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Employee well-being in international business travel

A case study from a global business context

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis examines employee well-being in the context of international business travel. It addresses the following research question: *"How do employees experience well-being across the different phases of international business travel?"* International business travel remains an important part of work in many international organisations, and previous research has shown that it may affect employee well-being in several ways. Building on this literature, this study aims to explore employee well-being across the pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip phases of international business travel.

The theoretical framework of this study positions international business travel within the context of internationalisation and examines employee well-being across different phases, in relation to travel stress, cultural differences, and organisational support. The study was conducted as a qualitative case study at a global SME. The empirical data were collected through thematic interviews with employees whose work involves 20-180 days of international business travel per year. Afterwards, the data was analysed thematically to identify recurring experiences related to well-being in different phases of travel.

The findings show that employee well-being is shaped by phase-specific demands, stressors, and recovery challenges. In the pre-trip phase, well-being is affected by scheduling and coordination uncertainty, booking and logistical planning demands, lack of shared knowledge, cost and time pressure and the need to balance work and personal life before departure. During the trip, employees experience stress related to long working days, intensive schedules, disrupted routines, cultural and communication challenges, and limited opportunities for rest and recovery. In the post-trip phase, well-being is influenced by fatigue, backlog of work and the need to adjust both work and private life. The findings further suggest that within the company, international business travel is experienced as a recurring cycle rather than a set of isolated events, as demands arising before, during, and after travel often overlap and shape employee well-being across phases.

The study contributes to the literature on international business travel by using a phase-based case study approach to examine employee well-being across pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip travel. In this process, it builds on existing theories and research on internationalisation, travel stress, cultural differences, and HRM support.

KEYWORDS: International business travel, Global Mobility, IHRM, Well-being, Adjustment, Travel stress

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ABSTRACT:

Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee työntekijöiden hyvinvointia kansainvälisen liikematkustuksen kontekstissa. Tutkimus vastaa seuraavaan tutkimuskysymykseen: *"Miten työntekijät kokevat hyvinvoinnin kansainvälisen liikematkustuksen eri vaiheissa?"* Kansainvälinen liikematkustaminen on edelleen tärkeä osa työntekoa monissa kansainvälisissä organisaatioissa, ja aiempi tutkimus on osoittanut sen vaikuttavan työntekijän hyvinvointiin monin tavoin. Aiempien tutkimusten pohjalta tämän tutkielman tavoitteena on tarkastella työntekijöiden hyvinvointia kansainvälisen liikematkustuksen eri vaiheissa, eli ennen matkaa, matkan aikana, ja matkan jälkeen.

Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys sijoittaa kansainvälisen liikematkustuksen kansainvälistymisen kontekstiin ja tarkastelee työntekijöiden hyvinvointia eri vaiheissa suhteessa matkustamisesta aiheutuvaan stressiin, kulttuurisiin eroihin ja organisaation tarjoamaan tukeen. Tutkimus toteutettiin kvalitatiivisena tapaustutkimuksena globaalisti toimivassa pk-yrityksessä. Empiirinen aineisto kerättiin teemahaastattelujen avulla työntekijöiltä, joiden työ sisälsi xx-180 päivää kansainvälistä liikematkustamista vuodessa. Tämän jälkeen aineisto analysoitiin temaattisesti toistuvien hyvinvointiin liittyvien kokemusten tunnistamiseksi matkan eri vaiheissa.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että työntekijöiden hyvinvointiin vaikuttavat matkustuksen eri vaiheisiin asettuvat vaatimukset, kuormitustekijät ja palautumiseen liittyvät haasteet. Ennen matkaa hyvinvointiin vaikuttavat aikatauluihin ja koordinointiin liittyvä epävarmuus, varausten ja logistiikan suunnitteluun liittyvät vaatimukset, keskitetyn tiedon puuttuminen, kustannus- ja aikapaineet sekä työn ja yksityiselämän yhteensovittamisen tarve ennen lähtöä. Matkan aikana työntekijät kokevat kuormitusta pitkien työpäivien, intensiivisten aikataulujen, häiriintyneiden rutiinien, kulttuuristen ja kommunikaatioon liittyvien haasteiden, sekä rajallisen lepo- ja palautumismahdollisuuksien vuoksi. Matkan jälkeisessä vaiheessa hyvinvointiin vaikuttavat väsymys, matkan aikana työtehtävien kasaantuminen sekä tarve sopeuttaa työ ja yksityiselämä uudelleen matkan jälkeen. Tulokset viittaavat lisäksi siihen, että kansainvälinen liikematkustaminen koetaan yrityksessä jatkuvana syklinä, jossa ennen matkaa, matkan aikana ja matkan jälkeen ilmenevät vaatimukset, kuormitustekijät ja palautumiseen liittyvät haasteet limittyvät ja vaikuttavat työntekijöiden hyvinvointiin eri vaiheissa.

Tutkielma täydentää kansainvälistä liikematkustusta koskevaa tutkimusta tarkastelemalla työntekijöiden hyvinvointia ennen matkaa, matkan aikana ja matkan jälkeen vaiheisiin perustuvan tapaustutkimuksen kautta. Tutkimus pohjautuu aiempaan kirjallisuuteen ja teoreettisiin näkökulmiin, jotka liittyvät kansainvälistymiseen, matkustusstressiin kulttuurisiin eroihin ja henkilöstöjohtamisen tukeen.

KEYWORDS: Kansainvälinen liikematkustaminen, Globaali liikkuvuus, Kansainvälinen henkilöstöjohtaminen, Hyvinvointi, Sopeutuminen, Matkustusstressi

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1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the rationale for the thesis. It begins with background information on the topic and defines the research problem. Next, the objectives and research question are introduced. Finally, the chapter presents the key concepts, and the overall structure of the thesis.

1.1 Background and problem area

International business travel forms an important part of work in many globally operating organisations (Beaverstock et al., 2009; Welch et al., 2007), where employees engage in cross-border travel to support business activities, cooperation, and international operations (Jooss et al., 2022; Suutari et al., 2013). According to Edström and Galbraith (1977) typical reasons for such international work include filling positions, exercising organisational control and developing managers.

International work today is not only limited to traditional long-term expatriate assignments, as organisations are utilising also short-term assignments and other flexible global work arrangements, such as international business travel, commuter assignments, and virtual assignments to fulfil their global objectives (Brewster et al., 2020; Tahvanainen et al., 2005). Within this broader mobility portfolio, international business travellers represent an important group of globally mobile employees that have a crucial and strategic role due to their position to acquire and transfer knowledge about foreign markets and operations (Welch et al., 2007). According to Welch (2007), international travellers might even contribute more to knowledge transfer compared to traditional expatriates. From an internationalisation perspective, international business travel may also support the development of market knowledge, relationship building and network creation that can overcome the liability of outsidership in foreign markets (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009).

While international business travellers have received increasing attention from researchers over recent decades, traditionally international HRM research has focused more on long-term expatriate assignments (Welch et al., 2007). Dimitrova et al. (2020) similarly argue that international business travellers might still receive less organisational and scholarly attention compared to long-term expatriates despite their growing importance in global work context.

International business travel can create repeated adjustment demands and considerable stress for employees due to uncertainty, high expectations, extended work hours, and the challenge of operating across diverse cultural and institutional environments (Jooss et al., 2022; Suutari et al., 2013). Differences in national cultures and workplace norms may further increase the adjustment challenges associated with international business travel across diverse cultural contexts (Hofstede, 1980). Moreover, stress related to business travel may arise before departure, continue during the trip, and persist after return (DeFrank et al., 2000). DeFrank et al.'s (2000) study identifies pre-trip, in-trip, and post-trip stressors, suggesting that business travel can generate demands before departure, during the trip, and upon return.

Previous studies have identified stressors related to international business travel and highlighted challenges that may emerge before, during and after travel (DeFrank et al., 2000; Westman & Etzion, 2002). While organisations tend to have support mechanisms and policies for longer expatriation assignments, employees engaging international business travel generally receive less structured support from the organisation, even though they face stress, adjustment demands, and cultural challenges (DeFrank et al., 2000; Suutari et al., 2013; Jooss et al., 2022; Black et al., 1991). Therefore, there is a need for better understanding of employee well-being experiences throughout the travel process and to understand how organisational and HR support practises could influence these experiences within specific organisational contexts. According to Guest (2017) employee well-being may be influenced by the organisation's ability to provide appropriate support practises for employees engaged in international work.

1.2 Research question and aim of the study

The study's research question has been evolving and taking shape since 2023, and since then, the research topic has become clearer and more focused. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, pp. 37–38), reformulating the research question is integral to conducting a successful qualitative study and should be carried out iteratively throughout the research process as the researcher develops a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

The initial questions already focused on how the case company could support its international business travellers during their business trips. As the study progressed, the research question evolved to its current form: *"How do employees experience well-being across the different phases of international business travel?"* To answer this question, the study aims to find solutions with the help of the following sub-questions:

- *How do HR practices support employee well-being across these phases?*
- *What are the main stressors during the different phases of international travel?*

The objectives for this study are:

1. To examine employees' experiences of international business travel during the pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip phases.
2. To identify the main well-being challenges linked to each phase of international business travel.
3. To explore how organisational and HR practices support or fail to support employee well-being throughout these phases.

By examining employee well-being across different phases of international business travel within specific organisational context, this study seeks to deepen understanding

of how international work travel, adjustment demands, and organisational support practises are experienced in international business travel related events and short-term assignments.

1.3 Delimitations

This thesis has a few delimitations. Firstly, the study focuses only on international business travel and short-term assignments, expatriation assignments are left out of the scope as the case company doesn't utilise long-term expatriation assignments. While expatriation literature is largely excluded, Black et al.'s (1991) cross-cultural adjustment theory makes an exception due to its fit to the international business travel. For example, Schneider et al. (2013) and Dowling et al. (2013) acknowledge the importance of adjustment in international business travel and short-term assignments. Secondly, this thesis focuses solely on international business travel from the perspective of employee well-being and does not consider for example, organisational performance or travel cost management. Finally, this thesis does not aim to compare experiences across industries and companies but instead seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within the selected case company.

1.4 Definition of key definitions

In this study, **international business travel (IBT)** refers to temporary, work-related travel across national borders that does not involve the relocation of the employee or their family, and is therefore quite different from long-term expatriation (Brewster et al., 2020)

In this study, **employee well-being** is defined as work-related well-being, covering the overall quality of an employee's work experience. From an international business travel perspective, it also includes experiences such as stress, fatigue, recovery, and support, along with the capacity to effectively handle work demands (Guest, 2017).

This study considers the travel process as comprising a **pre-trip phase, a during-trip phase, and a post-trip phase**. This structure is based on the DeFrank et al. (2000) model, which differentiates between pre-trip, trip, and post-trip stressors in business travel.

HR support in this study refers to organisational policies, practices, and managerial actions intended to support employees' well-being related to international business travel, including travel conditions, safety, workload, and opportunities for recovery (Guest, 2017)

In this study, **adjustment** refers to employees' process of adapting to the changing work, social and practical demands associated with international business travel before departure, during the trip and after return (Black et al., 1991). Unlike traditional expatriation research, adjustment is understood here as a repeated, ongoing process rather than a single, long-term relocation experience.

1.5 The structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the topic, states the aim of the study and research question, outlines delimitations, and defines key concepts. The second chapter reviews the theoretical background, focusing on international business travel and employee well-being through the lenses of international human resource management, internationalisation and cultural concepts. In the third chapter, the methodology of the case study is explained, covering the research strategy and process, case selection, data collection and the evaluation of the study's reliability and validity. In the fourth chapter, the findings for the case company are presented while the fifth chapter discusses them in relation to the theoretical background. The final sixth chapter offers the conclusions and recommendations for future research.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter provides the theoretical background related to international business travel, cultural and institutional differences, international human resource management practices, adjustment and employee well-being.

2.1 Internationalisation and international business travel

Since this study seeks to understand employee well-being during international business travel, it is important to consider why such travel takes place in the first place. The Uppsala internationalisation model explains how increasing international engagement leads to more frequent cross-border interactions and employee mobility, including international business travel (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977).

1977 model

Johanson and Vahlne (1977) introduced the Uppsala model of internationalisation to explain how organisations gradually expand into foreign markets. Their model (1977) was developed based on studies of Swedish manufacturing companies and views internationalisation as an incremental, learning-based process. The model assumes that organisations initially lack knowledge of foreign markets, which can only be gained through experimental learning (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). According to Johanson and Vahlne's (1977) model, organisations tend to gradually commit resources and increase their involvement in foreign markets due to uncertainty and risk). Johanson and Vahlne (1977) explain that this process, called "establishment chain," describes how organisations move from irregular exports to exports through intermediaries (agents), then to sales subsidiaries, and finally to manufacturing operations abroad. According to Johanson and Vahlne (1977) one of the key concepts related to this incremental internationalisation process is psychic distance, which refers to the perceived differences between the home country and the country the organisation is planning on entering. These differences may be related to the business climate, cultural patterns, market system structure, or characteristics related to customers and their personnel (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977).

2009 Revisited Model

While their 1977 model emphasises incremental international expansion, the 2009 revision places greater focus on business networks and relationship building (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). In their revised model Johanson and Vahlne (2009) argue that organisations do not primarily internationalise by gradually entering countries based on geographic or psychic distance. Instead, organisations internationalise by developing and maintaining relationships with suppliers, customers, partners and other stakeholders in various networks (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Whereas the 1977 study focused on psychic distance where the main challenge is the uncertainty and the lack of knowledge about the market (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977), the 2009 study focuses on liability of outsidership. Liability of outsidership refers to situation, where organisation is either considered an insider or outsider within the market's relevant networks (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). According to Johanson and Vahlne (2009) an outsider has limited access to information, fewer trusted relationships, fewer opportunities, and higher uncertainty. Johanson and Vahlne's 2009 model emphasises that knowledge is built through interaction, uncertainty is reduced by trust, and commitment strengthens the organisation's position within networks while ultimately creating new international opportunities.

While the Uppsala model has a strong influence in the internationalisation research, researchers have argued that internationalisation does not always follow a gradual or incremental process suggested by 1977 Uppsala model, instead companies internationalise more rapidly, utilising network relationships (Forsgren, 2002; Oviatt & McDougall, 2005)

Aside from the Uppsala model by Johanson and Vahlne, other researchers have explored the internationalisation process. Eriksson et al. (1997) study show that different types of market knowledge influence internationalisation in distinct ways. A lack of institutional market knowledge, such as insufficient understanding of language, legal systems, and regulatory frameworks, is closely linked to psychic distance and contributes to liability of foreignness (Eriksson et al., 1997). In addition, a lack of knowledge of the business

market weakens the organisation's network, such as relationships with customers, suppliers, and partners (Eriksson et al., 1997). According to Eriksson et al. (1997), this knowledge shortage creates the liability of outsidership for organisations that are not insiders in relevant networks. Erikson et al. (1997) claim that this creates greater challenges in accessing opportunities and building trust within the market.

Although the Uppsala model does not specifically focus on international business travel, it emphasises gradual international growth, knowledge accumulation, and network integration, which provide a useful framework for understanding employee mobility (Pucik et al., 2023). According to Pucik et al. (2023, p.315), as organisations expand their international activities and deepen their engagement in foreign markets, coordination across different locations becomes increasingly important. Internationalisation often involves frequent international travel to share knowledge, build relationships, and maintain their network positions (Dicken, 2007; Stahl et al., 2012).

In this study, internationalisation theory is not examined as a broader theory of company's expansion. Instead, the study presents selected concepts such as psychic distance, liability of outsidership, and network relationships to provide contextual understanding for international business travel and the challenges employees may encounter during international assignments.

2.2 Cultural and institutional differences

According to Dowling et al. (2013, p. 24), there is no single consensus on the precise meaning of culture. Kluckhohn (1951, p. 86) states *culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts: the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values."* Hofstede (2001) influenced by Kluckhohn's definition, views culture as the collective programming of the mind that differentiates members of one group or category

of people from another. For Hofstede (2001, p. 10), the term "mind" relates to *"thinking, feeling, and acting,"* which affect beliefs, attitudes, and skills.

According to Chhokar et al. (2007), culture can be understood as having two distinct forms: culture *"as is"* and culture *"as should be."* The first refers to shared values, beliefs, and assumptions held by members of society or an organisation and is often described as the underlying attributes of culture (Chhokar et al., 2007). The second form refers to observable practices, such as behaviours and institutional arrangements found in families, schools, legal systems, workplaces, and political institutions (Chhokar et al., 2007).

Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Throughout the history of cultural research, researchers have debated whether to emphasise cultural uniqueness or similarity (Hofstede, 2001). Hofstede (2001) argues that while cultures are unique, they share comparable traits that make cross-cultural comparison possible. His original study (2001) used a comparative approach to investigate phenomena such as individuals, situations, institutions, and organisations. Conducted within the multinational company IBM between 1967 and 1973 across more than 50 countries, the study included data from over 100 participants (Hofstede, 2001). The study aimed to identify differences in employee values across national contexts and demographic groups, including age, occupation, and gender. Hofstede (2001) initially identified four cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism–collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity–femininity. This research primarily focuses on power distance, individualism–collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance as these dimensions directly shape communication, coordination, and responses to ambiguity in international business travel.

Power distance indicates the extent to which a society accepts an unequal distribution of power (Dowling et al., 2013, p. 26). In cultures with high power distance, hierarchical structures, centralised decision-making, and formal authority are emphasised, whereas in cultures with low power distance, relationships tend to be more egalitarian,

participative, and informal (The Culture Factor Group, 2026). For example, in high power distance cultures such as China, employees generally are expected to respect hierarchy and follow the instructions given by superiors without disagreements, whereas in low power distance cultures such as Finland, workplace relationships are more equal, and employees are encouraged to share their opinions openly (The Culture Factor Group, 2026).

Individualism–Collectivism addresses the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups (The Culture Factor Group, 2026). In individualist societies, people are expected to look after themselves and their immediate families, valuing autonomy (Dowling et al., 2013, p. 26). In contrast, in collectivist societies, support and protection are provided more broadly in exchange for loyalty (The Culture Factor Group, 2026). According to Dowling et al. (2013, p. 28), in collectivist companies the relationship between the superior and the employee tend to be more personal and relationship-oriented while in individualistic companies, the relation can be formal, task-focused and impersonal. For example, in individualistic cultures like Finland, employees are expected to take personal responsibility for their work and complete tasks independently. In contrast, in collectivist cultures like China, teamwork and group harmony are emphasised (The Culture Factor Group, 2026).

Uncertainty Avoidance indicates how societies deal with uncertainty and ambiguity (Dowling et al., 2013, p. 26). Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance tend to feel threatened by the unknown and therefore they establish formal rules, beliefs, and institutions to reduce unpredictability (The Culture Factor Group, 2026). In contrast, cultures with low uncertainty avoidance are more at ease with ambiguity and adopt more flexible approaches to rules and planning (The Culture Factor Group, 2026). For example, in high-uncertainty-avoidance cultures like Finland, clear rules, detailed planning, and predictability are preferred, whereas in low-uncertainty-avoidance cultures such as China, employees might be more comfortable working in situations where not every detail is known in advance (The Culture Factor Group, 2026).

Hofstede's framework has also faced criticism as researchers have pointed to conceptual ambiguities and inconsistencies when comparing different cultural models (Brewer & Venaik, 2011). For example, McSweeney (2002) argues that reducing culture to numerical scores oversimplifies the complexity of societies. Despite these critiques, empirical research has shown that Hofstede's cultural dimensions remain influential in explaining differences in organisational behaviour and managerial practices across countries (Kirkman et al., 2006)

Hofstede's cultural dimensions are a useful framework for understanding how cultural differences between countries affect the communication and management style (Pucik et al., 2023), employees' ability to integrate into the local community, build strong relationships (Tahvanainen et al., 2005) and adapt to new behaviours, values, and assumptions in the new culture (Pucik et al., 2023). Hofstede's cultural dimensions can provide understanding for employees who face barriers in social interactions in new cultures (Wurtz, 2018) and insight of the cultural sensitivity that can have an impact to business outcomes (Dowling et al., 2013). In this study, Hofstede's cultural dimensions provide the understanding for cultural differences and how they may shape employee's experiences during international business travel.

2.3 International human resource management practices

According to Boxall and Purcell (2011, p. 1), Human resource management (HRM) refers broadly to "*activities associated with the management of work and people within organisations".* In international context, HRM extends to managing employees across different countries and cultural environments, commonly referred as international human resource management (IHRM) (Dowling et al. 2013). IHRM practices are shaped by organisational and external environmental factors, including the international context in which organisations operate (Gooderham et al., 2019; Reiche, 2022). According to Budhwar et al. (2019), international human resource management (IHRM) involves managing HR activities worldwide to enhance both individual and organisational performance. When referring to IHRM, it typically includes a wide range of HR activities such as planning,

staffing, performance management, training and development, compensation, and employee relations, but also entails operating in different countries and employing diverse nationalities (Dowling et al., 2013, p. 2). According to Dowling et al. (2013), HRM in an international setting involves designing and managing HR programs on a global level. Dowling et al. (2013, p. 116) argue that IHRM should understand local business practices and establish emergency evacuation procedures for assignments in high-risk areas. According to Dickmann and Doherty (2010), international assignments often serve multiple objectives, such as with filling positions, developing management, and organisational growth (Dowling et al. 2013, p. 117).

According to Pucik et al. (2023, p. 315), global mobility is crucial for international expansion as it facilitates cross-border coordination, encourages knowledge transfer among organisational units, and aids in developing key skills and competencies necessary for leadership in global organisations. As a result, organisations are prioritising human resources to achieve global success (Dowling et al., 2013, p. 175). Kamoche, (1996) argues that human resources consist of the knowledge, skills and capabilities within organisation over time. To improve these resources, companies invest in training and competency development, such as preparation for international assignments (Dowling et al., 2013, p. 177). The nature of business has become more geographically dispersed with global management structures and project-based collaboration involving stakeholders across borders (Dicken, 2007; Stahl et al., 2012). According to Dicken (2007) and Stahl (2012), digital technologies enable seamless connectivity, but organisations still depend on international travel to coordinate and manage activities. While videoconferencing can replace some forms of business interaction, important situations involving relationship building, trust development, complex communication or collaboration still require face-to-face meetings (Müller & Wittmer, 2023).

In addition to long-term expatriation, organisations increasingly utilise short-term assignments and international business travel due to flexibility, cost considerations, and evolving organisational needs (KPMG International, 2020; Pucik et al., 2023) According

to Brewster et al. (2020), short-term assignments typically last less than 6 months, whereas Harris et al. (2003) report durations ranging from 3 months to 1 year. According to Suutari et al. (2013), to avoid issues with taxes, insurance, and social security, these assignments generally do not exceed six months. Based on the studies by Pucik et al. (2023, pp. 335–338) and Tahvanainen et al. (2005), short-term assignments are often used for knowledge transfer between subsidiaries, project work, and problem-solving.

Baruch et al. (2013) add that organisations who provide knowledge-intensive services often rely on short-term assignments for project tasks. Moreover, Pucik et al. (2023, pp. 334–338) argue that short-term assignments are more practical than long-term expatriation due to lower costs and easier administration, making them generally less burdensome for the organisation. Compared to expatriates, short-term assignees often face greater challenges in integrating into the local workforce and community, which can limit their ability to build strong relationships with local colleagues and customers (Tahvanainen et al., 2005). According to Wurtz (2018), short-term assignees typically stay in hotels or accommodations provided by their organisation. Outside of work, especially in countries where they do not speak the local language or encounter other barriers to social interaction, short-term assignees tend to spend most of their time in their accommodations (Wurtz, 2018).

Comparison of the main other types of international work		
Common features	**Short-term assignees**	**International business travellers**
Length of international work	3–12 months (generally under 12 months).	One or few days
Main individual motivations	For example, nature of work, opportunities, international work experience, career development.	For example, nature of work, career development, international travel possibilities.
Individual challenges	Separation from family, adjustment, intensive work, stress, and fatigue, freetime possibilities.	Separation from family, impacts on personal life, stress of travel, health issues.
Main organisational motivations	Problem solving, staffing problems, project work, management development, knowledge transfer, control, and coordination.	Integration, flexibility, knowledge transfer, innovation, control and coordination, relationship building.

Organisational challenges	Taxation and social security issues, visa and work permits, responsibility allocation.	Travel arrangements, legal compliance, safety issues.

Table 1. Comparison of the main other types of international work adjusted, based on studies by Brewster et al. (2000); Harris et al. (2003); Suutari et al. (2013); Tahvanainen et al. (2015); Pucik et al. (2023); Shaffer et al. (2012).

According to Shaffer et al. (2012), international business travellers are employees who frequently undertake short international business trips to different locations without their families, trips typically lasting from one day to three weeks. They spend a large proportion of their time, for example, visiting trade fairs, distributors, and potential customers (Dowling et al., 2013, p.122). International business travellers stay at locations for shorter periods but may work across multiple cultures throughout the year (Baruch et al., 2013), gaining competence and knowledge from different places and thus becoming vital assets to their organisations (Sparrow et al., 2004). The differences in common features between short-term assignees and international business travellers are shown in Table 1. The table is adjusted based on studies by Brewster et al. (2000), Harris et al. (2003), Suutari et al. (2013), Tahvanainen et al. (2015), Pucik et al. (2023), and Shaffer et al. (2012).

Given that international business involves the movement and interaction of people across national borders, recognising and understanding cultural differences is vital for effective collaboration (Dowling et al., 2013, p. 177; Gooderham et al., 2019). People must adapt not only to new behaviours, values, and assumptions but also to the broader institutional and organisational context (Pucik et al., 2023, p. 355). This adaptation may include learning to navigate different management and leadership styles, communication norms, approaches to time and deadlines, and expectations around work–life boundaries (Pucik et al., 2023, p. 355). Additionally, employees may need to understand local labour laws, the role of trade unions, negotiation practices, and how to access and operate within local business networks, depending on their roles and responsibilities (Pucik et al., 2023, p. 355). While there is no consensus on how culture should be defined or measured, it is recognised that a lack of cultural sensitivity, whether due to ignorance

or incorrect assumptions, can negatively affect international business outcomes (Dowling, 2013, p. 28).

The studies by Baker and Ciuk (2015) and Suutari et al. (2013) indicate that short-term assignees and international business travellers receive relatively limited support from IHRM departments, which tend to concentrate on expatriate contracts. Consequently, short-term assignees often must be more self-reliant, compared to long-term expatriates (Suutari et al., 2013). Since short-term assignments are usually managed by line managers instead of centralised HR functions, short-term assignees within the same organisation can experience home-leave arrangements, accommodation standards, expense policies, and travel-time allowances significantly different ways (Brewster et al., 2020; Ellis & Tsang, 2010). In many organisations short-term assignees are expected to gather the necessary information for their assignments and deal with challenges themselves without additional help from the organisation (Brewster et al., 2020). Ellis and Tsang, 2010 and Baker and Ciuk, 2015 claim that this might result in a lack of trust, demotivation, and even reluctance to undertake such assignments.

In a study by Welch et al. (2007) international business travellers reported receiving relatively limited support from the HR compared to one given to long-term expatriates. According to Dowling et al., (2013, pp. 177–186) studies indicate that long-term expatriates usually receive pre-departure training programs designed to facilitate a smooth transition to a foreign environment. These programs typically include cultural awareness training, initial visits, language lessons, practical guidance for daily living, and security briefings (Dowling et al., 2013, pp. 177–186). In Welch et al. (2007) study the assistance offered to international business travellers by HR mainly focused on travel-related logistics, such as flight and hotel arrangements, expense reimbursements, and vaccinations which led them to rely on formal and informal networks. According to Dowling et al. (2013, pp. 177-186), cultural awareness training, initial visits, language lessons, practical guidance for daily living, and security briefings could also be beneficial for short-term assignees and international business travellers (IBTs). However, short-term assignees

often lack access to such training due to limited time, and IBTs, as a group, are frequently neglected despite their involvement in international activities that require cross-cultural interaction (Dowling et al., 2013, p. 184). Evidence suggests that IBTs primarily learn on the job, gradually developing the knowledge and skills necessary to operate effectively across different countries (Dowling et al., 2013, p. 185).

2.4 Well-being at international assignments

According to Guest (2017), HRM research has made significant progress over the past 30 years. Different approaches, such as Boxall and Purcell's (2016) emphasis on the strategic role of internal and external fit and Jiang et al.'s (2012) discussion of the link between HRM and performance have received attention, but according to Guest (2017), employee well-being has received less focus within HRM. Guest (2017) suggests that HRM should not only focus on performance but also actively promote employee well-being as according to him well-being and performance are connected and can benefit both individuals and organisations. Guest (2017) identifies five groups of HR practices that support well-being: investing in employees, engaging work, positive work environment, voice, and organisational support. The aim of these practices is to develop people, design meaningful jobs in safe and fair conditions with supportive management and culture and foster a sense of being heard by the organisation (Guest, 2017).

Guest (2017) argues that employee well-being should be treated as a central organisational outcome and claims that there is evidence linking well-being to performance. This is supported by studies by Bakker et al. (2008) study which claims burnout dimensions such as exhaustion and cynicism are associated with lower objective performance, and study by Taris and Schreuers (2009), which linked negative well-being to lower organisational performance indicators. Guest's (2017) argument is also supported by Bockerman and Ilmakunnas, (2012), who found a positive relationship between job satisfaction and productivity. High managerial expectations and long workdays, which often include expected social interactions with colleagues and customers, place significant pressure on international business travellers (Jooss et al., 2022; Suutari et al., 2013).

This pressure is intensified by the need to overcome language barriers, navigate cultural and institutional differences, and adapt to diverse verbal and non-verbal communication styles (Jooss et al., 2022). In addition, exposure to corruption, harassment, and feelings of insecurity in unfamiliar destinations may increase the overall strain experienced by IBTs (Jooss et al., 2022; Ye & Xu, 2021).

Jooss et al. (2022) highlight that international business travellers operate in an intense environment characterised by *"high physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and non-work"* demands, all of which may affect their health (Demel & Mayrhofer, 2010; Espino et al., 2002; Jooss et al., 2022; Striker et al., 2000; Ye & Xu, 2021). Striker et al. (2000) define travel stress as the employee's *"mental, emotional, physiological, and behavioural response to the demands and conditions of business travel",* which may manifest in burnout, fatigue, sleep difficulties, lack of exercise, gastrointestinal problems, infections, and injuries (Demel & Mayrhofer, 2010; Ye & Xu, 2021; Striker et al., 2000; Jooss et al. 2022) Jooss et al., (2022) also observe that employees are expected to maintain a cheerful and friendly demeanour, even when they feel frustrated or fatigued.

Research by Ye and Xu (2021) and Demel and Mayrhofer (2010) shows that international business travellers often feel guilty about failing to maintain healthy routines such as exercise. Similarly, a survey of World Bank travellers found that business trips may harm personal life, create emotional isolation, and cause jet lag (Striker et al., 2000). At the same time, pressure to remain available for colleagues in the home country remains high due to digital connectivity, which prevents travellers from being fully offline (Jooss et al., 2022; Striker et al., 2000). Busy schedules and limited time at each destination may also make it difficult to adapt to local life, which can negatively affect health (Suutari et al., 2013; Ye & Xu, 2021).

Business travel also affects personal life, including relationships with friends, family, and spouses, due to limited time at home (DeFrank et al., 2000; Demel & Mayrhofer, 2010; Striker et al., 2000; Ye & Xu, 2021). Espino et al. (2002) and Jooss et al. (2022) describe

being away from family as difficult when there are children are involved. Espino et al. (2002) studies report observable changes in children's behaviour following the traveller's absence, and highlight the difficulty on organising daycare and caregiving arrangements when going on a international business trip. According to Suutari et al. (2013) travellers may struggle to stay in touch with their families due to time zone differences and demands related to work and the environment itself. Ye and Xu's (2021) study claims that frequently travelling employees are generally aware of the health risks associated with highly mobile lifestyles, but usually stopping the travel is not an option. Therefore, Ye & Xu (2021) emphasise the importance of raising awareness of issues related to business travel.

DeFrank et al. (2000) examine coping strategies at the organisational and individual levels to reduce travel stress. DeFrank et al. (2000) suggest that travellers should manage jet lag, nutrition, and stress through healthy habits while organisations should offer structured support such as scheduling, travel and accommodation arrangements, safety and health guidance, and access to training (DeFrank et al., 2000). DeFrank et al. (2000) note that organisations fail to adequately support employees' travel needs, especially when it comes to health, safety, and reintegration. Similarly, Mäkelä and Kinnunen (2018) emphasise the importance of supportive HR practices and sufficient recovery opportunities in maintaining the psychological well-being of international business travellers. After travel, employees might struggle to return to normal routines due to fatigue, jet lag, family commitments, or changes in eating and sleeping habits (DeFrank et al., 2000). DeFrank et al. (2000) argue that organisations should recognize these issues and adjust work schedules to support well-being for example by helping employees' families during trips through benefits like childcare, eldercare, dry cleaning, or grocery shopping.

DeFrank et al.'s (2000) travel stress model outlines different phases of a business travel and the stressors associated with each phase: before, during, and after the journey. Pre-trip stressors involve planning tasks like booking flights, hotels, organising work, and household issues with family (DeFrank et al., 2000). During the trip, stressors include

logistical issues, health and safety concerns, work problems, and anxieties about the host culture (DeFrank et al., 2000). The post-trip phase involves work and family stressors, like accumulated chores (DeFrank et al., 2000). In addition, DeFrank et al. (2000) suggest that factors such as personality, organisational aspects, and family circumstances may further influence employee's stress levels throughout the travel process.

Adjustment in international assignments

Westman et al. (2023) argue that research on international business travel has largely neglected the importance of adjustment, while it has been a key attribute in expatriation research. According to Westman (2023), adjustment is a combination of emotional, social, and behavioural components. According to Schneider et al. (2013), adjustment involves adopting adaptive behaviours that, for instance, enhance the effectiveness of international business travellers. According to Schneider et al. (2013) these adaptive behaviours could be related to relationship building, facilitating knowledge transfer, and developing familiarity with cultural norms, such as learning new communication styles, adapting to local dress codes, and in general, adapting to the local working climate.

Black et al.'s (1991) study divides international adjustment into three main stages: anticipatory adjustment (before departure), in-country adjustment (during assignment), and re-entry adjustment (upon return home), as shown in Table 2. Anticipatory adjustment focuses on preparations prior to departure, while in-country adjustment focuses on understanding how work is managed, how people communicate, and how daily life generally functions (Black et al., 1991). Re-entry adjustment involves resettling into life, work, and social activities in the home country (Black et al., 1991). Based on their study (1991), there are five factors that influence the adjustment process: individual factors, job factors, organisational factors, non-work factors and previous international experience. The study (1991) presents individual factors, including skills and personality traits, as well as the capacity to develop mental resilience and handle stress effectively. Black et al. (1991) argue that the ability to establish and nurture relationships, as well as to accurately

interpret the host environment and its participants, significantly impacts the adjustment process before, during, and after the assignment.

Job factors such as role clarity and demands, as well as organisational factors like training and HR support, also influence successful adjustment (Black et al., 1991). According to Black et al. (1991), family and living conditions, along with the cultural environment of the host country, influence the extent to which adjustment is supported or hindered. Mendenhall & Oddou (1985) argue that the greater the cultural distance between the host country and the individual's home culture, the more difficult the adjustment process is likely to be. While the theory was originally designed for long-term expatriates, Dowling et al. (2013, pp. 177–186), Suutari et al. (2013) and Baker and Ciuk (2015) suggest that similar adjustment mechanisms could be equally relevant for international business travellers and short-term assignees. More recent literature has also recognised that adjustment-related challenges may extend beyond traditional expatriation to broader forms of international mobility, including international business travel and short-term assignments (Dimitrova et al., 2020).

Adjustment process over time in expatriation

BEFORE (Anticipatory Adjustment)	**DURING** (In-country Adjustment)	**AFTER** (Re-entry Adjustment)
Expectations	Work Adjustment	Return to Work
Preparation	Interaction	Reintegration
Experience	General life	Family Adjustment

Influencing Factors (affect all phases):

Individual factors	**Job factors**	**Organisational factors**	**Non-work factors**	**Previous international experience**
skills	role clarity	training	family	
personality	demands	HR support	living conditions	

Table 2. Adjustment process over time in expatriation by Black et al., (1991).

2.5 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this study is structured as follows. The Uppsala internationalisation model provides the broader business context by explaining why companies engage in international business travel, as international operations require cross-border interaction, customer contact, coordination, and employee mobility. Within this context, international business travel is understood as a necessary work activity through which employees contribute to organisational goals and perform tasks associated with international operations.

In this study, international business travel is conceptualised as consisting of three phases: pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip. These phases involve different stressors, demands and adjustment challenges that shape employees' experiences during the travel process. In line with DeFrank et al.'s (2000) framework, stressors may emerge before departure, during the trip and after returning home. In addition, adjustment is understood as an important aspect of international work experiences, as employees adapt to changing work, social, and cultural environments across different travel phases (Black et al., 1991). Cultural differences and IHRM-related organisational support influence how employees experience and manage these demands across the different phases. At the centre of the framework is employee well-being during international business travel.

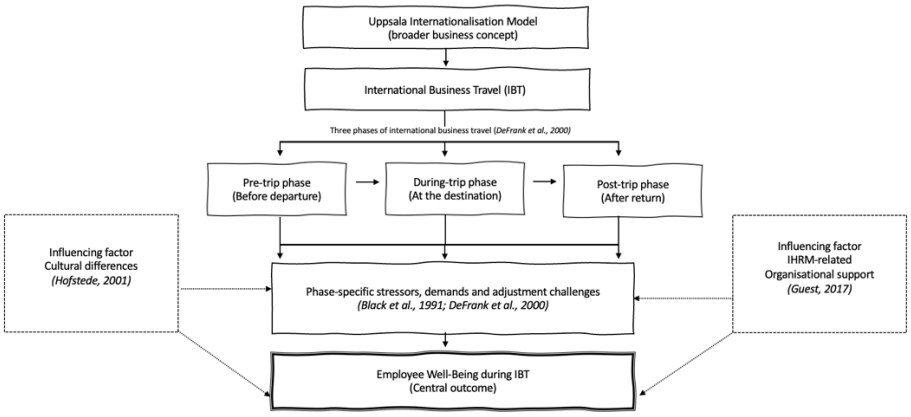

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the thesis.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research methodology in terms of the research strategy, case selection, data collection and analysis methods. In this chapter also the assessment of reliability, validity and generalizability is discussed.

3.1 Philosophical assumptions

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 10), state that it is important to recognise that research methods are closely linked to research philosophy and the underlying assumptions about how knowledge can be produced through research. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p.12) argue that in a context of continuously expanding information and research knowledge, it becomes increasingly vital to critically examine both the process of knowledge production and the knowledge itself. This involves reflecting on the processes through which research knowledge is creates, described and interpreted (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 12).

According to Bryman and Bell (2015, pp. 29–35), several classification frameworks have been developed to describe philosophical positions in business research. This study adopts an interpretivist stance, focusing on understanding the subjective experiences of international travellers at the case company (Bryman & Bell, 2015, pp. 29–35). Considering the context-specific aspects of adjustment, well-being, and cross-cultural issues, interpretivism provides insight into how employees perceive HR support, social expectations, and organisational demands during international assignments (Bryman & Bell, 2015, pp. 29–35).

Researchers outline three primary methods for developing theories: deductive, inductive, and abductive approaches (Bryman & Bell, 2015, pp. 25–27). Bryman and Bell (2015) characterise the deductive method as a process that reviews existing theories, formulates hypotheses based on them, and then collects data to test those hypotheses. The inductive approach involves collecting qualitative data without relying on a predefined

theory, analysing the patterns or themes that emerge, and developing new concepts and insights based on these findings (Bryman & Bell, 2015, pp. 25–27). In the abductive approach, the research starts with unclear or surprising observations and seeks the best possible explanation by moving iteratively between data and theory (Bryman & Bell, 2015, pp. 25–27). In the abductive approach, existing theories may be tested, modified, or even developed into a new one, and this iterative process continues until a coherent understanding is reached (Bryman & Bell, 2015, pp. 25–27). This study follows an abductive approach, as the analysis moved iteratively between empirical findings and existing theories related to international business travel, adjustment, and employee well-being. Existing theories were used to support the interpretation of findings, while the empirical data refined the understanding of international business travel experience.

3.2 Research strategy

This study aims to answer the research question: *"How do employees experience well-being across the different phases of international business travel?"* Since the study examines employee well-being across the pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip phases of international business travel, while also considering how HR practices support well-being across these phases, the study adopts an exploratory research approach. The research was conducted as intensive case study, which seeks to achieve a deep and comprehensive understanding of a specific case by examining its internal processes, meanings, and contextual dynamics (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

This study is conducted as qualitative research due to its nature. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) qualitative research seeks to understand human experiences, behaviour, and social phenomena through the perspectives and interpretations of the participants themselves. A qualitative research design offers flexibility, allowing the researcher to adapt the approach as the study progresses (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) argue that such adaptability is essential when investigating complex phenomena. According to Tellis (1997), the case study method facilitates the production of detailed, holistic knowledge by drawing on multiple empirical sources

that offer rich, contextualised information. Tellis (1997) claims that the method promotes diversity and complexity, but avoids methodological oversimplification. Yin (2002) describes a case study as an empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon situated in its real-life context, particularly when the distinction between the phenomenon and its context is blurred and when multiple forms of evidence are required.

According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), there are intensive and extensive case studies. Intensive case study research seeks to gain a detailed, comprehensive understanding of a specific case by examining its internal processes, meanings, and contextual dynamics (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). With intensive case study research, the goal is not to produce generalisable knowledge but to explore and understand how the case being studied functions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). An extensive case study, on the other hand, examines a larger number of cases or a wider set of observations to identify patterns, compare differences, and draw somewhat generalisable conclusions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). As discussed earlier in this chapter, this research adopts an intensive case study approach to develop a detailed understanding of a single company's international business travel practices and the needs of its travelling employees.

3.3 Case company

The Case Company is a small to medium-sized enterprise based in Finland that designs, manufactures, sells, installs, and maintains complex medical equipment worldwide. It operates through subsidiaries in the UK, USA, Japan, and China, with its main markets currently in the US and China. In addition, many installations and planned maintenance tasks take place in APAC and EMEA due to the extensive customer networks in these regions. Sales are also conducted through distributors and agents, which may result in limited technical expertise in certain markets. Due to its global customer base, international business travel is an important part of the company's operations and common across several employee roles.

This case study focuses on the headquarters located in Finland, particularly on employees who travel extensively for maintenance and installation work. These employees primarily support customers across EMEA and APAC (excluding Japan) as company does not have local service personnel in every country.

The interviewees in this study spend approximately 30 to 180 days per year abroad, either travelling internationally or working on customer sites for extended periods. Planned maintenance assignments typically last about one week, whereas installation projects may require four to six weeks depending on factors such as customer readiness, logistics, customer procedures, and the number of personnel involved. Their responsibilities include installing, repairing, and rebooting complex medical equipment, requiring both technical expertise and interaction with the customers and colleagues during assignments. In addition to fieldwork, employees also participate in planning assignments, supporting audits, updating CRM cases and assisting research and development in product design activities.

Based on previous research, business travellers often face stressors such as irregular schedules, long periods away from home, cultural adaptation challenges, physical exhaustion from travel, and disruptions to work–life balance (DeFrank et al., 2000; Jooss et al., 2022; Suutari et al., 2013; Westman & Etzion, 2002). Recognising the growing importance of employee well-being, the case company aims to better understand the difficulties encountered by its employees who travel internationally for extended periods. This makes the company a relevant case for examining employee well-being in the context of international business travel while also identifying practical implications for organisation.

3.4 Methods of Data Collection

The primary data was collected both face-to-face and Microsoft Teams interviews. A thematic interview approach was selected, in which the main interview themes were prepared in advance based on the preliminary theoretical background, the research

question, and the research objectives. Furthermore, potential follow-up topics and areas for deeper discussion were considered beforehand to support a more comprehensive understanding of the interviewees' experiences (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008, p. 184)

The data comprise six interviews, each lasting between 30 and 80 minutes, depending on the participant's talkativeness. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis. For triangulation, secondary data sources, such as the case company's intranet and website, were accessed to verify facts and supplement the data collection process (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 292).

3.5 Data analysis

In this study, the data collected from thematic interviews were transcribed to support the analysis process as suggested by Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2008). The data was then reviewed and organised into a thematic case record to ensure a logical and structured management of the data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 128; Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008, p. 141). Afterwards identified patterns were matched and compared with existing theoretical frameworks using a pattern-matching approach introduced by Yin (2003, pp. 116–137). The themes were further structured according to the travel stress model by DeFrank et al. (2000), which distinguishes between pre-trip, trip, and post-trip stressors.

3.6 Limitations, Reliability and Validity

The main limitation of this study relates to the limited number of interviewees and the focus of single case company. As the research was conducted within one company, the findings reflect the experiences and practises of that specific company (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Although the qualitative approach enabled an in-depth exploration employees' experience, the findings cannot be broadly generalised beyond the case context (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

According to Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2008) and Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), reliability refers to the consistency of results, meaning that the same responses would be obtained if the same questions were asked of the same individual at different times. However, this assumption may be problematic in research involving human subjects (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008, pp. 17–18, 185–186). According to Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2008, p. 186), human interpretations and experiences are fluid and shaped by context, and the depth of understanding is sometimes prioritised over the stability of measurement. The reliability of interview data may be affected by participants' tendencies to provide socially desirable responses and to avoid discussing sensitive topics (Hirsjärvi and Hurme, 2008, p.184–186). Furthermore, interview responses are influenced by the interviewer's presence, the phrasing of questions, and the language used during the interview, all of which can shape how participants interpret and respond to questions (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008, pp. 48–50, 184–186).

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 292) state that validity indicates how true and trustworthy the findings are and, essentially, measures how well the research conclusions accurately describe or explain actual events. Enhancing the quality of the research and strengthening the credibility of the results is achieved through the triangulation process (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 292). Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2008) recommend preparing a clear and well-structured interview outline and considering how each theme can be explored in greater depth through follow-up questions. Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2008) also emphasise the importance of transcribing the interview immediately to ensure that the interviewer still remembers the details of the discussion, which is especially helpful if recording equipment fails or produces incomplete material.

4 FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from the intensive case study examining the employees' experience on well-being during international business travel. The findings are organised by utilizing DeFrank et al.'s. (2000) travel stress model as a framework. The model divides stress into three categories: pre-trip, trip, and post-trip stressors (DeFrank et al.,2000). The findings are based on interviews with six employees travelling approximately 30 to 180 days annually.

To aid the interpretation of the findings, direct interview quotations are accompanied by pseudonyms assigned to each participant, as listed below. These pseudonyms are random letter-number codes to prevent the disclosure of identifiable details. In addition, the participants' views have been synthesised thematically to ensure clear presentation while safeguarding confidentiality, as recommended by Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2008).

Participants in the case study interviews			
Name	**Role in the organisation**	**Days travelled per year**	**Length of the interview**
H1	Project manager	30–50	66 min
H2	Team lead	30–60	36 min
H3	Team lead	50	45 min
H4	Field service engineer	80–120	1h 15 min
H5	Field service engineer	80–180	51 min
H6	Field service engineer	90–130	56 min

Table 3. Participants in the case study interviews and days traveller per year.

4.1 Pre-trip stressors

Preparation and expectations

Based on all the interviews conducted for this study, the planning and preparation for international business travel appear largely consistent across interviewees. According to the case company's travel policy, all business-related travel must be approved by the supervisor in advance, and several interviewees noted that upcoming travel is typically coordinated during team meetings. Despite this, due to the nature of the business (product maintenance and installation), unexpected issues can still arise. Delays may prevent planned business travel, as urgent customer issues may require the travellers' immediate attention elsewhere.

Since the case company's operations are highly customer-centric, conducting planned maintenance or installation work requires substantial cooperation and careful joint planning with the customer. Moreover, planned maintenance or installation projects shouldn't interfere with customer operations, such as medical research or clinical patient care, as system downtime can result in significant financial losses. Most interviewees emphasised the importance of a clear and aligned schedule between the customer and the service team. When schedules are not coordinated effectively, employees arrive at sites at inappropriate times, leading to either long waiting periods before they can access the facility or, in some cases, to working in construction environments where conditions may be unsafe or unsuitable.

All interviewees mentioned that they typically manage their own bookings and prefer to do it themselves. H1 mentioned that managing their own bookings gives them more control during the trip, especially when facing delays or unexpected changes. H1 also noted that without this control, their anxiety would increase because they trust more in their own research than in someone else's travel suggestions. Interviewees H2 and H3 believe that booking directly offers greater flexibility and efficiency than booking through a travel agency. In contrast, H5 prefers to use the company's travel agency because it simplifies managing bookings, cancellations, and changes with a simple phone

call. Furthermore, H6 acknowledges that travel agencies are very valuable partners during travel disruptions as they can reschedule flights regardless of the airline and are skilled at adjusting itineraries or cancelling unused flights or hotels when needed.

H4 agrees that professional support is essential because managing travel changes alone would be very difficult and time-consuming. H4 believes that without access to premium airline services, such as priority customer support, employees might spend significant time waiting in customer service queues, a wait that is often longer than it would take a travel agency to find an alternative flight. H6 also notes that extending accommodation and finding alternative options when the current hotel is fully booked present additional logistical challenges. However, they recognise the benefits of booking travel independently, as it allows travellers to choose flights and lodging that best suit their needs. For example, installation and maintenance work often has specific requirements, such as safely storing tools in the hotel room. For short-term assignments, proximity to public transportation is key, because travel between the hotel and the client's site is frequent. H6 also mentioned that business travellers often need to attend online meetings during their stay, a point that should be considered when selecting hotel locations and amenities.

Travel experience

H6 points out that the organisation lacks a formal system for sharing travel-related knowledge, as this information has neither been documented nor centralised. Instead, the data mainly exists as tacit knowledge among experienced travellers. In the past, the company's travellers exchanged restaurant and hotel recommendations through Google Maps, but this resource has not been updated for years. B17 notes that the team is small and that members are generally familiar with the cities where the worksites are located, which means they have their own preferences for accommodations and lunch spots. Nonetheless, H6 recommends creating a customer-specific knowledge repository that includes practical details, such as suggested travel routes and accommodation options, to prevent employees from repeatedly searching for the same information or relying on

informal queries when travelling. They believe centralised documentation would be especially useful for new travellers unsure who to approach for guidance.

H1 actively monitors flight options and evaluates different routing alternatives to lower costs for the company. H1 notes that this cost-conscious approach can sometimes be stressful, as finding the *"right flight or hotel at the right price"* takes time and effort. H1 mentions that being cost-efficient is especially difficult when trips are booked on short notice. Even in these situations, H1 has tried to factor in costs, for example, by opting for flights with layovers instead of direct routes when the price difference is significant. H2 notes that sometimes it's unclear when the customer's site will be ready, making it difficult or impossible to book flights and hotels in advance. They suggest these delays may be due to the customer's preparation schedule or internal factors such as the company's production and operations procedures.

Throughout the interviews, participants described varying effects of international business travel on their personal lives, mainly influenced by family circumstances and the amount of notice given before trips. H1 explains that, for them, travel is relatively easy to manage with enough preparation time, but for others, business travel can be more stressful. Interviewees with children reported that travel disrupts family routines and that longer trips are not well received at home. These participants mentioned feeling extra pressure as they try to balance family commitments with travel preparations. While spending time with family is valued, the days before a trip are often filled with practical tasks, such as gathering tools, organising equipment, and completing work-related chores. This mix of family expectations and work preparations can increase stress and create a sense of time pressure. Employees with extensive international travel experience opened up about the cumulative effects of frequent business travel. They acknowledge that travelling more than 100 days per year has had a noticeable impact on their personal life, including relationships, hobbies, and social activities. For example, H5 notes that working during around half of the weekends each year can be frustrating, as it often leads to missing social events, celebrations, and shared hobbies with friends,

thereby limiting opportunities for consistent participation. According to H4, preparing for a business trip is a complex puzzle, as everything is interconnected. *"Sometimes it can be tricky to estimate the duration of the trip, and you might need to make additional hotel bookings, change flights, cancel meetings scheduled after the trip, and generally inform people at home that you will be arriving later and that personal plans may need to be cancelled,"* according to H4.

4.2 Trip stressors

Challenges related to travelling

Travel disruptions are common and may involve delays, extended assignments, and sometimes even rerouting directly to another destination without returning home. H1 identifies the time difference as the most challenging aspect of travelling to and from China, as they struggle with sleeping on planes. This, combined with travelling in economy class or fully booked flights, can make the journey particularly tiring. They recounted an exceptional situation: "*There was also a time when all the flights from China were cancelled by Finnair, and they offered an alternative 32-hour flight with KLM, involving two layovers in Amsterdam and Stockholm. I contacted my supervisor, and with his support, I flew via Bangkok instead, from where I had a direct flight to Helsinki."* H5 also reports delays and cancellations caused by airline strikes. At one point, it took them 56 hours to return home from China. H5 mentions that many of the case company's customers are in Beijing, so the typical travel time is about 24 hours door-to-door, as direct flights with Finnair are unavailable. While faster airline options are available, the interviewees preferred not to use them. When discussing ways to make long-haul travel less stressful, most interviewees highlighted business-class flights as their preferred option, but this is currently not an option for them. Most are frequent flyers of a certain airline and thus receive upgrade vouchers that can be used for this purpose.

H6 described business travel as follows: *"Travelling 12 hours a day, seven days a week, without the opportunity to rest while flying in economy class made me question whether salespeople who travel in business class are considered more valuable to the company."*

According to H4, it is common to visit the customer's site the day after travelling, which, depending on the flight schedule and duration, may not allow enough time to recover, especially when jet lag is a factor. In addition to work-related demands at customer sites, H6 explains that employees must navigate unfamiliar locations, manage transfers between locations, find suitable restaurants, and organise meals. These practical tasks, combined with work-related stress, can be time-consuming and exhausting.

To make business travel less challenging, H4 suggests that employees should be encouraged to take breaks and enjoy their rest days as they would at home. They note that working without sufficient rest may be manageable for a week, but during longer assignments or when trips follow one another, the stress and fatigue begin to affect performance.

Local ways of working

Upon arriving at the destination, one challenge highlighted by H1 was the risk of being overcharged by taxi drivers, especially after a long flight when fatigue diminishes alertness. H3 noted that having local support is beneficial, especially when local staff or onsite personnel can help address country-specific challenges and practical issues that may occur during the assignment. Sometimes, local connections happen by chance as H1 shares:" *I was trying to catch a taxi in front of the hotel when the security guard approached me and said, 'I can get you a taxi.' He then introduced me to a driver with a nice car, perhaps one of his mates. That's how I made contact".* The company's travellers manage internet-related issues in various ways. Some have purchased local SIM cards with VPN access, while others have used eSIM options. As H1 explained, *"If you go to China, of course, your internet access differs significantly. You have Chinese internet and restrictions like that."*

In China, many services, such as taxis and payment apps, depend heavily on online platforms, making reliable internet access essential. H2 suggests buying an inexpensive local phone with a local SIM card that can share data with other devices, which can be helpful.

"It is always a surprise whether the SIM card works. The customer usually has internet, but it can only be accessed through Eduroam," noted H4. H5 mentioned that Wi-Fi or mobile connections can be unreliable in some places, especially in basements of worksites. They explained, *"Sometimes you need to run between the basement and the outdoors when you need internet to figure things out."* However, these locations are generally known to travellers, who are aware of what to expect in advance.

Employees' health and safety

According to H4, the case company currently does not provide additional support regarding health and safety. The company's travel policy states that travellers are responsible for arranging necessary vaccinations and other health-related requirements themselves. H6 also notes that the company does not provide information on regional health risks or emergency medical service contact details. According to H1, it is also unclear what the company's travel insurance covers in emergency situations, as this has not been clearly discussed with travellers, or it is not easily accessible, for example, on the Intranet. H4 also mentions situations in which the employee had to purchase safety equipment, such as a helmet and shoes, to access the work site because this information was not communicated in advance by the company.

Support from the case company

Some interviewees find it challenging to work effectively due to the case company's management practices and recent financial difficulties, as the employees have left without essential spare parts and tools. Often, these issues are not communicated clearly, forcing employees to explain the deficiencies to customers. In problematic situations, the interviewees generally believe that the customers are not to blame, but instead, the problems stem from within the case company. One interviewee remarked, *"Everything was super professional from the customer side. If someone was unprofessional, it was us."* This includes situations where tools are sent at the last minute due to financial constraints or are held up at customs due to the distributor's unprofessionalism.

Significant time zone differences often make real-time communication difficult, and when working on-site, employees frequently feel as though they are “on duty” 24/7. Most interviewees report that communication with the home organisation during trips generally works well through installation feedback meetings, weekly team meetings, and immediate discussions for urgent issues. Others describe reaching out to a supervisor or the home organisation while travelling as straightforward, mainly via calls, messages, or WhatsApp groups that globally distributed teams use to coordinate across time zones.

Overall, interviewees feel that management is accessible and that team members maintain regular contact to share advice and support as needed. However, H6 explains that on-site employees sometimes face urgent issues but cannot access support from their home country, leading to feelings of isolation. They note that travellers often must troubleshoot problems on their own and encounter issues they have never faced before or could not have anticipated. These can include complex technical challenges, specialised measurement tools, or unfamiliar software systems for which employees have little to no formal training, H6 states. H6 further explains that employees often must learn to operate these tools in real time, relying on remote guidance via platforms like Teams while managing the situation on-site.

Cultural differences

Interviewees reported that cultural and communication challenges often complicate collaboration with customers, local maintenance teams, and contractors. This can cause delays, for example in installations, if electrical connections are not completed on time. Since the company’s installation team makes only a marginal contribution to the overall project at the customer’s site, information about changes and delays might not be communicated effectively to them. Although most destinations pose few cultural difficulties, all interviewees described China as the most challenging environment, to the point that H1 identifies cultural differences as a source of discomfort.

Overall, interviewees enjoy exploring cultural differences, sampling local cuisine, and experiencing new environments. However, they frequently face challenges when shops and restaurants are closed or follow unfamiliar hours, which adds stress to the assignment. According to H1, exploring the surroundings can be challenging due to crowded public spaces, language barriers, and feeling treated differently as a foreigner. H1 described the situation as follows: *"So anywhere you go, there are like 100,000 Chinese people, and you are the only one standing out… OK, I don't want to be in that situation."* H1 mentions that the discomfort sometimes leads to staying at the hotel rather than going out after work. H2, H3, H4, and H5 also report similar issues, particularly with communication challenges.

H2 notes that using English at work sites in China can be challenging, even when interacting with local employees from the same company. Although translation apps assist in communication, concerns remain about whether the message is entirely understood. While working at customer sites in China, interviewees often prefer to have a colleague from the company's European or American offices present rather than work with local contractors or even the company's employees. This is because installation and maintenance activities can be quite stressful for employees due to language barriers and cultural differences.

The installation work generally takes place in basements and other restricted areas where internet connectivity is unavailable or weak. Apart from China, cultural differences were not considered particularly problematic. However, the interviewees described the business cultures in the United States and China as more distinctive from the business culture to which they are accustomed. According to Interviewee H2, openly admitting mistakes is less common in some cultures, which may require a more subtle communication approach to ensure that no one *"loses face."* For example, during installations, this may create challenges if mistakes are not openly addressed.

4.3 Post-trip stressors

Back to the 'office mode'

Some interviewees found returning from business trips challenging because work responsibilities continue immediately upon arriving home, making it hard to switch back to 'office mode'. According to H6, travel leads to the build-up of both professional and personal responsibilities. Since no one handles travellers' regular duties while they're away, they must tackle pending tasks upon return. In addition, they note that both work and home environments have accumulated demands. *"Colleagues may be waiting to schedule meetings, while family members expect attention, participation in household responsibilities, and social engagement. In many cases, there is a significant backlog of expectations and obligations,"* says H4.

Those waiting for the employee to return might find it difficult to fully understand the extent of their accumulated fatigue or stress from the business trip. Returning employees are often expected to get back to normal functioning quickly, even when recovery time is limited. While remote work is both available and appreciated by employees, H1 also points out that, due to the company's small size, no one covers responsibilities during an employee's absence, and they must remain available for customers. H1 sums it up by saying, *"You just have to be a big boy and do the thing."*

Recovery times

Recovery times vary greatly depending on trip duration and destination. H5 notes that recovering from time differences is somewhat easier when travelling from Asia to Finland, but after being "on the road" for 47 days, more than two days would be needed to recover properly. H3 reports that one day is enough to return to routine because their children "take care of that." In contrast, one person described needing 2 weeks to feel fully normal again, while another estimated 4–5 days to reach a "normal state," after which preparation for the next trip often begins immediately. One interviewee added that recovery is even more challenging for older colleagues in their 50s and 60s, a point that should be considered when planning assignments. Some interviewees also felt that

it had never been clearly agreed that short business trips could extend into assignments lasting up to two months, which they described as both demanding and difficult.

Several interviewees emphasise that jet lag is one of the biggest challenges of business travel, especially after spending weeks on a customer's site. H2 notes that they have discussed taking time off after trips with HR, and while the conversations have been positive, no formal policy has been established. H5 explains that accrued overtime and travel hours cannot be taken as leave and must be paid out, largely due to the current personnel shortage. H6 mentions that they have occasionally been able to take days off after business trips but believes recovery time should be a key topic for discussion in the future. According to H5, the case company previously had fewer customers and more personnel, but the situation has since reversed.

Burden on personal life

Regarding routines and family life, some interviewees say that business trips do not significantly disrupt their routines or cause them to miss important events. Others, however, experience disruptions and a sense of disconnection upon returning home. One interviewee also mentions the challenge of shifting a mindset from operating independently and only taking care of their own needs to office mode, where work is more collaborative, not to mention the demands of personal life. Transitioning back to "normal" routines can be difficult, particularly after longer assignments or when the next business trip follows shortly afterwards. In these situations, H4 finds exercise helpful for regaining balance. H5 and H4 state that personal life can "take a hit," making stability challenging. According to the interviewees, international business travel strains relationships with partners, families, and friends, and it can be difficult to sustain long-term relationships.

According to H2, taking a significant other or family along on a business trip has not been an issue. They believe that efficiency and productivity improve when employees can carry out normal activities during their free time. As H2 explains, sometimes on a trip, you only see the airport, the customer site, and the hotel, and there are days when you

simply do not feel like leaving the hotel. "*That's why I think it is good that there is someone else from your team with you, or that you can take your family with you,"* according to H2. H5 notes that, in principle, bringing a significant other or family along could work, but in practice, travel dates are often confirmed so late that family members cannot adjust their plans.

Support for returning travellers

When returning to the office after a business trip, some interviewees feel they were not formally acknowledged or supported. Some interviewees say their arrival is often anticipated, mainly so additional tasks can be assigned to them. According to some interviewees, there is little recognition of the physical and psychological strain accumulated during travel, and one interviewee wishes that HR or a team leader would check in after longer trips to ensure the employee is well. One interviewee states that there is a clear need for structured recovery practices, such as designated rest days or temporarily reduced working hours following travel. Greater organisational support is desired, including opportunities to recover not only after returning home but also during the trip itself. Additional support mechanisms could also improve on-site communication and help employees navigate cultural challenges more effectively.

To summarize the empirical findings, table 4 illustrates the key stressors identified during interviews across the pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip phases of international business travel. In the pre-trip phase, stressors mainly involved uncertainty, coordination challenges, travel planning responsibilities and the difficulty of balancing work-related preparations with personal life before departure. During the trip, stressors included operational work demands, physical fatigue, disrupted routines, logistical issues, cross-cultural communication, and adaptation challenges, along with ongoing pressure to remain flexible and solve problems on site. In the post-trip phase, stressors were primarily related to accumulated fatigue, limited recovery opportunities, backlog of routine tasks, readjustment to daily routines, and anticipation of future travel.

Pre-trip	During trip	Post-trip
Scheduling and coordination uncertainty	Operational work demands	Accumulated fatigue and need for recovery
Booking and logistical planning demands	Physical fatigue and disrupted routines	Insufficient time for rest and decompression
Lack of shared knowledge	logistical disruptions and travel complications	Backlog or regular work tasks
Cost and time pressure	Cross-cultural communication and adaptation demand	Difficulty transitioning back to routine
Work vs. family stress	Unpredictable site conditions	Personal-life readjustment demands
Stress linked to upcoming travel	Continuous flexibility and problem-solving pressure	Anticipation of future travel

Table 4. Key stressors identified during interviews across different phases.

5 DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the case study findings related to the theoretical premises outlined in chapter 2. The discussion is divided into three parts, each aligned with the themes identified in the previous chapter. Finally, this chapter presents a synthesis along with the theoretical and practical contributions.

5.1 Pre-trip phase

As shown in the findings, pre-trip phase involves stressors related to scheduling uncertainty, booking demands, and logistical planning. Interviewees also described limited shared knowledge regarding booking processes, as well as pressures related to time, costs, work responsibilities and personal life before departure. The findings related to the pre-trip phase are discussed through three categories: uncertainty factors, anticipatory adjustment, and organisational support.

Uncertainty factors

The findings indicate that uncertainty before departure is a major source of pre-travel stress. Interviewees described unclear schedules, limited knowledge of trip duration, and coordination with customer topics that create tension before the trip. These findings further support DeFrank et al.'s (2000) argument that travel stress may emerge already before departure, while also aligns with Guest (2007) argument how uncertainty and limited predictability can shape employee's well-being during the preparation phase. The findings further suggest that limited predictability may reduce employees' sense of control, as they could not confirm travel arrangements, organise their workloads and personal lives, or set realistic expectations about site conditions in advance. Overall, the findings suggest that pre-trip stress is shaped not only by the upcoming travel itself, but also by uncertainty surrounding schedules, travel arrangements, and anticipated working conditions at the customer site.

Anticipatory adjustment

The findings can also be discussed in relation to Black et al.'s (1991) concept of anticipatory adjustment. Although the model was originally developed in the context of expatriation, later literature has increasingly recognised adjustment related challenges across broader forms of international mobility. The findings of this study suggest that similar adjustment processes may also occur in international business travel. Before international business travel, employees appear to prepare themselves for possible challenges such as unclear schedules, site conditions, and changing customer needs. These actions taken by the employees align with the Black et al. (1991) model. However, in this study, the findings show a different process compared to traditional expatriation. Instead of a single, slightly longer preparation phase before relocation, the employees of the case company undergo this phase during each business trip. The findings therefore suggest that anticipatory adjustment in international business travel may operate as an ongoing and repeated process rather than as a single preparation phase associated with longer-term relocation like in the original Black et al. (1991) model.

Organisational support

The findings suggest that organisational support during the pre-trip phase was limited. This aligns with Suutari et al. (2013) and Baker and Ciuk's (2015) earlier research on short-term assignees and IBTs, who often receive less formal HR support than expatriates and may need to gather information themselves and prepare more independently. As travel booking responsibilities are currently handled by the travellers themselves, travel arrangements appear to be managed relatively decentralised within the company. Although employees value the flexibility and control associated with organising their own travel, the findings suggest that decentralised travel arrangements may shift significant practical, financial, and problem-solving responsibilities onto individual employees. The findings further suggest that limited organisational support during preparation phase may increase uncertainty and contribute to pre-trip stress. As Mäkelä et al.'s (2018) link supportive travel arrangements to international business travellers' well-being, more structured organisational practices including clear communication, realistic planning,

practical guidance, and cultural awareness training, could strengthen employee's preparedness for international travel and potentially reduce uncertainty before departure (Dowling et al.,2013; Guest, 2017).

5.2 During-trip phase

Findings from the during-trip phase indicate that employees experience operational demands, fatigue, routine disruptions, logistical and travel problems, cross-cultural communication and adjustment challenges, unpredictable site conditions, and ongoing pressures for flexibility and problem-solving. The findings related to during-trip phase are discussed through four categories: intensive work demands, physiological and emotional stress, adjustment to the local work environment, and limited organisational support.

Intensive work demands

The findings indicate that the during-trip phase involves intensive work demands, high time pressure and limited opportunities for rest and recovery. Interviewees described long and irregular working hours, heavy workloads, and pressure to resolve problems at the customer site within limited timeframes and resources. In addition, the boundary between work and personal time appeared increasingly blurred, as employees described remaining continuously "on duty" throughout the trip.

These findings further support DeFrank et al.'s (2000) argument that international business travel may increase stress through workload, time pressure, changing schedules and limited time for rest and recovery. Similarly, Jooss et al.'s (2022) describe international business travel as an intensive work environment characterised by high physical mobility, cognitive flexibility and overlapping work and non-work demands. in the context of the case company, the findings also suggest that limited organisational support may intensify these pressures by shifting practical and operational problem-solving responsibilities to the employees during travel (Suutari et al., 2013; Jooss et al., 2022).

Physiological and emotional stress

The findings suggest that international business travel may create not only work-related pressures but also significant physiological and emotional strain for employees. In line with DeFrank et al.'s (2000) travel stress framework, interviewees identified sleep disturbances, jet lag, extended working hours and disrupted routines as key challenges during business trips. Employees also described how fatigue reduced their ability to concentrate, think clearly, and manage demanding situations effectively. These findings suggest that the effects of international business travel extend beyond operational workload and may directly influence employees cognitive functioning, recovery, and overall well-being during travel.

The findings further indicate that structured recovery support within the case company was limited, suggesting that organisational practises may not sufficiently support employee's ability to recover from the demands of international business travel, which may negatively affect employee well-being (Guest, 2017). This interpretation is also supported by Striker et al. (2000), who describe travel stress as involving mental, emotional, physiological, and behavioural responses to the demands of business travel. Similarly, Jooss et al. (2022) note that international business travellers may need to remain cheerful and professional even when exhausted or frustrated. In this context, the findings suggest that stress during international business travel is shaped not only by demanding work assignments, but also by disrupted recovery, ongoing performance expectations and the need to manage behaviour and emotions under intensive travel conditions. The findings also suggest that these demanding travel conditions are closely linked to the operational realities of international business, where employees are required to maintain customer relationships and support coordination across borders. This reflects Johanson & Vahlne's (2009) revised Uppsala model, which emphasises the importance of business networks and relationship-building in international operations.

Adjustment to the local work environment

Based on the findings, an indication of adjustment to the immediate work and social environment was found, even though the adjustment period is shorter and more compressed than in traditional long-term expatriation. Unlike traditional expatriates, short-term assignees and international business travellers have limited time to become familiar with the host environment, which may make their adjustment more immediate and potentially more demanding. While Black et al.'s (1991) adjustment framework primary describes a more gradual adjustment process associated with longer-term relocation, the findings of the study suggest that adjustment during international business travel may occur in a more compressed and immediate form. This interpretation is also supported by Pucik et al. (2023), who argue that international work often requires adaptation to different behaviours, values, and assumptions across cultural contexts. Johanson and Vahlne's (1977) concept of psychic distance further help explain why differences between home and host environments may make local practices, communication patterns and workplace expectations more difficult to interpret. At the same time, adjustment may be complicated by barriers to social interaction (Wurtz, 2018), while temporary nature of short-term assignments and international business travel may limit employee's opportunities to integrate into the local environment (Tahvanainen et al. ,2005).

The findings also suggest that adjustment to the local work environment involved cultural and communication challenges, as interviewees described difficulties collaborating with customers, local maintenance teams, and contractors, especially when language barriers and differing communication practices were present. In some cases, these challenges appeared to complicate problem-solving and delay installation processes at customer sites. The findings indicate that cultural differences shaped employees' experiences both at work and in their leisure time. For example, interviewees described discomfort with language barriers, crowded places, and feeling out of place in China. In some cases, this reduced their interest in exploring the surroundings outside of work, leaving them to stay at the hotel instead. These findings can also be interpreted through Black et al.'s (1991) concept of adjustment, as employees appeared to experience

discomfort and unfamiliarity when navigating new cultural and social environments. Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions further help to conceptualise how different communications styles, hierarchy, and workplace expectations may shape employees' experiences in the host environment. Cultural differences were generally seen as manageable across most destinations, whereas China was consistently described as the most demanding environment. This may reflect greater psychic distance between the home and host environment, which can make local practises, communication patterns and social expectations more difficult to interpret (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977).

Limited organisational support

As discussed by Dowling et al. (2013) and Pucik et al. (2023), international mobility is widely recognised as an important tool for coordination, knowledge transfer, and organisational development. At the same time, earlier research suggests that short-term assignees and international business travellers often receive less structured HR support than traditional expatriates (Suutari et al., 2013; Welch et al., 2007). The findings of this study support this interpretation, as interviewees described managing many practical challenges, travel-related problems, and local uncertainties largely independently during international assignments. In the context of the case company, limited organisational support appeared to increase employee's individual responsibility from problem-solving, communication and adaptation during demanding travel situations. Guest (2017) emphasises the importance of organisational practises that help employees to manage demanding work conditions through supportive management, clear communication and policies that support employees.

5.3 Post-trip phase

The findings from the post-trip phase suggest that the effects of international business travel often continue after employees return to home. Interviewees described accumulated fatigue, limited opportunities for recovery and decompression, backlogs of regular work tasks, difficulties returning to everyday routines, and pressure related to personal life readjustment and upcoming travel. The findings related to the post-trip phase are

discussed through three categories: Limited recovery after return, returning to "office mode" and personal life, and lack of organisational support following travel.

Limited recovery after return

Interviewees reported minimal opportunity to recover after returning from business trips as they described returning to ongoing work demands, accumulated administrative tasks, and unfinished projects which reduced opportunities for rest and recovery. The findings therefore suggest that returning home did not necessarily mark the end of travel-related stress, but rather the beginning of a new phase involving recovery, work-related catch-up, and readjustment to everyday routines.

Required recovery times appeared to vary depending on trip duration, destination, and individual circumstances. Some employees felt they could return to work quickly, while others reported needing several days or even weeks to feel fully recovered. Long trips, demanding destinations and jet lag were described as particularly difficult to recover from. These findings further support earlier literature suggesting that the effects of international business travel may persist into the post-trip phase rather than ending upon return home (DeFrank et al., 2000; Jooss et al., 2022; Striker et al., 2000). The findings also suggest that insufficient opportunities for recovery after travel may weaken employee's ability to cope with ongoing travel demands and maintain long-term well-being (Guest, 2017). For many interviewees, returning home did not represent rest or recovery, but instead involved increased pressure from both work responsibilities and private life.

Returning to 'office mode' and personal life

The findings indicate that returning from international business travel involved a demanding behavioural shift, as interviewees described difficulties in transitioning from the fast-paced and relatively autonomous travel environment back to office routines and family responsibilities. Although Black et al. (1991) primarily discuss adjustment in relation to the host environment, the findings of this study suggest that a similar process of re-adjustment may also occur when employees return home from international travel.

This interpretation is also supported by more recent literature recognising that adjustment-related challenges may extend across broader forms of international work and mobility, including international business travel (Dimitrova et al., 2020). Interviewees also described difficulties re-engaging with family routines, resuming childcare and household responsibilities, and reconnecting with personal activities, such as hobbies and social relationships after returning from travel. These findings can be interpreted through Black et al.'s (1991) adjustment framework, as employees appeared to require a period of re-adjustment when returning from international business travel assignments.

Lack of post-trip organisational support

Findings suggest that although international business travel is a routine part of organisational operations, structured recovery and re-integration practices have not been systematically integrated into organisational HR processes. Interviewees reported that recovery following travel had been discussed within the organisation, yet no formal practises or policies had been established to support employees after returning from international assignments. The findings also suggest that employees viewed structured recovery practices as important for managing the demands associated with repeated international travel. Without adequate reintegration or recovery support, the effects of international business travel may accumulate over time, potentially weakening employees' recovery capacity, resilience, and long-term well-being (Suutari et al., 2013; Jooss et al., 2022; Guest, 2017). In this context, the findings indicate that organisational support should not be limited only to the travel period itself but should also address employee's recovery and re-adjustment after international assignments.

5.4 The cyclical nature of international business travel

Although the findings were discussed in separate pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip phases, the interviewees' experiences suggest that international business travel is not experienced as a series of isolated events. Instead, the findings indicate that international business travel at the case company can be viewed more as a cyclical process, in which uncertainty before departure, stress during the trip, and limited recovery upon

return are closely interconnected and repeatedly reactivated over time. In this way, the effects of one trip often carry over into the next due to insufficient recovery and unresolved work demands, and anticipation of future travel assignments.

Based on the findings international business travel should not be viewed only as separate travel phases, but rather as a mobility cycle shaped by repeated adjustment demands, ongoing work pressures and limited opportunities for recovery. This interpretation can be linked to both DeFrank et al.'s (2000) travel stress model and Black et al.'s (1991) adjustment theory. While DeFrank et al.'s (2000) travel stress model helps explain how stress may emerge before, during, and after travel, the findings of this study suggest that Black et al'.s (1991) adjustment framework may be understood differently in the context of international business travel and short-term assignments, where employees experience repeated cycles of adjustment and readjustment demands across multiple business trips rather than a single linear adjustment process associated with long-term expatriation. Similar patterns of recurring travel demands and repeated transitions between travel and home environments have also recognised in earlier international business travel literature by Westman et al. (2012) and Westman and Etzion (2002). This interpretation is also supported by more resent literature recognising that adjustment-related challenges may also extend to international travel and short-term assignments (Dimitrova et al., 2020).

The findings suggest that employees did not fully recover between travel assignments, which meant that stress, fatigue, and adjustment demand often carried over from one trip to the next. This highlights the importance of organisational practices that support employee recovery, manageable workloads, and well-being throughout the travel cycle (Guest, 2017). Based on the findings, the conceptual framework can be slightly refined as seen in the figure 2. While the original framework conceptualised international business travel through separate pre-trip, during-trip and post-trip phases, the findings suggest that these phases are closely interconnected rather than experienced in isolation. Stressors, adjustment demands, and recovery experiences often appeared to extend

across phases and influence future travel experiences, emphasising the cyclical and on-going nature of international business travel.

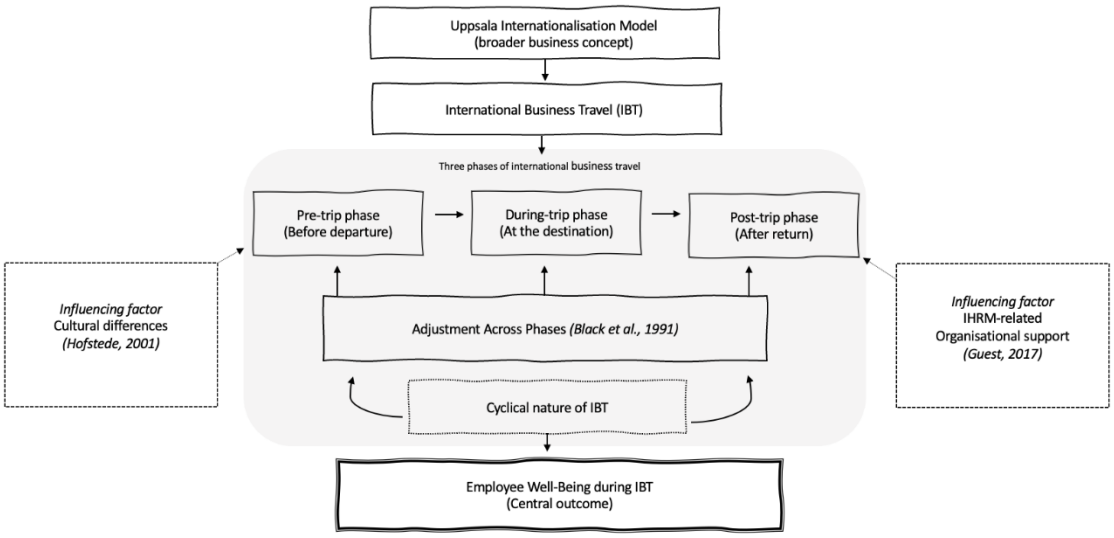

Figure 2. Conceptual framework revisited.

6 CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This chapter concludes the study's results, outlines its limitations, and presents recommendations for future research.

The aim of this study was to examine how employees experience international business travel across the pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip phases, with particular attention to the well-being challenges linked to each phase and the role of organisational and HR practices in supporting employee well-being throughout the travel process.

6.1 Results

The findings indicate that employee well-being was shaped differently across the pre-trip, during-trip and post-trip phases. During the pre-trip phase, uncertainty, limited predictability, and self-preparation created stress related to upcoming travel. During the trip, employees experienced intensive work demands, physiological and emotional strain, and adjustment challenges related to the local work environment. In the post-trip phase, limited opportunities for recovery, difficulties returning to the office routines and readjusting to personal life continued to affect employee well-being. Overall, organisational support appeared limited throughout the travel cycle.

In response to the research question "*How do employees experience well-being across the different phases of international business travel?",* the findings suggest that employee well-being is shaped by distinct yet closely interconnected demands across the different travel phases. Rather than being experienced as isolated events, the findings indicate that the effects of international business travel often carry over from one phase to another due to ongoing work pressures, repeated adjustment demands, ongoing work pressures and insufficient recovery time between assignments. The findings therefore suggest that the well-being of international business travellers is influenced not only by

the demands of individual trips, but also by the cyclical nature of repeated international travel and the level of organisational support provided throughout the travel process.

6.2 Theoretical contributions

While the previous research presents international business travel through different phases, such as pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip (DeFrank et al., 2000; Black et al., 1991), the findings of this study suggest that in the context of short-term assignments and frequent international business travel, these phases are experienced as closely interconnected and recurring processes due to repeated nature of international travel assignments.

The study also reinterprets Black et al. ’s (1991) adjustment theory in the context of short-term assignments and international business travel by suggesting that adjustment is experienced as rapid, task-focused, and repeatedly activated with each trip rather than as a gradual linear process associated with long-term expatriation.

The findings indicate that well-being risks may accumulate when employees do not have enough time to recover between trips. In this context, travel-related stress appeared less as a reaction to individual trips and more as part of an ongoing mobility cycle shaped by repeated travel and limited recovery opportunities. De Frank et al. (2000) argue that organisations can minimise the travel-related stress by providing necessary support, such as planned recovery time and support for family life. The findings of the study show limited evidence of systematic well-being monitoring, recovery planning or follow-up after travel.

The study further suggests that effective HR support in international business travel should extend across the entire travel process. In addition to supporting employee well-being on administrative coordination, such as handling travel policies, approvals, bookings and permits, the effective HR support also involves structured support before, during and after travel.

6.3 Managerial implications

The findings suggest that the case company relies heavily on travellers' tacit knowledge, although this knowledge is currently underutilised at organisational level. Employees often arrange their travel themselves, including researching routes, accommodations, and logistics which may increase cognitive load, uncertainty, and individual responsibility. A practical solution could involve developing a shared internal repository containing travel routes, accommodations, safety guidance, and logistical practices to support future travellers and reduce some uncertainty.

The findings also demonstrate a clear need for structured recovery practices following long-haul or otherwise demanding assignments. Interviewees described insufficient recovery time, fatigue, and jet lag after business trips, while the findings also suggested that travel-related stress may accumulate across repeated assignments. Organisations could therefore support employee well-being by implementing structured recovery periods after intensive travel and by reducing workload pressures immediately following return from business trips.

In addition, the findings indicate that the case company currently provides limited cultural preparation for international travel, even though employees described adjustment difficulties in certain countries. To support employees' readiness for international assignments, organisation should implement short pre-trip cultural briefings or provide practical tools, such as country-specific guidance materials, mobile applications or short informal videos. apps or videos, to help international travellers prepare in advance. These practices could help employees prepare for unfamiliar environments and reduce uncertainty associated with international travel.

6.4 Future studies

There are several opportunities to continue this research. Similar studies could be conducted in other companies and industries to examine whether similar well-being

challenges emerge in different cultural and organisational contexts. In addition, employee well-being across different phases could be examined longitudinally to provide deeper insight into recurring travel experience and recovery processes. Future studies could also incorporate perspectives beyond employees themselves, such as HR professionals, leadership and family members. More research is needed on post-trip recovery and readjustment, as it appears to remain a relatively underexplored area, particularly in relation to short-term assignees and international business travellers. Furthermore, future research could focus specifically on women international business travellers to examine how family responsibilities, gendered care expectations, and mobility-related career requirements interact in contexts where international mobility is considered important in career advancement.

6.5 Limitations of the study

Like all research, this study has limitations. The study focuses on a single case company, which limits the wider generalisability of the findings. In addition, the study also relies on thematic interviews with employees' subjective experiences of international business travel. As with all qualitative interview research, participants may have interpreted questions differently or emphasised certain experiences more strongly than others. While the study provides in-depth insight into employee well-being across different travel phases, the findings cannot be generalized to other organisations or industries. The study also applies established theories related to travel stress, adjustment, and employee well-being, although some of these frameworks were originally developed in the context of expatriation rather than short-term assignments or international business travel. This should be considered when interpreting the findings and theoretical implications of the study.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Pattern-matching comparison between the empirical findings and the patterns identified in the theoretical framework.

Theme	Empirical finding	Matching theoretical framework
Uncertainty before departure	Employees described uncertainty related to customer readiness, delays, changing schedules, and difficulty confirming trip duration in advance	DeFrank et al. (2000); Suutari et al. (2013); Jooss et al. (2022)
Travel preparation	Employees were largely responsible for booking flights, hotels, tools, spare parts, visas, and other practical arrangements	DeFrank et al. (2000); Jooss et al. (2022)
Work-family tension before travel	Some interviewees described stress in balancing family life, work tasks, and travel preparation, especially when trips were longer, or notice was short.	Suutari et al. (2013); Mäkelä et al. (2015), Espino et al. (2002)
Cumulative burden of frequent travel	Frequent travel was described as affecting relationships, hobbies, social life, and the ability to participate in events outside work	Suutari et al. (2013), Jooss et al. (2022)
Physical fatigue during travel	Long-haul flights, time differences, poor sleep, jet lag, and limited rest before customer-site work were described as demanding.	DeFrank et al. (2000); Jooss et al. (2022), Striker et al., (2000), Guest (2017); Espino et al. (2002); Demel & Mayrhofer (2010)
Operational pressure on site	Employees described demanding installations and maintenance work, troubleshooting, missing tools or spare parts, and pressure to solve problems in real time.	DeFrank et al. (2000); Suutari et al. (2013); Jooss et al. (2022)
Cultural and communication challenges	Language barriers, uncertainty in communication, and discomfort in unfamiliar environments, especially in China, were described as challenging.	Black et al. (1991); Hofstede et al. (2001); Suutari et al. (2013), Tahvanainen (2015)
Practical adaptation to local conditions	Employees described the need to adapt to local transport, internet restrictions, payment methods, and destination-specific practical conditions.	Black et al. (1991); Suutari et al. (2013); Wurtz (2018)
Limited formal organisational support	Interviewees described limited formal support regarding health, safety, insurance clarity, and recovery practices.	Guest (2017); Suutari et al. (2013); Welch (2007)
Informal supervisor and team support	Supervisors and team members were described as approachable, and regular contact during trips helped employees deal with problems.	Guest (2017)
Post-trip recovery challenges	Employees described jet lag, fatigue, difficulty returning to office mode, and limited time to recover after longer trips.	DeFrank et al. (2000); Jooss et al. (2022); Striker et al. (2000); Guest (2017)
Backlog and readjustment after return	Employees often returned to accumulated work tasks, customer needs, and home responsibilities immediately after travel.	DeFrank et al. (2000); Suutari et al. (2013)
Cyclical nature of business travel	The findings suggest that stress is not limited to the trip itself but continues across pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip phases.	DeFrank et al., (2000)

Appendix 2. Themes for participants interviews

Theme 1: Work experience related to travelling.

Theme 2: Pre-trip phase. This phase includes discussions such as preparing for the trip, challenges and stressors related to preparation, and current organisational support for this phase.

Theme 3: Travelling (Part of the during-trip phase). This phase includes the travel to the customer site, and travel demands practical arrangements.

Theme 4: On location (Part of the during-trip phase). This phase includes discussions such as on-site work demands, cultural differences, communication issues, and current organisational support for this phase.

Theme 5: Post-trip phase. This phase includes discussions on the challenges that take place after international business travel, for example, how recovery, backlog of work, readjustment to everyday life and personal-life demands affect well-being after return.