns that cost savings at the headquarters, in line with a stronger trend towards digitalization, would lead to a decrease in future expatriate assignments. However, the Covid-19 pandemic brought German expatriates to feel much closer to the headquarters through heavy electronic communication. Previously experienced “out of sight, out of mind” syndrome of expatriates became less relevant.

Keywords Covid-19 pandemic, Expatriate work practices, German expatriates, Japan, Lockdown

1 Introduction

Research on expatriates in international management continues to draw much interest (Bebenroth and Froese, 2020), with many studies building upon challenges and adjustment issues the expatriates have to cope with (Nadeem and Mumatz, 2018; Wilczewski et al., 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic brings in an additional driver to work adjustment of expatriates, which is yet scarcely analyzed (Campbell and Gavett, 2021). The lack of a systematized analysis of the

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complex role of expatriations during the pandemic situation limits our understanding on how expatriates modify their work practice. This research is hence aimed at elucidating critical factors of work practice adjustments during the Covid-19 pandemic in a Japanese setting.

To address these questions, the lead author adopted a qualitative, inductive approach based on seven semi-structured in-depth interviews via Skype with German expatriates in Japan. The expatriates worked for German MNC (Multinational Corporation)s' foreign subsidiaries located in Japan. Based on the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Charmaz (2014), adjustment issues were coined as "adjustment of expatriate work practices during the Covid-19 pandemic". This study contributes to expatriation studies in several ways. First, by conducting in-depth interviews with expatriates, the authors hope that the findings in this study would corroborate current literature that expatriates are not uniform in nature, but demonstrate varying distinct challenges and adjustment issues (Black and Gregersen, 1991; Black et al., 1991). Second, a systematic classification of work practices during the Covid-19 pandemic is developed. The paper builds theory on the initial framework of Black et al. (1991) who differentiated expatriates' adjustment of work practices into three categories, namely work, interactive, and general adjustment of work practices. The unique Covid-19 pandemic leads the authors to establish a new framework on critical work practices. Accordingly, the following research question is formulated: How do German expatriates adapt to work practices in Japan during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Results indicate that expatriates rather disliked to work in the home office, and they experienced an overflow of online meetings. On the other hand, adjustments outside Japan enabled expatriates to communicate electronically much better with German headquarters, and also more frequently with third parties. In sum, this study provides insights into a better understanding of expatriates' work practice adjustments during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The paper is organized as follows: After discussing the literature on adjustment issues as well as the Covid-19 pandemic in Japan, the methodology is presented. The main results and discussion follow. Finally, a conclusion summarizes the findings of this study.

2 Adjustment of work practices and the Japanese Covid-19 pandemic situation

The concept of adjustment in acculturation literature (Searle and Ward, 1990) rests on subjective well-being and life satisfaction with a new cultural setting (Ward et al., 1998). Psychological adjustment is understood as coping with stress factors, especially having the ability to handle negative psychological consequences of cross-cultural contacts and situations (He et al.,

2019). Changes and unexpected circumstances in a different cultural setting may cause acculturative stress, often leading to a decline in mental health while experiencing increased physical symptoms of stress (Berry, 2006). Psychological adjustment is conceptualized from a problem-oriented viewpoint, focusing on attitudinal factors in the process of the adjustment (Fenner and Selmer, 2008). Early research by social theorists indicate that expatriates experience cultural adjustment in various phases (e.g., a honeymoon stage, a cultural shock, etc.) resembling a U-shaped trajectory (Black and Mendenhall, 1991). The model of Black et al. (1991) includes three specific areas of cross-cultural adjustment. First: work adjustment, defined as the degree of adjustment on the job as well as working conditions and responsibilities in the host country. Second: interaction adjustment, defined as exchanges of expatriates with the host and the home country environment. Third: general adjustment, defined as the degree of comfort and familiarity of expatriates with living conditions in the host country.

The Covid-19 pandemic had triggered much disastrous effects on Japan businesses (Watanabe, 2020). However, it is to say that the Japanese government did not impose strict lockdown measures similar to those implemented in other countries, e.g., in Germany, Italy, or the UK. The Japanese way of lockdown was referred to as a “state of emergency”. In the first lockdown period from April 7 to May 25, 2020, a reduction in contact rate of 80% was deemed necessary to control the outbreak (Kuniya, 2020). For instance, Japanese restaurants were advised to close after 18.00 in the evenings. Before Jan. 21st 2021, the Japanese government could only request shop owners to close; it did not have the legal authority to mete out punitive measures to those who did not comply with government guidelines. In Osaka, for example, several pachinko parlors chose not to comply with governmental requests to close temporarily. It was reported that the local government in Osaka had no alternative but to resort to publicly naming and shaming those defiant pachinko parlors to force them to abide by the government’s bidding (Asahi Shimbun, 2020). Also, the practice of wearing face masks in public has been quite widespread well before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic – and the “opening of Japan to outside world” for foreigners was not allowed earlier than August 2022 (Times Japan, 2022).

3 Methodology

3.1 Context and data collection

German expatriates in Japan offer an interesting context for this study for three reasons. First, there is a long-standing research tradition on Western expatriates in Japan, reaching back to the work of Black in 1988 who investigated American expatriates in Japan. Similarly, much

early research focused on Western expatriate assignments in Asia and the Pacific Rim (Black and Gregersen, 1991), with a plentitude of studies conducted by Selmer (1999) in Hong Kong. Second, this research corroborates with the segmentation of high and low context cultures (Hall, 1976), drawing upon a German low context culture and a high context host country culture in Japan. Finally, Japan is ethnically a very homogeneous country, and foreigners may find it difficult to adjust to the socio-cultural environment despite it being an advanced economy (Yamashiro, 2011).

In order to address the research question for this study, an exploratory, inductive approach was adopted to gather data from qualitative interviews (Caligiuri and Bonache, 2016; He et al., 2019). Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype with seven German expatriates located in Japan. Three of the expatriates were recruited by social network and the other four via the lead author's personal network. The interviews took between one and two hours, and one interviewee was asked twice to respond to additional questions. Having the Covid-19 situation at hand, it is believed that such a qualitative approach is best suited in bringing to the surface specific challenges that German expatriates faced with regard to their work practices in Japan (see Arseneault, 2020, for Korea and Canada). The interviews were conducted during December 2020 to October, 2022. The number of interviews for this research was deemed acceptable as Sinkovics et al. (2008) based their in-depth research on 9 interviews and Eisenhardt even claimed that not more than four in-depth studies are necessary to retrieve sufficient information to extend theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). Finally, Wilczewski et al. based their study on a single interview (Wilczewski et al., 2019) and Charmaz (2014) contends: "...you can decide how many interviews will suffice for your project" (p. 19).

3.2 Study sample

During the interview process, the lead author verified that the expatriates were based in Japan, on a management level position, and had several years of management experience. Three of the interviewees arrived in Japan shortly before Covid-19 was declared a pandemic. The four others were already several months or even years in Japan before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the interviewees was a self-initiated expatriate (No. 2, certification company) with about 20 years of experience in Japan. All the interviewees were male, with degrees ranging from Bachelor to a PhD from German universities. They were working in IT, automotive, engineering or certification companies in Japan; all of them worked at different companies (Appendix 1).

3.3 Method and data analysis

The interviews captured dialogues on the adjustment of work practices. The interviewees, who offered individual insights of the study topic, were considered as primary sources of detailed content. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and memos were written by the lead author when interviewees did not allow recording. All interviews were conducted in the German language as it was the mother tongue of both interviewer and interviewees. The data coding of all seven interviews was performed manually. The statements in this paper were translated as adequately as possible to reflect the true feelings of the interviewees. Next, transcripts and memos were coded following a template analysis approach developed originally for the grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This involved choosing an inductive approach to collect data which were coded into different themes. The study hence set out a refined version of the grounded theory by Charmaz (2014) who contends: “(G) rounded theory serves as a way to learn about the worlds we study and a method for developing theories to understand them” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 17).

This technique starts with existing and potentially relevant themes, and a flexible approach to code the themes as they arose. By moving between levels, the lead author refined and re-evaluated previous theoretical ideas (see findings in Table 1). Thus, following the typical template analysis for the grounded theory, the author began initially coding more than 120 different facets as the first step. As a second step, the data were categorized into micro themes. Following this, the first order (micro) themes were transferred into higher order (macro)

Table 1: Overview of findings during Covid-19 pandemic situation

Micro themes	Macro themes	Overall themes
Restricting travels and staying at home	Restrictions and internal changes	Adjustment to work practices in Japan
Home office as “teleworking”		
Lacking physical relationships, overflow of online meetings		
Fear of having lower numbers of expatriate positions in future	Firm changes and adjustments	Adjustment to work practices with outside Japan
Increase in digitalization		
Diminishing holding patterns	Successions	
Increasing overlap time for successions		
Increasing interactions with headquarters	Bridge building activities	
Increasing interactions with third parties		

Produced by the authors

themes. In this step, micro themes appearing directly from the transcripts were merged with those identified in the memos. Subsequently, these templates were iteratively revised to saturation until two overall themes (i.e., adjustment to work practices in Japan and outside Japan) were reached. The final template showing four macro themes is summarized in Table 1.

4 Findings

4.1 Adjustment to work practices in Japan

4.1.1 Restricting travels and staying at home

Increasing attention was placed on travel restrictions for expatriates and practical limitations, resulting in their inability to be physically present at the office (Ryugen, 2020). In this way, the Covid-19 pandemic affected work practices of German expatriates in Japan significantly. Several expatriates expressed surprise at the Japanese government's way of dealing with the pandemic situation. As an illustration, German expatriate Interviewee No. 4 expressed his feelings on governmental restrictions the following way:

“Here (in Japan) there is no regulatory agency running around allotting tickets or fines or whatever. It works through social pressure. I have to admit that the Japanese are more disciplined than us (the Germans).”

Research on how other countries responded to the pandemic shows that many companies offered their expatriate staff a temporary home return or an early termination. Nonetheless, the situation also arose where “... many assignees simply stayed in the host country location and had to adopt 100% virtual working patterns from one day to the next” (Sahakiantz and Dorner, 2021, p. 786). Also, in this research setting, all seven German interviewees did not use this exit option; they continued to stay in Japan until the ban of entering Japan was lifted in August 2022.

Interviewee No. 2, a self-expatriated German top manager, reported that he went back to Germany in September 2020 for a four-week period. He made this trip to Germany as he had expected even greater difficulty with re-entry after autumn (2020) because of a possible new wave of Covid-19 infections. In contrast, Interviewee No. 3, who had been expatriated to Japan for a three year period, decided not to leave the country in the summer of 2020 as he did not want to spend three days quarantined in an assigned hotel close to the airport, and then a further 11 days in isolation at home (should he test negative for Covid-19) (Times Japan, 2022).

4.1.2 Home office as “teleworking”

Research on remote collaboration shows that the home office was the only way for expatriates to fulfill their duties at foreign locations during travel restrictions (Caligiuri et al., 2020). During State of Emergency, all the seven interviewed German expatriates in this study were forced to work from home, an arrangement called “teleworking” in Japan. In a December 2020 interview, Interviewee No. 1 stated he found himself teleworking since April 2020. He was assigned as an expatriate to a German automotive company in Japan, and arrived in late 2019 shortly before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Teleworking for him started some months after he arrived at the subsidiary located in Kawasaki, Japan. He mentioned that he had never worked from home before in his career. However, from April 2020 onwards, just like all other expatriates, he rarely went to the subsidiary office. This meant that he spent almost all his office time working from his home office. Interviewee No. 1 reported:

“...since April (2020) I have not been to the subsidiary office more than once a week, or even twice a month, sometimes even only once a month. That means, [laughing] I am basically here all day at my home office, just working on the computer.”

The regular teleworking day was mainly composed of online meetings. These extensive group meetings, often consisting of 10 to 15 participants, were scheduled over the entire day. Expatriates commonly reside in upmarket areas when on assignment abroad (Wentland, 2003), this being the case also with expatriates in Japan. However, in spite of the comfortable houses that expatriates occupied, the interviewees complained that they did not enjoy working from their home offices. Essentially, the decision to work from the home office was made by the company in order to curb Covid-19 infection risks. Societal pressure to meet the ambitious targets of firms to stay isolated in Japan was high.

4.1.3 Lacking physical relationships, overflow of online meetings

The relationship between expatriates and local managers weakened owing to the zero physical contact policy as part of the health protocol during the pandemic. For expatriates, it was understandably difficult (or even impossible) to compare what Japanese managers did (or not did!) at their homes. Expatriates could only complain they had to use the digital media to contact their local managers. Interviewee No. 2 said that he missed his local Japanese colleagues. He considered such contacts necessary for long-term relationships to keep up group perform-

ance at his firm. In addition, he noticed that the after-work activities of Japanese workers had also changed substantially during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, he did not go out anymore for drinks with colleagues after work. Interviewee No. 5 supported this observation:

“There are no “nomikais” (drinking events) anymore after work. That is because of the Corona.”

Expatriates in Japan were not the only ones affected by the pandemic. For example, the introduction of newly arrived expatriates to the new work environment used to be a routine practice for the Japanese staff. Hence, the introduction of a new boss from Germany would have been a routine procedure. Even family and housing arrangements for the expatriate manager were seen as routine processes to be carried out by the Japanese employees. Since the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, however, with no more physical contact between locals and expatriates, many routine issues needed to be handled by the expatriates themselves (He et al., 2019).

Just like the expatriates, local Japanese managers similarly disliked working from their home office. There were several reasons for their dissatisfaction. Japanese managers had difficulty handling their subordinate employees in an efficient manner without being physically close to them. Japanese managers felt they had to be physically present for their teams to fully understand their needs and requirements. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, Japanese managers could never have imagined to stay away from their team and work from home. It is undesirable for Japanese managers, as well as for any other employees to stay at home, away from the office. Employees are expected to at least demonstrate their industriousness by being present at the workplace. That way, the manager can easily speak with each employee face-to-face, be able to handle their staff personally and receive the necessary feedback or concerns. Besides, managers who worked from home often hesitated to chastise an errant employee via electronic communication because no spontaneous feedback was possible. In this regard, interviewee No. 4 mentioned:

“Well, we do not fuss anymore with expat-stories. I and most of my colleagues (German, but also Japanese) have to stay at home. But many of us are not happy about working from home.”

Furthermore, emerging research indicates negative effects of information overload associated with the overuse of new media (Matthes et al., 2020). Concerns have been raised regarding the absence of a separation between private life and work, which gives rise to the feeling of

having to be online and available most of the time (Campbell and Gavett, 2021). In sum, German expatriates revealed that there had been an overflow of online meetings.

4.2 Firm changes and adjustments

4.2.1 Fear of having lower numbers of expatriate positions in future

Research has long indicated that premature termination of assignments or underperformance by expatriates is often caused by poor cultural adjustment (Bonache, Brewster and Froese, 2020). Such premature terminations pose high costs to headquarters (Collings, Scullion and Morley, 2007). However, another reason for a premature return to the home country can be a directive from headquarters. Also, expatriates may get transferred to another destination in the global network because their expertise is needed more urgently there (Caligiuri, 2000). Premature expatriate return, therefore, should not be automatically associated with expatriation failure (Harzing, 1995). Headquarters sometimes may have no other choice than to arrange a transfer should the need arise. Also, spouses and family members can influence the performance of expatriates, the well-being and the timing of return to headquarters. It is, therefore, not uncommon for expatriates to change their span of assignment to leave earlier than agreed upon (Lee, 2007). Expatriates might also delay their return to headquarters for their own personal reasons. For example, a project by Interviewee No.1 was originally set up for a time span of two years, ending in December 2021. Owing to family reasons, he requested to further extend his tenure at the Japanese office. However, the German headquarters asked him to finish his assignment in Japan as scheduled and to return home (to the German subsidiary). The reasons for headquarters to shorten assignments, or not to extend current assignments, could be financial constraints due to the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is reasonable to assume that headquarters aim to save money by requesting expatriates to return home earlier (or at least not later than agreed upon). Concern was expressed by Interviewee No.1 that German MNCs might shorten expatriate assignments, especially when the MNCs experienced high financial losses as their business operations were curtailed or even shut down during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Some of the interviewees speculated that expatriate positions might not be filled again even after the Covid-19 pandemic was over. Interviewee No.1 opined that his headquarters seemed to be downsizing their global expatriation program activities even when the end of the pandemic was still not in sight. The pandemic had made the headquarters more aware of cost-saving measures, e.g., by not sending their managers overseas. It was likely that heavy losses in-

directly caused by the Covid-19 pandemic had led many German MNCs to curtail their investment programs. Also, German expatriate managers might be deemed no longer necessary for Japan-based subsidiaries. The higher the financial losses suffered by the headquarters, the more important it would be for headquarters to implement cost-saving measures. This is likely to be a long-term effect of the Covid-19 pandemic even when the virus no longer poses a threat to public health globally in the future. In other words, German headquarters might seize the opportunity to reduce financial costs not only by shortening existing assignments but also by keeping human resources at its headquarters. Such a decision might hamper alignment of the subsidiary to the headquarters in the long run. Concern was raised that German MNCs might be forced to leave their subsidiaries to operate autonomously, relying on locally hired Japanese staff instead.

4. 2. 2 Increase in digitalization

This research builds on recent findings by Caligiuri et al. (2020) that employers worldwide increasingly use digital solutions to support their expatriates at international locations (Caligiuri et al., 2020). In this regard, Sahakiant and Dorner (2021) contend that expatriates should benefit from using online technology and new media enforced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, research on digital applications for expatriate management is scarce (Sahakiant and Dorner, 2021). Enhanced electronic communication between subsidiary and headquarters could foster their relationships, bringing them much closer. The Covid-19 pandemic can be considered as an additional driver for increasing digitalization (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021). Through digitalization, expatriate mentoring from headquarters to spatially separated mentees becomes possible (Zhuang et al., 2013). This would essentially be e-mentoring centered around internet-based technology (Sahakiant and Dorner, 2021).

On a positive note for expatriates, the “out-of-sight and out-of-mind” syndrome diminishes as the closeness of foreign-based subsidiary managers to headquarters leads to a new balance. Expatriates can gain new experience abroad without losing contact with headquarters. These tendencies were also expressed by German expatriates in this study.

4. 3 Adjustment to work practices with outside Japan

4. 3. 1 Diminishing holding patterns

Succession of expatriates typically occurs when the HR decides to bring back expatriate managers to the headquarters (Bebenroth and Froese, 2020). The normal length of an expatriate

term is three to five years arising from the idea that expatriate managers need to have at least three years to positively influence the subsidiaries without distancing themselves too far away from headquarters. Also, this time span is considered adequate to receive sufficient returns on investments. Interviewee No.2 confirmed this view with a Japanese proverb: “Ishi no uenimo san nen” (translated: “One needs to sit on a stone and wait for three years [before something pays off]”).

The literature discusses mostly two kinds of expatriate successions. Expatriates can be replaced by other expatriates or they can be replaced by locals (Bebenroth and Froese, 2020). When locals (in this case Japanese) take over the position, it is also called job role localization (Pegram, Falcone and Kolios, 2019). It is unclear if expatriation stints end up helpful or harmful career-wise upon returning to the headquarters (Bolino, 2007). Some studies have found that expatriates remain in a so-called “holding pattern” during their international assignments (Itani, 2011). In such cases, they are not connected anymore to internal issues at headquarters. They might be disadvantaged compared with other managers at the headquarters who prefer not to be sent abroad to subsidiaries longer than a few weeks or months. These managers get promoted earlier than expatriates because they are not “out-of-sight and out-of-mind” as expatriates are (Feldman and Thompson, 1993). Such a holding pattern, therefore, can result in major career disappointments for expatriates (Antal, 2000). Also, studies suggest that younger expatriates face more difficulty reintegrating into headquarters, especially in cases of organizational downsizing at the headquarters (Itani, 2011).

4.3.2 Increasing overlap time for successions

Research suggests that transition periods, also known as overlap time of successors and incumbents, are of vital importance for a successful handover (Selmer and De Leon, 1997; Wilczewski et al., 2019). Overlap time is spent on briefings on how to run the business in the local cultural context, to introduce important stakeholders and generally to prepare the successor for a successful handover. In the present research, all the interviewees agreed that overlap time was an important period in the transfer of responsibilities. Bigger MNCs sometimes assign expatriates to special projects where overlap time does not matter. However, the majority of expatriates, especially at smaller entities in Japan, are sent out to lead the subsidiary as top managers. In this case, the length and quality of overlap time can determine the performance of the incumbent-successor handover.

Previous expatriate studies suggest that the duration of an adequate overlap time depends

on the firm and the distance between the two cultures. Expatriates to firms with greater cultural distance take a longer time to get acquainted with the business, while on average, overlap time takes about 1.5 months (Selmer and De Leon, 1997). During the present Covid-19 pandemic, there were naturally no successions taking place. However, according to Interviewee No. 7, the “joy of traveling for German managers was back to usual not later than autumn 2022” (Interviewee No. 7¹). Incumbents have lost time experiencing being at their own firm because they have spent (at least) more than a year of their expatriation time at their home office. Therefore, interviewees suggested that German headquarters give incumbents a longer time to introduce successors to the local cultural (Japanese) context, especially to introduce successors to important clients, stakeholders and key employees at the local firm itself.

4. 4 Bridge building activities

4. 4. 1 Increasing interactions with headquarters

Expatriates are expected to focus on bridge building activities i.e., linking the headquarters to their subsidiaries and to existing or potential partners. The interviewees in this study revealed that during the Covid-19 pandemic, expatriates spoke more frequently with their own headquarters rather than with the local manager. Here is the statement of interviewee No. 6.

“Well, the connection to the headquarters is always important. Of course, we are the builder of the bridges between our subsidiary and the headquarters, but unfortunately, not anymore bridging local partners”.

In return, expatriate-headquarters connections were strengthened during the Covid-19 pandemic. Headquarters had more contact with expatriates and also more control over their expatriate managers as there was easy communication access and, in some cases, even daily online meetings were held.

4. 4. 2 Increasing interactions with third parties

Business contacts of expatriates within the network to third parties increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. This included links to managers based at other subsidiaries outside Germany, e.g., in Korea. Several expatriates conceded, however, that this widened networking with colleagues all over the world would very likely not be stable after the Covid-19 pandemic ended. The reason was that there would be little chance for the expatriates to physically meet in the

future. Therefore, although expatriates in Japan increased their flexible business network worldwide, it was not deeply rooted but rather based on so-called “weak signals” (Granovetter, 1973).

Both Interviewees No. 2 and No. 3 reported that they spoke more often to colleagues all over the world online, including colleagues with whom they had never contacted before the outbreak of the pandemic. Both interviewees also thought they would not have spoken to them, under normal (non-Covid-19) circumstances, until in-person meetings were set up. Interviewee No. 2, a self-initiated German top manager (at a German certification company, and who had been in Japan for around 20 years) realized that not only had his place of work been transferred to his home, but that his working hours had also increased. He further reported that his erst-while extensive travels over the past years came to zero except for a few trips to Tokyo. He spent most of his time holding online meetings from home with colleagues in various parts of the world, and not just with the headquarters in Germany. However, he complained that teleworking was disadvantageous to him as global time differences meant that he had to be available almost 24 hours a day.

5 Discussion

The study was organized following the seminal framework of Black et al. (1991) underpinned by the grounded theory, and was based on seven qualitative interviews. The term “adjustment of German expatriates’ work practices in Japan during the Covid-19 pandemic” was coined for this study. Specifically, a unique template was derived dividing adjustment of work practices into two main themes: adjustment in Japan and adjustment outside Japan. The main issues elucidated were travel restrictions, physical isolation and an overflow of online meetings at the home office, global changes, successions, and bridge-building activities.

This research contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive overview of German expatriates’ work practices during the Covid-19 pandemic situation. The study departed from original framework by Black et al. (1991) comprising three elements, namely work adjustment, interactive adjustment and general adjustment. The study’s framework consists of two overall themes to fit expatriates’ work practice adjustments to the pandemic situation, viz. expatriates’ work practice adjustments within Japan and outside Japan.

Also, global changes and adjustments that occur due to a higher rate of digitalization deserve mention. As pointed out by Amankwah-Amoah et al. (2021), Covid-19 has led to a faster pace of digitalization at firms. While the digitalization process is seen as a necessary undertaking

by headquarters (Caligiuri et al., 2020), expatriates also gain the advantage of being brought closer to headquarters. However, concern is also raised that headquarters might make the change to fully govern their subsidiaries online, and stop the practice of sending out expatriates. In contrast to Granovetter (1973)'s research suggesting that many weak ties outperform a few strong ones, results of this study clearly point out that these new weak ties, generated by online meetings, would very likely be lost in the near future as soon as the Covid-19 pandemic is over. This finding adds a new perspective to literature that tends to ascribe a rather passive role to expatriates who are bound by their newcomer status at the host country (Mäkelä, 2007).

This research also offers a more nuanced view on depression experienced by expatriates working in physical isolation. Besides affective and adjustment disorders found by Foyle et al. (1998), in Japan, the incidence of depression is on the rise (Yamamoto et al., 2020). Despite expatriates enjoying much better housing than locals, their physical isolation remains a concern. Isolation due to confinement to the home office leads also to serious discomfort. Findings of Caligiuri et al. (2020) and Sahakiantz and Dorner (2021) are corroborated by the interviewees' revelation that the transfer of work practices to the home office leads to isolation and (at the same time) to an overflow of online meetings that increase stress. This research also validates the findings of Holtbrugge and Shillo (2008) that virtual assignments which result in a lack of face-to-face interaction exacerbates intercultural management problems. In addition, trust-building among team members becomes more difficult to manage (Sahakiantz and Dorner, 2021).

The findings of this study have several implications. First, expatriates felt isolated, even if their housing standard was far above that provided for local managers. This implies that digitalization, virtual meetings, and housing quality could not fully compensate for the physical isolation felt by German expatriates during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, expatriates had also to ensure their own physical health. Although communication with headquarters had increased via the electronic mode and relationships between the two parties had strengthened, the network with local employees remained (at best) underdeveloped.

The interviewees expressed concern that, following their experience with the pandemic, headquarters would try to save resources, especially finances, by shrinking expatriation activities and not sending them out again to subsidiaries (at least for the next few years). While such a move might be partly unavoidable for MNCs with high financial losses due to the severe economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, headquarters should clearly communicate their inten-

tions to managers. The interviewees also suggested that the overlap time of incumbents and successors (expatriates) should be increased to ensure a successful handover. Headquarters are advised, therefore, to continue expatriation programs to connect strategically with foreign based subsidiaries and to give both parties sufficient time to ensure a smooth transition.

6 Conclusion

This research, based on the theoretical framework of Black et al. (1991) as well as on the grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and by Charmaz (2014), highlights “adjustment of German expatriates’ work practices in Japan during the Covid-19 pandemic”, a term coined specifically for this study. The theoretical framework helped to provide the guidelines for in-depth interviews with seven German expatriates on assignments in Japan.

Here, work practices were divided into two themes: adjustment of work practices in Japan and adjustment with outside Japan. It was found that during the pandemic, the expatriates felt isolated in their home offices despite their living in comfortable houses. There was a lack of physical contact with co-workers, whereas an overflow of online meetings was common, including those occurring at awkward times of the day due to differences in international time zones. Expatriates were unhappy with their situation “teleworking” in the home office. Otherwise, the expatriates viewed their adjustment of work practices with outside Japan more favorably. This was especially true among interviewees who valued the stronger connection with headquarters that ensued, and who appreciated better digitalization and easier communication through the electronic media not to be “out of sight and out of mind” for the headquarters anymore.

Appendix 1: German Expatriates interviewed between Dec. 2020 to Oct. 2022

Interviewee No. 1: Automotive company, Kawasaki, project manager, male, Interview: Jan. 2021.

Interviewee No. 2: Certification company, Osaka, general manager, male, (interviewed twice), Interviews: Feb. and Mar. 2021.

Interviewee No. 3: Engineering company, Tokyo, development engineer, male, Interview: Mar. 2021

Interviewee No. 4: Car parts manufacturer, Tokyo, key account manager, male, Interview: Dec. 2020

Interviewee No. 5: IT company, Tokyo, systems engineer, male, Interview: Dec. 2020

Interviewee No. 6: Automotive company, Tokyo, Systems manager-engineer, male, Interview: Dec. 2020

Interviewee No. 7: Certification company, Tokyo, top manager, male, interview: Oct. 2022.

Interview guidelines mostly during covid-19 pandemic (translated from German):

1. How do you arrange your regular working day nowadays? Are there any changes, difficulties or

- advantages because of the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. How much of your time do you spend in your home-office?
 3. What advantages or disadvantages does the home-office provide?
 4. Did you have the chance to return to Germany before lockdown was enforced?
 5. What do you think is different nowadays compared to a regular assignment (without the Covid-19 pandemic)?
 6. Do you think you have to shorten or to extend your stay at Japan because of the Covid-19 pandemic?
 7. Do you think your succession might be influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic? To what extent?
 8. Do you think the overlap between you and your successor will change, i.e., becoming longer or shorter?

Notes

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