


The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on expatriates: A pathway to work-life harmony?

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Abstract

International assignments tend to be a turbulent time for expatriates, as they bring about changes in the two main spheres of their lives: personal and work. Although work-life interface is a challenge among expatriates it can also be a work-life harmony. Here, we present the findings of how expatriates work-day life changed while performing overseas tasks during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and analyze how this new status quo may influence future expatriates' expectations regarding their work-life interface. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 expatriates. Results show that although since the beginning of the quarantine, personal life is interfering in work, causing work-life conflict, the role of the expatriates' family positively impacted their work-life balance, and harmony. We suggest some recommendations to human resource managers and conclude that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on expatriates can be a pathway to work-life harmony, where work and life are seen as an integrative domain, rather than competing ones.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, expatriates, work-family interface, work-life balance, work-life harmony

1 | INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. The World Health Organization first learned of this new virus from cases in Wuhan, People's Republic of China on December 31, 2019 (WHO, 2020). When the WHO officially declared the coronavirus outbreak on March 11, 2020, few would have predicted the extent to which the world would change, and the speed at which the change would happen (Shortland, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is acting as a motivator for change, speeding the "future of work" and the need to plan now to be prepared for the next normal (Deloitte, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic changed each person's reality overnight. Countries, economies, and whole continents have come across the fear of the unknown and the shock of the lockdown. It began as a

public health crisis, but it rapidly moved into a significant global economic challenge, reaching nearly every layer of organizations, and their employees (EY, 2020). A survey from Gartner revealed that 88% of organizations encouraged or required their employees to work from home due to the coronavirus (Gartner, 2020). Human resource managers had to take many decisions in a very short period, such as how to best communicate the companies' priorities, and who and how employees would work away from the offices.

Many people are doing remote work, also termed home working and teleworking (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020) during the pandemic, and while both domestic and international employees have been affected by the pandemic, expatriates are a particularly interesting group to study as career concepts, adjustment processes, and job satisfaction differ for domestic and international assignees.

Additionally, from an organizational perspective, selection, career management, and training are significantly different for these two groups of employees (Andresen & Biemann, 2013). Although international assignments may seem glamorous and attractive, they also bring professional and personal challenges for the employees and are an unstable time for expatriates, as two main spheres of their lives: personal and work are impacted (Shaffer et al., 2012).

All global work experiences are associated with personal demands (e.g., stress, identity transformation), non-work/private demands (e.g., work-family conflict, family adjustment in the foreign country, maintenance of friendships, work-life balance) and work demands (e.g., career transition concerns, structural and perceptual barriers) (van Oudenhoven-van der Zee et al., 2005). If the expatriate is married, or has a significant relationship, and/or has children, this situation becomes even more difficult (Fischlmayr & Kollinger, 2010; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). In the research of expatriates, work-family interface is little researched, especially concerning the positive side of this relationship (Schütter & Boerner, 2013). Additionally, the changes in the work context, as well as the search for balance between the professional and personal life have increased the interest for the topic.

There is research on individual, contextual, and specific factors in the sphere of work, which contributes to the success of these expatriations (e.g., Takeuchi, 2010), but we realized that, in most of these studies, even if family support issues have been recognized for many years as crucial to assignment success, the expatriate's family remains a neglected factor. Many researchers have considered the family as the most important element in the success of expatriation (Andreason, 2008) and the partner's dissatisfaction has been mentioned as the main reason for the failure of expatriate performance on an international assignment, especially in cases where both partners work (Cole, 2011; McNulty & Moeller, 2018). Research on the topic has shown that the partner has an important role in the successful adaptation and completion of the international assignment (Sarkiunaite & Rocke, 2015) and when the partner does not adapt to the new culture, the expatriate worker also shows problems of cultural adjustment (Davies et al., 2015; Lee & Kartika, 2014).

Family factors significantly influence the willingness to accept expatriation, and are critical, since international designations affect the family as a whole (Brown, 2008) for several reasons: in the expatriate's adaptation process (Black et al., 1992; Takeuchi et al., 2002), in his performance (Black et al., 1999), and in the desire to end the assignment (Shaffer et al., 2012). Considering that assigned expatriates are quite expensive to organizations,

it is important to manage them more effectively (McNulty, 2015).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many expatriates found themselves living through unprecedented challenges across geographies. During this time, assigned expatriates (Andresen et al., 2018) worked from home, had the opportunity to interact more with the family and benefit from different types of life-long learning. People had the chance to reflect on how they bear the long daily commutes and long working hours, as work and home lives had been put under the same roof, and the fight to manage it all was now visible to co-workers and bosses (Donald, 2020). New ways to accomplish global work were born, inspiring us to rethink how multinational organizations use global teams and international assignments (Caligiuri, 2020). This scenario poses a significant challenge for expatriates: how to integrate personal and professional life in a working day based entirely indoors? Although work-life interface is a challenge among expatriates, did they benefit from a work-family harmony during the COVID-19 pandemic? How might the response to COVID-19 affect future expatriates' work dynamics?

In view of this situation, the aim of this paper was to identify how expatriates' work-day life changed while performing overseas tasks during the COVID-19 pandemic and analyze how this new status quo may influence future expatriates' expectations regarding their work-life interface.

2 | WORK-LIFE INTERFACE

Challenges associated with conflicts between work and life roles are typical in contemporary societies, and impact every employee irrespective of social economic status, individual demographics, or family structure (Frone, 2003; McMillan et al., 2011). Many employees struggle in finding a healthy balance between personal life and work, although this is a priority for them (Milkie et al., 2010). Additionally, the stress caused by work-life conflicts affect the general well-being of employees (Davis, 2020; Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007) and damages the individual job performance (Pitt-Catsoupes et al., 2007). The concept between work-life relationships has, therefore, been of great interest in the literature, aiming for approaches to reach a level of compatibility between them (Ong & Jeyaraj, 2014).

Work-life interface includes "any relationships between dimensions of the person's work life and the person's personal life" (Griffin & Moorhead, 2010, p. 182). This is a dynamic and complex concept that involves a cross-domain effect, including cognitive, affective, social, and behavioral dimensions (Morris, 2009), and happens when

experiences and decisions in one domain can influence outcomes on the other domain (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000).

The constructs work-life conflict, work-life balance, work-life enrichment, and work-life harmony expand and shape the understanding of the work-life interface (McMillan et al., 2011). This idea of interference between roles means that the challenges and pressures from one domain are, in a certain way, not compatible with the other. In summary, the interference between roles happens because the responsibilities from work and home are competing for resources, which are limited (i.e., physical energy, psychological resources, time) (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Some examples are when a parent is overwhelmed by being a parent (e.g., having to attend to a sick child) and an employee (e.g., staying late at work for unexpected demands), or when the expectations from a partner compete with pressures to perform at work (e.g., emotional availability once at home and worries with work demands (Canlas, 2016).

In work-life conflict, the term “family” life has been replaced in some cases by “private life,” due to the current number of alternatives to the typical family model, and also due to different opinions on leisure activities (Tetrick & Buffardi, 2006). Private life includes the time dedicated to family but also to time shared with friends, time for leisure, and time dedicated to voluntary work (Roberts, 2008). Two different situations provoke work-life conflict: work may interfere with personal life, and vice versa, but activities in the personal-life domain are usually considered to be more flexible (Gutek et al., 1991). Unfortunately, not everyone can solve work-life conflict and may end up performing at an unsuccessful level or even being forced to leave the organizations they work for, which may result in frustrating experiences (Edralin, 2013). In the most recent work-life conflict research, the functional side of this conflict has been addressed, with an interactive approach in the relationship between different domains of life (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000), which emphasizes that one role can produce positive effects by increasing energy in another role and consequently generating new resources available in different roles (Marks, 1977).

The concept of work-life balance was born in the 80s as a result of the increasing number of women who were part of the paid workforce, but who also performed both paid work and family work (Friedman et al, 2000). Work-life balance is normally defined as the degree to which people reach equal levels of satisfaction in work and life (Greenhaus et al., 2003). Generally, studies on work-life balance adopt a view where the domains – work and life – are mutually exclusive and each competing for resources (e.g., time, energy). Clark’s work-family border theory, on work-life balance (Clark, 2000), sees work and life as separate

domains, each fulfilling different needs of a person. Clark compared these two worlds as having different purposes, and for this reason, there is a search for achieving a sense of work-life balance.

Greenhaus et al. (2003) expressed that to achieve work-life balance, people had to commit equivalent amounts of time and psychological involvement and get the same satisfaction from both work and life roles. The concept of balancing work and life is therefore a zero-sum game, where dedicating resources to one domain is considered as taking resources from the other, resulting in a constant dispute between the domains (Hill et al., 2007; Ong, & Jeyaraj, 2014). According to Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) “balance is bunk,” as it is a fallacious metaphor that assumes that we need to trade among work and the rest of life. Instead, a more gratifying goal than balance is the enrichment, not related to trade-offs but to synergies (Friedman, 2014), when work and family help the individual better perform across other life domains (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000).

Kirchmeyer (1992) and Ruderman et al. (2002) have referred to the instrumental pathway to provide work-life enrichment, suggesting that employees believe their family/personal lives have, for example, taught them to better interact with co-workers or to multitask on the job. The opposite is also stated, when workers, for example, may learn conflict resolution techniques in training at work that are used to resolve conflicts more efficiently at home. According to the work-life interface facilitation approach, involvement in one role will spread to another (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Rothbard, 2001) and such thinking is in line with positive psychology (Seligman et al, 2005). However, depletion theories about the effect of multiple functions suggest that there is a limited amount of energy that people have (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Therefore, engagement in some roles may cost engagement in other roles (Rothbard, 2001).

Greenhaus and Powell (2006) argue that there are three ways in which participation in multiple roles can produce positive results for individuals: (1) professional and family experiences can have beneficial effects on physical and psychological well-being, (2) participation in professional and family roles can protect individuals from distress in one role, and (3) experiences in one role can produce experiences and positive results in the other role. This mechanism differs from the two previous mechanisms because it represents a transfer of positive experiences from one role to another. As stated by the authors, this third mechanism is the one that best captures the concept of work-life enrichment, which they define as “the degree to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role . . . work-life enrichment occurs when work experiences improve the quality of family life, and

family-work enrichment occurs when family experiences improve the quality of professional life” (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006, p. 74).

Several companies view work and personal life like competing priorities, in which a gain in one side means a loss in the other but for Friedman et al. (1998), work and personal life are in fact complementary rather than being competing priorities. In line with this point of view, McMillan et al. (2011) prefer “harmony” to “balance” when referring to work-life issues, considering work-life harmony as the ability to integrate both work and life dimensions. More recent studies have suggested that there is evidence to reinforce that work and personal life are complementary, instead of competing areas, thus shifting to the metaphor of “harmony” instead of balance (Hill et al., 2007). McMillan et al. (2011) see work-life harmony, as a harmonious setup of work and life roles that are well integrated into a single narrative.

The notion of work-life harmony brings a distinctive perspective where work and life are seen as an integrative domain, rather than competing ones, and involves the understanding and sharing of role responsibilities (McMillan et al., 2011; Ong & Jeyaraj, 2014). In the work-life harmony model proposed by McMillan et al. (2011), harmony occurs when the resources gained through work-life enrichment (Wayne et al., 2007) are successfully aligned with, and serve to ameliorate or alleviate the stressors arising from work-life conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). McMillan et al.’s (2011) model goes beyond work-life balance as it integrates the concepts of work-life conflict and work-life enrichment into work-life harmony and considers the negotiation and sharing of role responsibilities (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007). According to Hughes and Bozionelos (2007), ensuring harmony between work-life relationships consists in “the ability of individuals, regardless of age or gender, to find rhythm that will allow them to combine their work with their non-work responsibilities, activities, and aspirations.” Frone (2003) considers that giving the exact amount of time and resources to both work and family roles does not necessarily promote a positive work-family experience. Instead, the work-family interface could promote a positive experience if the individual is equally satisfied with both roles (Greenhaus et al., 2003).

In summary, based on the literature, there are differences between work-life balance and work-life harmony. Still, the approaches have been adopted alike, both by practitioners and scholars. This ambiguity in the definition of balance and harmony can lead to difficulties in the development of the construct. Additionally, greater clarity is needed in the understanding of these work-life approaches for human resource professionals who attempt to develop effective work-life interventions (McMillan et al., 2011; Ong & Jeyaraj, 2014). As the interface between work

and life incorporates the social, affective, and behavioral dimensions of an individual (Morris, 2009), a lack of work-life balance or work-life harmony can create conflict in an individual’s behaviors and emotions, which consequently may promote cognitive dissonance, emotional dissonance, and burnout (Owens & Kottwitz, 2018). With the abundance of definitions, the positive aspect of work-family interface is still in the process of development (Canlas, 2016).

Exhibit 1 summarizes the main concepts from work-life conflict, work-life balance, work-life enrichment, and work-life harmony considered in this work.

2.1 | Work-life interface among expatriates

Work-life interface and its dimensions are associated with situations experienced by expatriates in their international assignments, which can be both an opportunity for their growth and learning, as they can aggravate adversity and animosity in their personal relationships. Therefore, the pressures associated with international assignments, which leave families vulnerable to internal conflicts, cannot be ignored in expatriation (Davies et al., 2015; Kupka et al., 2008). Considering that the impact of psychological withdrawal among expatriates can be prejudicial to organizations, the assignees and their families, the importance of understanding factors that negatively influence expatriation success are important for international human resource managers to take actions (Andresen et al., 2018).

International assignments remove employees from their usual routine, their colleagues, friends, and home security (Zhu et al., 2015). Expatriates frequently experience excessive demands in both work and personal life and report higher levels of work-life conflict due to their loss of social networks (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2001), isolation (Takeuchi et al., 2002) and increased responsibilities (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). The partner and the family are a crucial means of support for expatriates to deal with work-related demands and stress (Kraimer et al., 2001; McNulty & Moeller, 2018) and to achieve work-life balance (Shortland & Cummins, 2007). Barnett and Hyde (2001) and Frone (2003) called for more attention to be paid to the positive side of the work-life interface among expatriates, as when there are positive affects over the work and personal lives, work-life enrichment is experienced (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2005) and expatriates feel the benefits of being an expatriate, not only for themselves but also for their families (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

Companies need to integrate strategy with the expatriate selection process (Black et al., 1999) and to consider not only technical, managerial, and behavioral skills in

EXHIBIT 1 Work-life interface: Dimensions and concepts

Dimension	Concept	Author
Work-life conflict	“a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect”	Greenhaus and Beutell (1985, p. 7)
Work-life balance	“satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home with a minimum of role conflict”	Clark (2000, p. 751)
	“the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in-and equally satisfied with his or her work role and family role”	Greenhaus et al. (2003, p. 513)
	“lack of conflict or interference between the work and family roles”	Frone (2003, p. 145)
Work-life enrichment	“the extent to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role”	Greenhaus and Powell (2006, p. 72)
Work-life harmony	“the ability of individuals, regardless of age or gender, to find rhythm that will allow them to combine their work with their non-work responsibilities, activities, and aspirations”	Hughes and Bozionelos (2007, p. 146)
	“an individually pleasing, congruent arrangement of work and life roles that is interwoven into a single narrative of life”	McMillan et al. (2011, p. 15)

the selection process, but also family requirements (Dowling & Welch, 2005) since selecting an expatriate for an international assignment, requires the involvement of all individuals who accompany him or her. The importance of selecting and training expatriate family members in the new roles they will play, clarifying their responsibilities is fundamental to the success of expatriation (Kupka et al., 2008). To maximize work-life enrichment experiences, organizations have recognized the importance of adapting the whole family, and not just the expatriate and his/her partner, as a key resource for the success of an international expatriate assignment (Kraimer et al., 2001; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). Even if the pre-expatriation selection and training were very careful and intensive, it is only after the expatriate and his/her family arrive at the new workplace that the work-life interface management process begins (Vance et al., 2006). Special care is required in adapting the accompanying partners, who are usually at home alone and unprepared, as they generally do not receive the necessary support from organizational policies (Konopaske et al., 2005; Kupka et al., 2008). Many global companies simplify their commitment to their professional, and often neglect the fact that they have a family that has been heavily affected by the expatriate decision, which makes them partly responsible.

Currently, there is an increasing number of expatriate women with male partners as companions, bringing new challenges to the family adjustment process (Cole, 2012; Gupta et al., 2012). This new reality justifies investments in family adaptation programs, not only due to the influence already mentioned of the partner's role in the success of an expatriation, but also based on research results that demonstrate that accompanied expatriates are much more likely to adapt than those who leave alone. An

evolving issue that makes this situation of adapting the expatriate manager and the family abroad even more complex is the growing number of couples with dual careers (Puchmüller & Fischlmayr, 2017; Shortland, 2020). If, on the one hand, these couples establish more egalitarian unions in which the partners participate more jointly in family decisions and share responsibilities, it is still observed that even if women develop professionally, the structure of domestic power still presents traditional traits of a patriarchal model (Abele & Volmer, 2011). Both women and men experience work-family spillover, but the effects on women's health and well-being seem to be greater as women continue to perform most of the tasks—both physical and mental—required to maintain a household (Davis, 2020).

2.2 | Work-life interface during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed social distancing measures to combat the spread of the virus, such as working from home, closures of schools and daycare centers, and placed a tremendous burden on families. The measured impact of the pandemic on family well-being is presently unknown, but according to Prime et al. (2020), there has been a dramatic shift in the routines of family life during the COVID-19 pandemic on a magnitude likely not seen since World War II. When work-life balance policies are discussed at workplaces, even in dual-career families, employers talk about women's access to flexible working arrangements in order to accommodate childcare needs, revealing the gendered nature of this concept (Sørensen, 2017; Utoft, 2020). COVID-19 lockdown

presented new characteristics to the patriarchal pandemic situation and began to change the mental model in a direction where both women and men tend to perform the same tasks and housework is less gendered (Featherstone, 2020). Del Boca et al. (2020) surveyed a representative sample of Italian women, to analyze the effect of COVID-19 on the working arrangements and time devoted to childcare, and highlighted the advantages of working from home, which may generate a better sharing of family work within the couple and the importance that couples take the opportunity of the crisis to share the burden of childcare more equally. Carnevale and Hatak (2020) anticipate that employees should adapt to this new work environment and highlighted some human resource management challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, for employee adjustment and well-being, as the erosion of person-environment fit and how to resolve potential misfit.

In a survey with 2772 Australian households, Craig and Churchill (2020) showed that before COVID-19, mothers averaged 3.41 daily hours in active care of children compared to 2.21 daily hours for fathers. This difference decreased to 40% during COVID-19 because fathers' hours went up by 64% (to 3.64 hours per day) whereas mothers' went up by 50% (to 5.13 hours per day). The findings confirmed that enforced restrictions during COVID-19 were associated with increases in fathers' time with children and somewhat benefits work-life interface. A research to measure working parents' perceptions of support from their partners and their employers and how well they were balancing work with family at home in Singapore, concluded that lockdowns could be detrimental to parenting and marital harmony especially for parents with poor work-life interface and weak social support (Chung et al., 2020). Family support issues have been recognized for many years as crucial to assignment success. As the COVID-19 pandemic entered its second wave, potentially exceeding that of the first, many expatriate families continue working from home and the search for a positive work-life interface impacted on the assignee's ability to work effectively. Otherwise, this can potentially result in reduced productivity and performance, and even lead to early assignment return (Shortland, 2020).

3 | METHOD

This descriptive-analytical research with a qualitative approach was chosen to understand the phenomenon in its complexity. As most studies conducted on the subject so far have been quantitative, and the perceptions that are recognized to impact on expatriates' experiences in achieving

work-life interface appears to be singular, requiring a more in-depth analysis, the qualitative approach seemed to be more appropriate. The research involved semi-structured interviews with twelve expatriate managers, using the interview script outlined in Exhibit 2.

Interviews were conducted by telephone and the participants' selection criteria were convenience and accessibility. Personal contacts were used to access all respondents: assigned expatriate managers, who were supported by their employers while working outside their home of origin, on a long-term assignment (more than 18 months) (Andresen et al., 2018; Brewster et al., 2017), at the time of interview. All participants were married and had an accompanying partner while working internationally, and gender balance was ensured. Exhibit 3 summarizes demographic information from the respondents.

The interviews, which generally lasted around 50–70 min, were in English, and took place at two different times: in January 2020, before COVID-19, and in June 2020, when all expatriates had experienced 4 months of quarantine. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and data coding and analysis process was based on content analysis that was used to extract perceptions about the topics covered (Bardin, 2009). Categories were created with semantic criteria, and quotes were selected based on these categories. Thus, the themes that referred to the same concept came together in the same category.

The questions that make up the interview script were divided into the following categories: (1) expatriate's challenges in work-family interface, (2) perception of work-family conflict (3) impact of gender on work-family interface, (4) positive impact of family on work (5) positive impact of work on family, and (6) future assignments and work-life harmony.

4 | ANALYSIS OF RESULTS BY CATEGORIES

4.1 | Category 1: Expatriate's challenges in work-family interface

Respondents acknowledged that their assignments pose several challenges in the work-family interface. Before the pandemic, expatriates faced a strong pressure of work, as revealed below:

One thing you definitely feel as an expat is that you have to work harder, because you are getting paid more than the locals, and there is a pressure to demonstrate you worth the difference (expatriate 6)

EXHIBIT 2 Interview script

Question	Aim of question
(a) What are the main expatriates' challenges in balancing personal/professional roles?	Understand the main expatriate challenges prior to quarantine.
(b) How did you experience work-life conflict since you started the COVID-19 quarantine?	Work-life conflict—expatriates' perceptions of work-life conflict during the quarantine.
(c) How do you think the role of your family positively impacted your work-life balance during the COVID-19 quarantine?	Work-life balance—expatriates' perceptions on work-life balance during the quarantine.
(d) How did your family life positively impact and enrich your work during the COVID-19 quarantine?	Work-life enrichment—expatriates' perceptions on how family life positively enriched work life during the quarantine.
(e) How did your work life positively impact and enrich your family life during the COVID-19 quarantine?	Work-life enrichment—expatriates' perceptions on how work life positively enriched family life during the quarantine.
(f) Do you think that COVID-19 will introduce a new model of work-life harmony, where work and life are seen as an integrative domain?	Work-life harmony—expatriates' expectations for after the COVID-19 quarantine.

EXHIBIT 3 Demographic data

Expatriate	Gender	Age	Family size	Position held in the company	Assignment country (in bold) + previous assignments
1	F	56	M + 1	Technology Manager	Brazil
2	F	43	M	Head of HR	France
3	F	41	M + 4	Global Rewards Manager	UK , Singapore, and Netherlands
4	F	34	M	Commercial Manager	UK , Scotland, Tunisia, and Australia
5	F	40	M + 2	Psychologist	US
6	F	46	M + 2	Development Manager	Kuwait , UK
7	M	32	M + 1	Business Manager	Argentina
8	M	54	M + 2	Compliance Manager	UK , US
9	M	49	M + 4	Business Development	Netherlands , Singapore, and Netherlands
10	M	42	M + 2	Principal Data Scientist	US
11	M	36	M	Project Designer	US , Germany
12	M	36	M + 2	New Business Manager	UK

There is a pressure for how much you cost and then the pressure to be brilliant, to extrapolate all expectations, to be an impeccable person, amazing, who will be the next CEO in the whole world (expatriate 2)

We often hear people say: you must work 200 hours because we pay you a fortune (expatriate 3)

This finding is consistent with almost every study among expatriates (Shaffer et al., 2012; Shortland & Cummins, 2007). Respondents also reported the demand from the family environment and the lack of time for the family:

Trying to help the family adapt, and even small everyday things become a nightmare (expatriate 10)

When you are an expatriate, every time you move, you have many things to do: administrative things, moving the house, finding school (expatriate 8)

These are some of the main issues related to the work-family interface during international assignments found in research on the topic (Davis, 2020; Shaffer et al., 2012; Shortland & Cummins, 2007). However, expatriates had a new experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenge of excessive workload remained, but it was softened by the flexibility to perform housework, family, and professional tasks throughout the day, according to demand, as demonstrated below:

Quarantine brought me a perspective of flexibility at work that I have never had before, and I like it a lot. I think I am happier because I

can deliver the work on my own time. If I decide to spend the night working, it's my problem, as long as I'm delivering it. It shouldn't be a problem for anyone if I decide to dedicate myself to my daughters during the day, when they really need it, and work some other time (expatriate 6).

I feel as busy now as before, but now I enjoy my time better (expatriate 11)

4.2 | Category 2: Perception of work-family conflict

During quarantine due to COVID-19, there was work-family conflict in both directions: family life interfering in professional life (Kempen et al., 2015), and work pressures impacting the family domain (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The lack of time limits, which allow family life to interfere with professional life, is illustrated in statements such as those below:

Sometimes my children interrupt me when I am working. 'Professionals can understand how to split their professional lives from their family lives, but family didn't have to do that. So, they find it a bit weird to see you doing your professional time at home (expatriate 9).

As a mother of four, I have a lot more interruptions at work: one calls, the other has doubts with homework, another has problems with the computer . . . so, the family demands increased (expatriate 3)

What I find confusing is that time for work mixes with personal time. So, there are no more barriers between the time to work and the time to be with the family. This is the big challenge! (expatriate 6)

The pressures of work impacting the family domain are also often related to the challenges of managing physical spaces.

My office is next to the TV room, so sometimes my youngest daughter enters and wants to talk to me and play, when I'm working (expatriate 9)

The expatriate's interviews confirmed that work-family conflict normally impacts the expatriates' behavior, the

support to their partner and family, the stress and early repatriation (Kraimer et al., 2001; Shaffer et al., 2012).

Sometimes the expat has a great time and a great experience, but her partner or kids are finding it difficult, so it is hard to manage home life (expatriate 11)

The women I know came back for family reasons that affected their emotional life. For men, it was because families have not adjusted (expatriate 12)

All the cases I know have to do with the family not adapting to the workplace. And the number one reason is the wife who was unable to adapt and the children are not happy [...] I've seen this happen several times (expatriate 4)

The challenges of work-family conflict reinforced research on the importance of flexibility and resilience to deal with the division of space and time between work and non-work (Chen & Bonanno, 2020).

4.3 | Category 3: Impact of gender on work-family interface

The impact of expatriate gender on the work-family interface was highly emphasized by the interviewees when they described balancing personal-professional life on assignment. Participants reported that expatriate women, in general, face more work-family conflict than men since they are pressured to articulate professional demands with the traditional roles imposed to them, such as taking care of home and children (Davis, 2020; Fischlmayr & Kollinger, 2010).

Woman will go to work and will know what is happening at home. She knows exactly what is going on. Man will be just working. He disconnects (expatriate 3)

Women are more connected to the family. They talk more about their families and are more likely to compromise their work in order to take care of their family (expatriate 9)

I think that the woman is used to doing several things at the same time. She's at work, but she thinks about what she's going to cook for dinner and where the kids are (expatriate 3)

Additionally, the behaviors expected of women in a traditional society often make them feel guilty when their professional aspirations take the time that should be dedicated to the care of the home and children (Abele & Volmer, 2011).

Latin society is very focused on the fact that women have to take care of their children. So, if she comes from such a culture, she has the challenge of taking care of work, progressing in her career and taking care of her children (expatriate 7)

Although society goes in the direction of equality between men and women in the family and at work, women have a maternal instinct of protecting the family (expatriate 10)

Women always put their personal lives ahead of work. Men prioritizes work more (expatriate 12)

In the expatriate's point of view, the pandemic promoted a decrease in the impact of gender on the work-family interface, and brought a positive dynamic to the functioning of the family, as also identified in studies of families in extreme situations (Henry et al., 2015), where it is seen the ability of family members to support each other, the flexibility in playing roles according to the needs imposed by the situation, and the communication of emotions; clearly favoring family cohesion and empathy.

Everything became more shared. For example, we had to schedule an hour to go to the supermarket, which only happened once a week. If we missed that date, we would be without food for another week. Then, we quickly learned that if I couldn't go, someone in the house would have to do it. So, 'sharing' became 'the' word (expatriate 6)

The COVID-19 pandemic made expatriate parental figures redefine their family routine, which implied in the establishment of new agreements on the division of childcare and housework (Chung et al., 2020; Featherstone, 2020; Prime et al., 2020).

4.4 | Category 4: Positive impact of family on work

Differently from what was said before the COVID-19 pandemic, expatriates emphasized during quarantine that the

role of their families positively impacted the work-family interface, leading to work-family enrichment, as presented in the studies of Frone (2003) and Clark (2000):

I had to prepare for a conference with a large audience of different backgrounds. So, I called everyone from the family to look at the slides. They got me very valuable feedback! I managed to communicate better, despite the subject being very technical (expatriate 11)

Now, I feel more connected with my family and more willing [...] so this has impacted the quality of my work, and I feel more productive (expatriate 1)

Respondents also suggested that their family-personal lives have taught them to better interact with co-workers, as claimed by the studies of Kirchmeyer (1992) and Ruderman et al. (2002).

By having children, I have always had a respect to co-workers with children. The main difference which happened is that I see co-workers now better understanding my situation, and of others with children (expatriate 6)

Research shows that, in times of stress and anxiety, people tend to find comfort in what is familiar to them: people, places, and even food (Caligiuri, 2000). Respondents demonstrated finding comfort at home and becoming aware that family life supported their work during the pandemic and that family environment needs to be productive but, at the same time, welcoming.

4.5 | Category 5: Positive impact of work on family

When asked about how their work positively impacted and enriched their family-life, we identified that their answers supported the studies on work-life enrichment, when work and family benefited each other in both ways (Friedman, 2014). The testimonies below illustrate how work influenced expatriates' family exchanges:

As children have to study at home, I think that seeing me working helped them to understand that they have to dedicate themselves too, and that it is not impossible to work and study at home (expatriate 9)

My son had a homework on Pakistan. I phoned a co-worker who had been a CEO in Pakistan for them to talk (expatriate 3)

4.6 | Category 6: Future assignments and work-life harmony

Expatriates emphasized that, at times, they experienced work-life harmony during COVID-19 quarantine, when there was a pleasing arrangement of work and life roles (McMillan et al., 2011).

Our family discovered things to do together [...] So, it is much more about sharing the experience, the life around the house... it gets intense to be confined or to keep together, but I don't mind. I actually enjoy it. (expatriate 6)

I have always loved lunch and it is important to me to have a break. Sometimes I go play a little bit with my children. So, it is nice to have the discipline to have a break at lunch time with the kids. (expatriate 9)

Respondents recognized that these new behaviors and practices experienced during the quarantine, may, as time goes by, introduce a new model of work-life harmony, where the integration of the different roles experienced by individuals throughout the day is internalized, in a win-win process.

COVID-19 is just speeding the process of change, for something which was already happening for a long time (expatriate 5)

I think that the experience during the pandemic made us think about how we can have a different work routine (expatriate 1)

When expatriates were asked about how the COVID-19 pandemic can promote changes in expatriation, three themes appeared from their responses:

- a. Work and family can be considered as an integrating and non-competing domain:

I hope COVID has helped people not to think of their careers in such a dichotomous way, since we have seen it possible to benefit from home office and remote work (expatriate 2)

People will balance better and give more value to their quality of life [...] they will realize that

they can professionally perform well without harming their quality of life (expatriate 4)

- b. There was resilience on the part of expatriates and their colleagues in face of the need for new behaviors:

my company was not prepared for remote work. The IT team quickly made a plan, and within a month all key employees had access to computers at home. They really turned the key fast and we, employees, as well (expatriate 6)

- c. There is an expectation that this new mental model will introduce changes to current assignments, reinforcing work at home:

I really hope that we can keep flexible work. The job can be done perfectly from home. Once you have the interpersonal relationship created at an early stage, there is a precious balance between what you can do face to face and remotely. I hope that this learning will be transferred to our professional lives and our companies, and that they recognize that it is a win-win solution, also reducing costs in offices (expatriate 3)

I don't think we'll be back in the office for five days and that will be wonderful! Things will work for the family and for me. I think this is going to be a big step forward. The best thing for me is the reduction of time in traffic. I think there will be a lot of happy people not going to the office five days a week! (expatriate 9)

Expatriates even dared to estimate a qualitative and quantitative change in future expatriations, with a possible decrease in the number of international assignments in the long term, due to the greater use of technology and reduction of business trips:

I think companies will reevaluate the need for expatriates, they will be more aware of the costs and will really think if the job cannot be done remotely. Technology is solving many challenges during COVID and I am sure that business travel will be reduced, even for security reasons. Much work will be remote (expatriate 12)

It may not be worth paying three times more, for assignments. We are in challenging times, of reassessment of costs and the need to send

EXHIBIT 4 Changes in expatriate's perceptions

Category	Previous vision	Current vision
1. Expatriate's challenges in the work-family interface	Excessive workload. Strong pressure for presence and results to justify the cost of expatriation.	The pressure for results remains, but the way to achieve them is different. Expatriates start to have more autonomy and to take responsibility for their domestic and professional agenda, which becomes flexible and aligned to their needs.
2. Perception of work-family conflict	Work-family conflict impacts the behavior of expatriates, and the lack of support from spouse and family can cause lack of adaptation and early repatriation. Family issues affect expatriates' emotions, generate stress and sometimes burnout.	Lack of time limits allows family life to interfere with professional life. Work pressures, related to the challenge in the management of physical spaces, impacts the family domain. Flexibility and resilience to deal with the division of space and working time and non-working time.
3. Impact of gender on work-family interface	Female expatriates, in general, have more work-life conflict than men, as they are pressured to articulate professional demands with the traditional roles imposed on them, such as taking care of the home and children.	The pandemic decreases the impact of gender on the work-family interface and brings a positive dynamic in family functioning. Family members are found supporting each other, being flexible in playing roles according to the needs imposed by the situation, and demonstrating greater empathy. Parental figures redefine their family routine, with new agreements on the division of childcare and housework.
4. Positive impact of family on work	The lack of opportunities and time to interact with the family does not promote this positive impact and the exchange of experiences.	Work positively impacts family relationships. Expatriate being at home all day favored socialization and the exchange of experiences among family members.
5. Positive impact of work on family	The lack of opportunities and time to interact with the family does not promote this positive impact and the exchange of experiences.	Family can have a positive impact on work. Family members teach expatriates to better interact with their co-workers, and to reflect on the introduction of new behaviors in their daily lives, promoting work-family enrichment.
6. Future assignments and work-life harmony	Work and family are seen as competing domains. The search for results and good performance often precedes the search for quality of life. There is a conflict between roles in the personal and professional lives.	Work and family can be considered as integrating domains. Greater concern with the search for harmony between personal and professional life.

employees abroad. Is it enriching? Yes; Does it promote knowledge transfer? Yes, but when it comes to performance, it is possible to deliver, regardless of where we are. There is a fine line there, but, for sure, what will come in the coming years is a significant reduction in assignments, not only because we can deliver remotely, but also because this is a very expensive model (expatriate 2)

5 | CHANGES IN EXPATRIATE PERCEPTIONS ABOUT WORK-FAMILY INTERFACE BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

From the field investigation analysis, Exhibit 4 summarizes the perceptions that expatriates have about the work-family interface, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6 | IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

As a contribution to the literature on work-life interface, we suggest some recommendations to human resource managers that could contribute to enhance work-life harmony among expatriates and to foster organizational performance. These suggestions are aligned to the six categories analyzed in this research:

6.1 | Category 1: Expatriate's challenges in work-family interface

As expatriates start to have more autonomy for their domestic and professional agenda, human resource managers should understand the impact of family demands on "employees' productivity and well-being, and which practices can alleviate such new avenues of family to work conflict" (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). To benefit from this change, human resource should help expatriates to work from home in a healthy manner, supporting lifestyle habits such as: working within regular hours, taking regular breaks, and clearly communicating work expectations to maintain expatriates' family responsibilities. The support will vary depending on the expatriate's work-life issues, but the assistance from the organization is fundamental.

6.2 | Category 2: Perception of work-family conflict

The flexibility and resilience to deal with the division of space and working time and non-working time (Chen & Bonanno, 2020) can be improved by training programs. Additionally, in a multicultural context with greater uncertainty, human resource managers should promote webinars and virtual counseling services with the expatriates and families on stress, to increase their virtual connection with co-workers and the organization, and build critical competences, such as tolerance for ambiguity, greater resilience, and being more open-minded.

6.3 | Category 3: Impact of gender on work-family interface

In order to help family members to be more flexible in playing roles and find comfort at home (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2020; Craig & Churchill, 2020; Featherstone, 2020; Prime et al., 2020), we suggest that human resource managers take familiar parameters of family living to

decrease the feeling of estrangement, supporting cultural manifestations and domestic rites (e.g., meals, readings and games) so that families can discover things to do together, share their personal and professional experiences that may favor cultural alignment, and the expatriates' feeling of comfort and proximity to their family and work.

6.4 | Category 4: Positive impact of family on work

Family can have a positive impact on work (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2005; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006) and human resource managers should understand the impact of family demands in combination with increased levels of self-governed work. Identifying the impact of self-responsibility on expatriate's productivity and well-being should be one of the main targets for human resource managers, who should be empathic to expatriates to lift them, morally and culturally, to reach their personal and organizational goals.

6.5 | Category 5: Positive impact of work on family

For work to impact family relationships positively, human resource should reinforce unity (Caligiuri, 2000; Del Boca et al., 2020). Shared stress and anxiety may create bond that further ties global teams. This shared experience may intensify unity in the future. Our second suggestion is that human resource managers reflect on personal and professional shared values, identifying cognitive dissonances that may affect expatriates' behavior and attitudes. Human resource should use COVID-19 as a common enemy to actively seek similarities with co-workers and families from different cultures. The sharing of stressful feelings among the families and co-workers may also facilitate their emotional ties, as health-related anxiety is present everywhere in the world.

6.6 | Category 6: Future assignments and work-life harmony

For the integration of work and family in the daily life of expatriates, it is necessary that human resource managers review corporate values, considering the wellbeing of the employees and their quality of life, to find a pleasing arrangement of work and life roles (McMillan et al., 2011). In this sense, recommendations made by Carnevale and Hatak (2020) to human resource managers, to adjust to the newly altered work environment, should be applied to

expatriates. Human resource managers should adapt their human resource practices, considering that these unprecedented changes are influencing the expatriates' experience, and evaluate how the work-family interface spheres may be managed, to maintain appropriate work-family role boundaries and promote work-life harmony.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

Most recently, the term "work-life balance" started being questioned and people are preferring to refer to "work-life harmony," instead. There is a perception that "balance" means that there must be the same amount of time spent in both areas, but, for many individuals, life does not work that perfectly and each day is different.

Our study contributed to the current literature, by addressing two important gaps in the work-life interface research. First, the study provides evidence that validates the conceptual difference between the constructs of work-life balance and work-life harmony. The improved understanding of these approaches can enhance the development of the constructs targeting the measurement of these concepts. The clear understanding of these concepts can also assist human resource professionals in developing effective work-life initiatives.

We have observed that, during the COVID-19 quarantine, expatriates lived all dimensions of the work-life interaction: work-life conflict, work-life balance, and work-life enrichment; and we asked if those experiences could be a pathway to work-life harmony, considering the negotiation and sharing of role responsibilities, as proposed by McMillan et al. (2011). Each expatriate has their own individual characteristics, suffers different consequences from the crisis, and needs to take their own individual actions in response. However, the experiences of these expatriates are important sources of learning for other expatriates facing the same challenges in similar situations. We observed that the flexibility in these families, the collaboration among family members and the use of technology were crucial to these expatriates and should, as well, be to those trying to deal with the current changes in the business environment, and for coping with whatever may come in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic, for which no one was prepared, produced massive uncertainty that is affecting many people around the world (WHO, 2020), and brought along significant strategic human talent concerns (Deloitte, 2020; EY, 2020), which are still ongoing. Much is unknown, and the ultimate effects are unlikely to be seen for some time.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that the virus had no frontiers. Expatriates had to reinvent their mindset, searching for ways to reach a mutually beneficial result in

work-life intervention, creating strategies that contributed to organizational goals. The sought pathway expressed by the expatriates is the one where work and life roles are integrated, resulting in increasingly positive perceptions of work-life harmony, and ultimately organizational performance.

Our study has a methodological limitation, as all our sample was composed of married expatriates. In this regard, we believe that the concept of work-life interface is an area that is rich in opportunities for future research. For instance, the study of contemporary family structure: childless and single expatriates (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020), lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex+ (LGBTQI+) expatriates, an area that is under-researched despite such individuals representing a growing sector of the global talent pool (McPhail et al., 2016). The social/physical distancing measures, and a lack of a sense of belonging, may be notable for this group, thus posing risk to their mental health and well-being, and to the productivity of the organizations. Similarly, future studies might also profitably investigate, in a longer term, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work-life interface.

The health risks of the pandemic begin to decrease in some locations and the vaccine has started being distributed, but it remains unclear how long the crisis will last, and what its eventual impact will be. The novel ways of working remotely and the fears around the global recession will continue to cause a state of uncertainty; however, as we have seen, some expatriates have been able to use the strengths of their family lives to respond to the challenges.

In conclusion, we believe that the data we obtained through the interviews with the expatriates has shown their daily reality at home. Although most felt work-life conflicts, many also experienced work-life enrichments. This cooperation between work and family can be rewarding for both sides in a partnership. As collaboration among expatriates, their families and the organizations increase, we hope that our work will provide some ideas for how work-family harmony may be reached in a rewarding way.

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The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.


AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sylvia Freitas Mello: Conceptualization (lead); Data curation (lead); Formal analysis (equal); Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal); Resources (equal); Supervision (equal); Validation (lead); Visualization (equal); Writing – original draft (lead); Writing – review and editing (lead). Patricia Amelia Tomei: Conceptualization (supporting); Data curation (supporting); Formal analysis (equal); Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal); Resources (equal); Supervision (equal); Validation (supporting); Visualization (equal); Writing – original draft (supporting); Writing – review and editing (supporting). Both authors contributed to the development and the writing of the article. The workload was distributed 70% (Sylvia Mello) and 30% (Patricia Tomei).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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