

THE PARADOX OF AUTONOMY IN VIRTUAL EXPATRIATION

Kamila LUDWIKOWSKA

Wrocław University of Science and Technology; kamila.ludwikowska@pwr.edu.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0002-2975-7539

Purpose: This paper explores the paradox of autonomy–responsibility among virtual expatriates and develops a grounded model of performance with organisational inputs and leadership as factors moderating this relation.

Design/methodology/approach: The research adopts a qualitative approach. Data were collected through 15 semi-structured interviews. The respondents represent three perspectives: HR directors, line managers, and employees engaged in international virtual assignments across various sectors. Data were analysed using MAXQDA software and analysis was performed using open, axial, and theoretical coding to identify first- and second-order concepts and aggregate dimensions.

Findings: The final model integrates aggregate dimensions and second order concepts to illustrate the theoretical concept of the autonomy paradox in virtual expatriation and mechanisms moderating its relation to well-being and job performance. When virtual expatriates experience a high degree of self-direction and strong accountability for outcomes supported by organisational policies and leadership relational safety, their well-being results in high performance.

Practical implications: The study provides information on organisational practices that support the performance of virtual expatriates. Highlights the need to balance flexibility with accountability, strengthen relational trust, provide clear role definitions, and standardisation of the procedures tailored to the context of virtual expatriates.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the emerging phenomenon of virtual expatriation introducing the concept of autonomy paradox in virtual assignments. Organisational conditions and leadership support structure its dual nature. It extends the existing framework to the global virtual context and highlights the moderators of its relation. The study provides practical guidance for organisations to navigate the future of global virtual work.

Keywords: virtual expatriation, virtual global work, autonomy paradox, employee well-being, job performance.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Global disruptions, the growing role of digitalisation and sustainable trends have changed the dynamics of global mobility (Mahadevan et al., 2025). Virtual assignments have been one of the most widely discussed research topics in recent years. Hybrid or fully remote work became the way to maintain business continuity and opened new opportunities to manage global travels. Virtual global mobility emerged as a mean to support business by replacing personal physical interactions for job purposes with virtual international interactions (Selmer et al., 2022). It allows employees to perform their tasks and take on operational responsibilities at different locations while remaining in their home country (Selmer et al., 2022). Global virtual teams could bring together the best talent regardless of team members' locations, and diversity of perspectives could speed up problem-solving, facilitate creativity, or drive innovation (Jimenez et al., 2017).

Virtual employees do the same job as assignees relocated to another country, but without physical relocation. Hence, the traditional understanding of expatriation evolved into a new concept of virtual expatriation. It gave organisations a new opportunity to rethink the way they operate their businesses in the context of sustainable trends. Relocation costs, family, immigration, and tax issues were no longer a risk; employees could continue their international careers and be open to new possibilities (Jimenez et al., 2017).

However, the complexity of international virtual assignments resulted in many challenges. Working in different time zones affected work-life balance, communication problems arisen due to reliance on teleconferences or online chats, language differences led to social categorisation and biases (Jimenez et al., 2017), and the risk of social isolation and stress increased (Vassiley et al., 2025). All these challenges damaged team dynamics and could amplify team conflicts. Managing employees in a virtual environment became increasingly complex as leaders are distant and hierarchy is blurred. The work environment enhanced greater autonomy and task authority (Lauring et al., 2024); however, significant operational decision-making power, limited strategic authority, and increased responsibility without real control emerged as consequences (Selmer et al., 2022; Vassiley et al., 2025).

In the context of virtual expatriation, autonomy is not unequivocally positive. On the one hand, it is a resource — it provides flexibility, motivation, a sense of competence, and decision-making power (Lauring et al., 2024). However, without organisational structures and leadership support, it becomes an emotional and cognitive burden (demand), leading to stress, isolation, and uncertainty about the role (Vassiley et al., 2025). The dual character of autonomy in the context of virtual expatriation shows that virtual expatriates experience autonomy, control, and responsibility, and these dynamics shape their performance and well-being. This tension between freedom and control creates a ‘paradox of responsibility’, a key phenomenon revealed in this study.

Although autonomy is recognised in the literature as an antecedent of motivation and performance, its paradoxical nature —both as a resource and a burden —remains unexplored in virtual expatriation contexts (Jaß et al., 2024). Although the autonomy paradox is well described, there is still little empirical evidence on how it operates in virtual arrangements when employees work across borders with a high level of responsibility (Mazmanian et al., 2013) and what are the consequences for employee well-being and performance in global teams (Fritsch et al., 2025).

Despite significant research on leadership in a virtual context, there remains a lack of research on the mediating role of leaders' influence on employee autonomy in virtual settings (Höddinghaus et al., 2024). Moreover, existing research does not reveal how leaders balance autonomy and accountability in virtual assignments (Brown et al., 2021) and how virtual expatriation depends on organisational context (Lauring et al., 2024). The study on virtual teams explains the psychological safety, however, it does not reveal which leadership practices model the autonomy paradox (Höddinghaus et al., 2024).

Although remote and hybrid work literature document the benefits of job autonomy, emerging studies reveal an autonomy–control paradox in which increased autonomy coexists with heightened demands, blurred accountability, and strain (e.g., longer hours, boundary erosion) (Vassiley et al., 2025). Yet, we lack process models explaining how this paradox unfolds in global virtual work, what are inputs for this concept, and which moderators buffer its negative effects on wellbeing and performance. Recent reviews of global virtual work call for multi-level, mechanism-orientated theories that link individual experience with organisational outcomes. This study addresses these gaps by theorising and empirically establishing a model in which leadership-mediated support converts autonomy into performance while mitigating responsibility overload.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Global virtual work and virtual expatriation

Digitalisation and global work have recently changed the way we work. In the past, multinational companies managed their international businesses based on traditional employee relocation.

Global work has been researched since the 1990s; however, it gained significant interest during the Covid-19 period (Jooss et al., 2022), when a new context of global mobility emerged (Donnelly, Johns, 2021). Global disruptions revolutionised modes of work and reorganised how people work and travel, redefining the boundaries between physical and virtual mobility (Mahadevan et al., 2025).

Global mobility and face-to-face contacts have been significantly reduced and replaced by virtual work, defined as being detached from fixed workplaces (Donnelly, Johns, 2021). Hence, new actors and new work contexts emerged, highlighting global employees, however, without physical relocation.

Global virtual work has become a fundamental means of operating cross-border activities. This shift has laid the foundation for virtual forms of mobility. Virtual expatriation emerged as a natural evolution of traditional mobility and international assignments. Remote work became a new organisational paradigm that gave the foundation for understanding virtual expatriation as a specific form of global virtual work (Donnelly, Johns, 2021). These challenges force organisations to reorganise organisational processes and develop a new approach to managing global mobility and organisational relations (Mahadevan et al., 2025). Remote work will continue to evolve, hence work transformation requires conceptualisation of organisational conditions to capture the novel phenomenon of virtual expatriation.

Recent research has emphasised that virtual expatriation is no longer just a concept but a real practice within multinational organisations. The ability of virtual expatriates to succeed depends largely on conditions provided by the organisation, such as organisational policies, leadership, and social conditions, hence, empirical and theoretical investigation of its structure is required (Lauring et al., 2024). In addition, Mahadevan (2025) points out the lack of empirically verified models for virtual expatriation and the emergence to conceptualise the novel context and roles in global virtual work.

2.2. Autonomy as a resource and a demand

Autonomy is a basic need at work. The concept is rooted in Self-Determination theory (SDT), which explains that the self-directed motivation of employee relies, among others, on autonomy (Ryan, Deci, 1985). Autonomy is essential for growth, integration, and social development. Autonomy determines employee personal well-being and performance (Ryan, Deci, 1985), it's a feeling of independence and individualism. Autonomy occurs when employees can choose their behaviour without being controlled by others. Autonomy is associated with positive outcomes and leads to better performance, engagement, and well-being (Ryan et al., 2022). The meta-analysis conducted by Ryan et al. (2022) provides empirical evidence for autonomy as a basic psychological need.

Autonomy and control on the job have traditionally been considered key factors in motivating employees to promote employee well-being and healthy working conditions (Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016). Undoubtedly, autonomy positively affects the meaningfulness of work (Vassiley et al., 2025). Employees can make decisions about their tasks and control their work and schedule.

However, if employees are under pressure to meet external expectations, they experience problems maintaining full engagement (Mazmanian et al., 2013). Their job performance depends on the clarity of organisational structures and support (Ryan et al., 2022). In virtual assignments, autonomy may not be adequately supported, leading to overload, personal,

and social disruptions (Ryan et al., 2022). SDT has practical implications for organisations, indicating that a disturbance in the sense of autonomy may lead to frustration and decreased well-being (Ryan et al., 2022).

Due to autonomy in virtual settings, employees are increasing their efforts to organise their work, for example, by working longer hours to adapt to different time zones (Pan et al., 2022). At the same time, they limit their independence through constant availability (Vassiley et al., 2025). Additionally, digital technology enhances prolonged availability, thereby burdening employees with their work (Mazmanian et al., 2013). Due to flexible work arrangements, employees blur the boundaries between their personal and professional lives, leading to greater anxiety and work-family conflicts (Bjärntoft et al., 2020). Autonomy can intensify work and lead to health problems and burnout (Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016).

Hence, the conflict arises from the attempt to gain greater freedom and independence while losing control and self-direction. SDT indicates that autonomy in the virtual expatriate environment may function as both a resource and a demand, depending on the conditions (Ryan et al., 2022). In addition, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory explains that autonomy can function as a resource but can also become a demand if not supported (Peretz, 2024).

This phenomenon, named the autonomy paradox, became a central issue in the context of virtual assignments (Vassiley et al., 2025). The autonomy paradox occurs when employees with a high degree of autonomy intensify their work and find it difficult to disconnect, which negatively affects their well-being (Vassiley et al., 2025). Employees are forced to shape their experience and develop self-management strategies to gain performance (Vassiley et al., 2025). The effect is intensified by technology that allows us to work from anywhere and maintain constant availability.

2.3. Leadership and organisational setting

In the context of virtual expatriation, the autonomy paradox arises when autonomy is granted without the positive support of leaders and organisational settings (Ryan et al., 2022). Hence, autonomy must be demonstrated situationally.

The dual nature of autonomy highlights conditions that moderate how autonomy results in well-being and greater performance. JD-R theory explains that job demands and resources influence employee well-being and performance (Bakker et al., 2025), hence organisational conditions or leadership support will play a significant role (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Ryan et al., 2022)

The lack of organisational frames for virtual context blur demands, and employees are transitioned towards self-management. Organisational inputs and leadership can reduce or intensify the autonomy paradox. The study of Ryan et al. (2022) indicates that autonomy will work if supported by organisational conditions and leadership that will enable its realisation. In addition, the JD-R model explains that work characteristics influence feelings of autonomy, which act as a key resource that enables self-management. Hence, leadership and organisational frameworks serve as contextual resources that foster a positive sense of autonomy (Bakker

et al., 2025). Additionally, distributed work arrangements, virtual communication, technological advancement, and external pressures will continue to increase the importance of leadership in virtual assignments (Höddinghaus et al., 2024).

In recent years, leadership in virtual settings has been the subject of extensive scholarly research (Höddinghaus et al., 2024). The use of digital technologies has transformed the way leaders communicate with employees, creating many challenges. The spatial distance between the leader and employees can decrease control and support and lead to changes in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behaviour, and performance (Höddinghaus et al., 2024). Due to reduced face-to-face contact, they struggle to foster positive relationships in the teams.

There are many styles of leadership in the literature; most of them can be categorised as task- or relationship-oriented. According to task-oriented leadership, including directive leadership, management by objectives, and transactional leadership, leaders coordinate and monitor work processes, define roles, assign tasks, set goals, and monitor performance (Brown et al., 2021). On the other hand, relationship-oriented leadership, such as LMX, participative leadership, shared leadership, and authentic or servant leadership, focuses on creating positive relationships with employees and building trust (Höddinghaus et al., 2024). Leaders inspire and motivate employees, develop and support them, and empower them to take initiative.

The results of a recent meta-analysis (Brown et al., 2021) revealed positive correlations of both types of leadership in a virtual context, such as job performance, job satisfaction (Brown et al., 2021). However, in virtual teams, relationship-based leadership may be harder for leaders to implement due to reduced information cues.

Studies on virtual assignments revealed that while working virtually, employees have higher autonomy, which requires self-management skills (Höddinghaus et al., 2024). Studies in virtual teams confirmed that leadership is a critical factor in helping employees overcome challenges while working virtually (Brown et al., 2021)

In virtual arrangements, leaders should ensure effective work while allowing psychological safety. Leadership in virtual settings requires different competencies, such as managing trust at a distance, enhancing relationships, and adapting tools to ensure effectiveness. Leaders should address the negative effects of digital technology by providing greater support, showing consideration for team members, and reducing uncertainty. On the other hand, leaders are expected to help employees execute tasks in a virtual environment, overcome the uncertainty and ambiguity of their roles, clarify requirements, expectations, and responsibilities, and finally establish structure to accomplish the task (Brown et al., 2021). This means there is no single style to adopt, and a new approach is needed.

However, many studies explore factors that moderate the relationship between leadership and performance in virtual context, but do not address how leadership moderates the relationship between autonomy and employee wellbeing in virtual assignments. Support from organisations and leaders can be an important factor in reducing the negative aspects of the autonomy paradox.

2.4. Employee well-being

The concept of well-being comprises a set of job characteristics that predict employee motivation, satisfaction, and efficiency (Bakker et al., 2025). Global disruptions, such as Covid-19, initiated a shift in how well-being is understood. Before then, well-being was associated with physical conditions and job satisfaction. However, disruptions and digital transformation introduced new conditions, including psychosocial risks, technostress, information overload, and challenges to work-life balance. These risks should be considered when discussing the concept of virtual expatriation. Mental-health programmes aim to provide holistic care to continue employee performance. Organisational experience has demonstrated that many organisations have begun to recognise the importance of developing dedicated mental health programmes, flexible work arrangements, and digital wellness policies (Duradoni et al., n.d.); however, the topic remains underdeveloped.

The job demands-resources (JD-R) theory integrates various job stress and motivational perspectives to explain how the organisational context may enhance or diminish employee well-being. A core assumption is that the physical, social or psychological aspects of the organisational environment influence employee health, behaviour, performance, and overall well-being (Bakker et al., 2025).

Knowledge of employee well-being in a virtual context is crucial not only for employee mental health but also for organisational long-term performance. Hence, investigating employee well-being in virtual context became a strategic need in achieving competitive advantage in the post-pandemic work environment (Mateen et al., n.d.).

Although SDT has robust empirical support (Ryan et al., 2022), its application to virtual global work — especially when autonomy interacts with increased responsibility without clear authority — remains underexplored. Hence, this study proposes leadership and organisational conditions as moderators of the relationships among autonomy, employee well-being, and job performance.

3. Methods

3.1. Research context

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

The participants represented diverse sectors, including the IT, banking, automotive, transport, and food industries, within international organisations (Table 1).

Table 1.

Formal interviewee characteristics

ID	Status	Gender	Age	Education	Industry	Company size
1	Manager	Male	30-40	Higher education	IT	More than 500
2	Manager	Female	40-50	Higher education	Transport	More than 500
3	HR Director	Female	40-50	Higher education	Food industry	More than 500
4	Manager	Male	40-50	Higher education	IT	More than 500
5	HR Director	Female	50-55	Higher education	Automotive	Less than 500
6	HR Director	Female	50-55	Higher education	Banking	More than 500
7	Employee	Female	20-30	Higher education	IT	More than 500
8	Employee	Male	20-30	Higher education	IT	Less than 500
9	Employee	Male	30-40	Higher education	IT	More than 500
10	Employee	Male	30-40	Higher education	IT	Below 500
11	Employee	Female	30-40	Higher education	IT	More than 500
13	HR Director	Female	30-40	Higher education	Banking	More than 500
14	HR Director	Female	40-50	Higher education	Food industry	More than 500
15	Manager	Male	30-40	Higher education	Transport	Less than 500

Participants were selected by purpose-sampling based on their international exposure and virtual assignments. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted via online communication tools such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or Google Meet. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised. Data were collected between November 2023 and September 2024.

3.2. Data analysis

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

In the first stage, the open coding procedure was applied to identify first-order concepts, key phrases directly reflecting the voices of the participants (e.g., “Performance criteria vary by manager”, “Limited formal & informal integration rituals”, “Home office increases comfort and focus”). Next, through axial coding, conceptually similar statements were grouped into second-order themes to represent theoretical dimensions (e.g., “Relational safety buffer”, “Autonomy and responsibility”, “Equal opportunities”). This stage involved a continuous comparison across all statements to eliminate redundancy. In the third stage, the author clustered related themes into higher-level constructs to represent broader theoretical patterns, and finally aggregate dimensions were developed (e.g., “Leadership and rational safety”, “Mechanisms of Virtual Expatriation”) (Gioia et al., 2013).

The entire coding process was refined through peer debriefing and cross-checking to ensure credibility and consistency (Goia et al., 2013; Corbin, Strauss, 2015).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were applied:

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

This rigorous analytical process led to the identification of five aggregate dimensions and nineteen second-order categories for the entire study (Figure 1).

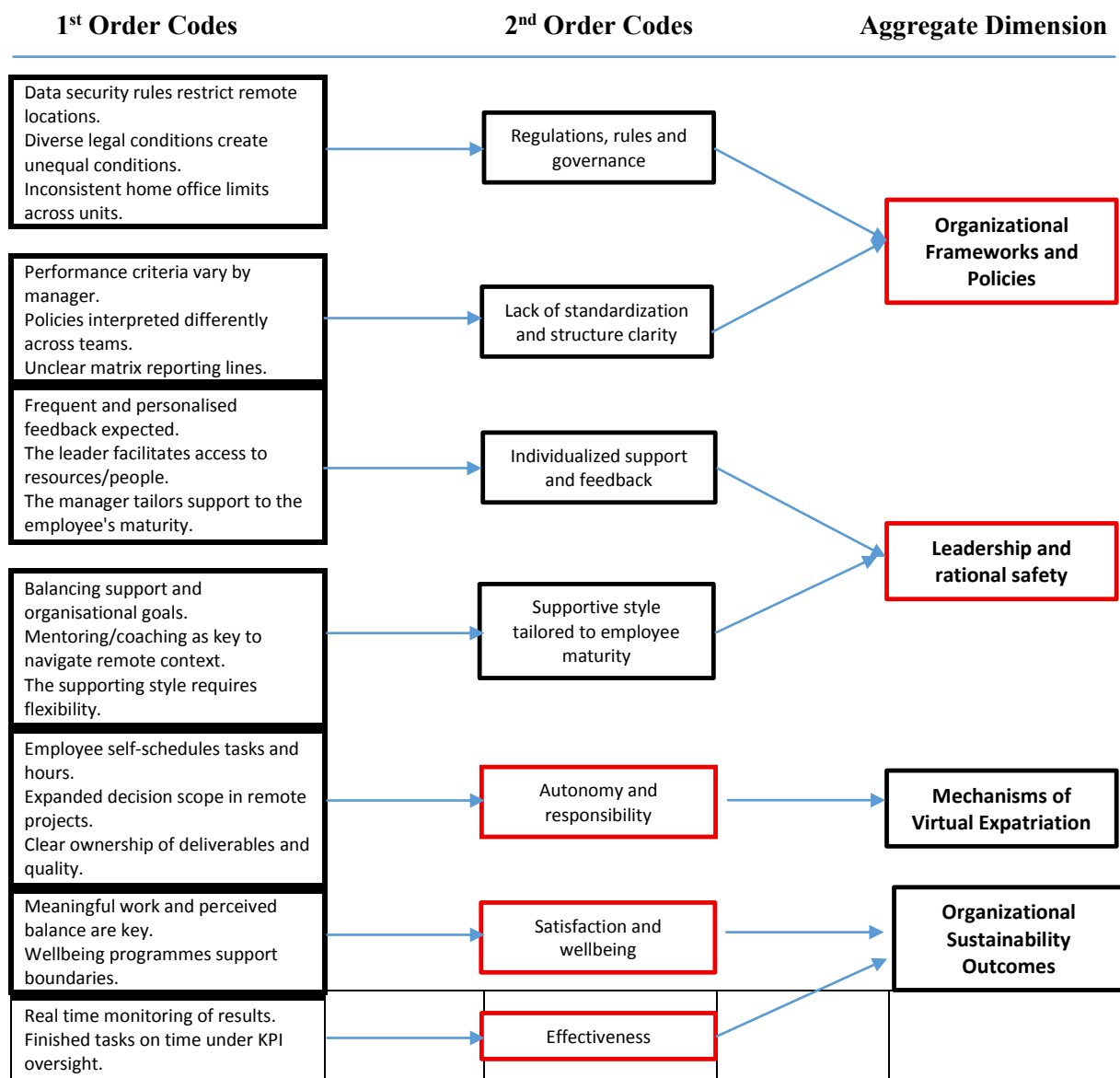


Figure 1. Coding scheme of selected concepts.

Source: Own resources.

The data presented in this article are part of a broader qualitative research project aimed at developing a model of virtual expatriation as a catalyst for organisational sustainability. In this article, the author focusses on selected codes and aggregate dimensions to explain how autonomy, responsibility, and support interact within virtual global work systems. The article presents five analytical dimensions to illustrate the autonomy paradox in virtual expatriates environment, two aggregated dimensions named Leadership and rational safety and Organisational frameworks and policies, as well selected 2nd order concepts, named Autonomy and responsibility as part of the Mechanisms of Virtual Expatriation, Effectiveness and Satisfaction and well-being as part of Organisational Sustainability Outcomes.

4. Results

4.1. Emerged codes and dimensions

Leadership and rational safety – this dimension reflects the role of leaders in creating the relational aspect of virtual work, balancing autonomy, providing personalised tailored feedback, and ensuring that employees remain connected to the organisation despite physical distance.

In interviews, employees described leaders as enablers and buffers: on the one hand, they empower people to make decisions and self-manage; on the other hand, they exacerbate isolation, stress, and communication breakdowns. Their unfair use of unrealistic performance monitoring caused poor mental health. Selected quotations are presented below:

- “The periodic assessment process should be supported by the line manager to gather comprehensive feedback” (MAN1).
- “I try to support the employee, but I also have to meet the objectives of the organisation - there is always a balance between the interests of the individual and the interests of the company” (MAN2).
- “Being there for employees – coaching, asking questions, offering support at every stage – that's what being a leader means to me” (HR3).

Organisational frameworks and policies – this dimension captures the formal and institutional structures and frameworks for virtual expatriation. It includes regulations, rules, governance, and the issue of structure clarity and standardisation of procedures. Provides the structural foundations for virtual assignments.

The interviews emphasised the lack of clear standards and policies for virtual assignments. Some organisations established rules defining eligibility for virtual work, such as financial regulations and compensation for home office expenses, while others relied on informal decisions. The absence of standardisation generated ambiguity among virtual employees. Selected quotes are presented below:

- “The regulations allow remote work for a maximum of twice a week or 24 days a year. In addition, there is an obligation to report the remote work location and a flat rate of thirty-odd zlotys per month” (HR1).
- “The supervisor has the authority to decide on remote work – it is up to them to decide whether someone can work remotely” (HR2).
- “The problem is the regulation of working hours, for example, from 11 am to 7 pm – and the lack of a specific duration for such tasks, which creates tension” (EMP4).
- “Feedback depends on the manager and the rules in the team – no specific regulations for remote work (HR1).
- “The methods are the same for everyone, regardless of the work system – there is no difference” (HR3).

Autonomy and responsibility – as part of the aggregate dimension named Mechanisms of virtual Expatriation, this concept captures how virtual expatriates organise their work, schedule tasks, make decisions in remote projects, and assume ownership of outcomes.

However, the respondents emphasised the high level of autonomy, while coexisting with high expectations of availability and productivity. In turn, it generated the paradox of autonomy, expressed as a tension between self-direction and accountability for performance. Selected quotes are presented below:

- “I am fully responsible for making decisions concerning my team – planning the work of the team, ensuring quality and timeliness. I am the one who assigns tasks and sets priorities” (MAN2).
- “I cannot decide which technology to use – architects impose this” (EMP2).
- “The biggest advantage of this role is the freedom to act; I have the opportunity to make decisions on how to run the project and how to solve problems” (MAN3).

Satisfaction and well-being – this concept encompasses the psychological and emotional outcomes of virtual expatriation, mainly well-being.

Some of the employees interviewed valued the organisation's flexibility, comfort, and well-being programmes. However, others experienced isolation and blurred boundaries between professional and private life. They found it difficult to disconnect from work, made worse by digital tools that provide constant access to job tasks, resulting in constant stress. Selected quotes are presented below:

- “They need to have self-discipline and good planning skills to avoid falling into the trap of having the laptop open from morning to night and being at work all the time” (HR3).
- “Remote work has allowed me to manage my time better and increase my focus. I have more time for my own pleasures, more private time, this is very valuable to me” (EMP4).

Effectiveness – this concept refers to achieving goals and ensuring performance. It includes real time monitoring of results and timely task completion under KPI oversight. Respondents noted that digital tools for coordinating tasks, clear goal setting, and mutual trust were critical to maintaining effectiveness without constant monitoring. Selected quotes are presented below:

- “Performance evaluation should be based on results and achievements, not just time spent at work. It should also include regular feedback and 360-degree evaluations” (EMP5).
- “The effectiveness of a virtual expatriate is determined by the success of the mission – e.g., implementing technology at the client's site or transferring an application to the client” (MAN1).

The study's results directly answer the research questions posed in this article. The study explores how autonomy is managed in a virtual context and highlights its dual nature (RQ1). Moreover, the author provides an exploration of mechanisms that influence the autonomy (organisational frameworks, leadership). The study explains how leaders can enhance employee well-being and job performance (RQ2). Finally, the study explains the consequences of the autonomy-responsibility dynamics for performance and wellbeing, both positively and negatively, and provides practical implications (RQ3).

4.2. Conceptual model and relationships

Based on the above dimensions, the model concept of autonomy paradox in virtual settings emerged. It is an interdependent model of organisational, relational, and individual mechanisms that shape the outcomes for the employee and the organisation. It is structured in the following interrelated levels:

1. Organisational frameworks as input.
2. Autonomy and responsibility as mechanisms of Virtual expatriation.
3. Leadership as a moderating mechanism.
4. Well-being and performance as outputs.

Organisational conditions create role ambiguity; hence, employee autonomy (freedom, flexibility) and responsibility (accountability, decision-making) may occur as a paradox (demand vs. resource). It is moderated by Leadership support, or its lack, which, in consequence, leads to a dual path of performance and wellbeing (empowerment and satisfaction vs. stress and work overload).

Based on the above discussion, the theoretical framework has been developed (Figure 2).

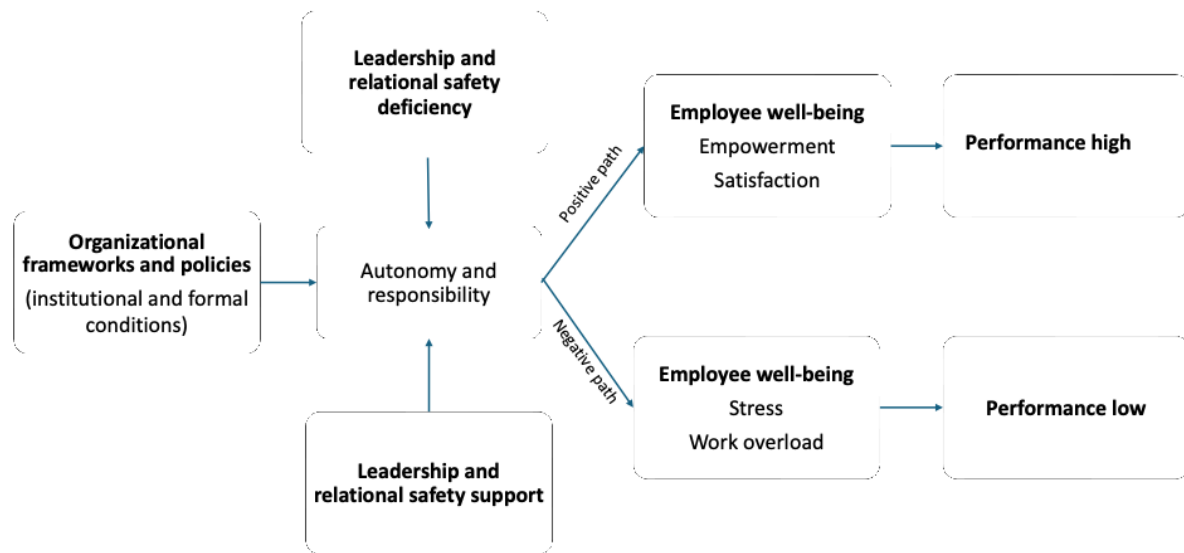


Figure 2. Emerged model of VE performance.

Source: Own resources.

4.2.1. Organisational conditions (input)

The organisational system plays a critical role in the virtual context and influences employees' mental well-being. Organisational frameworks—including regulations, rules, and governance, as well as standardisation and clarity of structure—define eligibility and support for virtual expatriates. The framework refers to rules that restrict virtual work, legal conditions, policies for virtual employees, and performance criteria. When these structures are clear and standardised in the context of virtual expatriation, employees can experience autonomy and focus on achieving results.

However, when standardisation is low or lacking, roles are not defined, processes are not adjusted to the virtual context of work, legal conditions are diverse, home office rules and performance criteria are unclear, it generates confusion, which directly influences perceived autonomy and, in turn, performance and well-being.

4.2.2 Mechanisms: Autonomy and responsibility as dual forces

The core of emerged model is constituted by 2nd order concept: autonomy and responsibility. It explains under what conditions perceived autonomy leads to well-being and higher performance.

In a virtual context, autonomy may be both a resource and a burden. VE gains freedom while having the opportunity to make decisions, organise tasks, and experience trust. It enhances self-discipline and accountability for your work, leading to higher performance. Autonomy may also lead to overload, stress, and role ambiguity if VE do not experience a supportive leadership style. The balance between autonomy and organisational control determines whether employees experience empowerment or overload. This equilibrium constitutes a micro-foundation of sustainable virtual work performance.

Hence, the negative path of the autonomy-leadership relationship will result in accountability without authority, decision constraints, and psychological tension. The positive path will determine self-organisation of tasks and time, flexibility, and focus.

However, this positive outcome depends on the clarity of organisational frameworks and leadership support. Determines whether virtual expatriation becomes a source of performance, stress, or disengagement.

4.2.3. Moderating mechanism: Leadership and relational safety

Within the organisational framework, leadership represents the relational and emotional infrastructure of virtual expatriation. When leaders demonstrate support through trust, provide constant, individualised feedback, and facilitate access to resources, virtual expatriates can experience greater empowerment. Moreover, leaders can enhance VE's flexibility and sense of belonging by applying a supportive, coaching style that balances support with organisational goals. It creates a psychological buffer that enhances well-being and productivity, and protects employees from the isolation and stress typical of the virtual environment. The supportive leadership style has been shown to improve motivation, trust, and psychological safety in a virtual environment (Carnevale, Hatak, 2020).

However, if these expectations are not fulfilled, VEs experience tension and difficulty sustaining in dispersed teams. Hence, leadership can either stimulate or reduce the autonomy paradox in virtual settings.

4.2.4. Well-being and performance as outcomes (output)

The final part of the model concerns the outcomes of perceived autonomy. The well-being of employees in virtual assignments emerges from the interaction among organisational frameworks, leadership, and perceived autonomy. It reflects how work conditions and leadership can support employee autonomy. Performance in virtual settings reflects how employees exercise autonomy to deliver the results of their work. Well-being and performance are interlinked outcomes that result in two possible paths.

The positive path of this relationship assumes that structured organisational frameworks and leaders' support encourage VE to demonstrate engagement, efficiency, high-quality results, and overall well-being. When organisational frameworks provide transparent expectations, clarity of role and structure, measurable work indicators, standardised procedures adjusted to the virtual work context, and supportive digital communication tools, VE are empowered to self-manage their tasks to achieve performance. In addition, leaders can improve autonomy by setting clear goals and evaluation criteria, providing constant support, and setting transparent expectations. It improves VE's sense of responsibility, often described as "the outcome depends on me," and leads to greater performance. This clarity reduces ambiguity and fosters employee well-being.

However, if autonomy is accompanied by a lack of managerial support and a blurred role, it generates stress and decreases performance. The negative path of this relationship results in overload, stress, isolation, role uncertainty, and reduced well-being. If performance

expectations are unclear, VE experience availability anxiety, expressed as a constant pressure to stay online and work beyond dedicated work time (Mateen et al., n.d.), as well as emotional exhaustion and decreased self-discipline.

When leadership and organisational frameworks align with the sense of autonomy and responsibility, VE will demonstrate stable well-being and high performance. When this mechanism misaligns, VE experience stress and detachment, and their well-being and performance decrease.

5. Discussion

The research resulted in the development of the framework for the effectiveness of virtual expatriates in the context of the autonomy paradox. The findings indicated that employees typically consider virtual assignments as a favourable mode of work. The level of overall well-being is satisfactory; however, employees highlighted the key role of autonomy and its dual nature. Autonomy may enhance well-being when supported by the organisation and its leaders. Employees expect flexibility in designing their work schedules with respect to their personal time. They highlight the need to disconnect when their mental state is threatened and expect adequate support. Recent studies also showed that when employees lose control over their time and conditions, it enhances their engagement and motivation (Pan et al., 2022). Hence, autonomy in the virtual context, as a positive phenomenon, is, however, moderated by many conditions.

Perceived organisational support proved to be a critical aspect of autonomy and well-being. Employees claim that managerial support, frequent individualised feedback, access to resources, coaching and mentoring practices, and well-being programmes allow them to navigate the virtual environment effectively. They expect expanded decision-making scope in virtual assignments, clear ownership of deliverables, and quality.

The study contributes to the literature on the dynamically evolving phenomenon of virtual expatriation, which remains underdeveloped. The study distinguishes virtual expatriation as a distinct concept among other forms of virtual work and places it within a clear conceptual framework. The author discusses conditions under which VE can achieve high performance.

In particular, the study adds to the literature on the autonomy paradox and puts it in the context of virtual expatriation. The study highlights that the autonomy is not universal but conditioned. Moreover, the study extends SDT and JD-R theory by explaining when autonomy shifts from a demand to a resource in virtual assignments, clarifying the conditions under which VE autonomy leads to well-being and high work outcomes. The model presents how unbalanced autonomy transforms into demands and decreases employee job performance.

The study highlights the critical role of the organisational framework and leadership to create favourable conditions for the effectiveness of virtual expatriates.

5.1. Limitations & future research

For this qualitative research, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the limited number of interviews and a sampling in one country. The qualitative design, based on the Gioia methodology, provided a theoretical, rather than statistical, generalisation of the concept (Gioia et al., 2013). Therefore, the results offer conceptual framework for the virtual expatriate mechanisms and cannot be assumed to represent other organisational settings. Second, qualitative coding and interpretation can introduce researcher biases, although all strategies of constant comparison and transparent data structures were applied to ensure credibility (Chamraz, 2014). Finally, participants were selected based on their experience with virtual experiences from different points of view (HR directors, line managers, employees); their perspectives may also reflect subjectivity.

By considering the study's limitations, the author also identifies several new directions for future research. Although the author found clear evidence of moderators of the relationship between autonomy and virtual expatriates well-being and effectiveness, encourages future research to investigate the effects of additional moderators. Future research may focus on quantitative validation of the model by developing scales to assess different inputs and moderators of virtual expatriation effectiveness and testing them using structural equation modelling (SEM). In addition, future research may also focus on cross-industry comparison.

However, since the data presented in this article are part of broader qualitative and quantitative research aimed at developing a model of virtual expatriation as a catalyst of organisational sustainability, there is significant potential to identify other factors influencing the effectiveness of virtual expatriates within virtual global work systems.

5.2. Practical implications

The author introduces the paradox of autonomy as a foundation for the design of virtual work. HR plays a significant role in supporting organisations in building systems that define accountability and provide support for virtual expatriates. Organisations need to consider the specific nature of leadership in virtual environments, such as clear goals, frequent communication, and virtual rituals, which have direct implications for organisational settings (Höddinghaus et al., 2024). Knowing that leadership moderates the autonomy-responsibility paradox, organisations need to adapt their practices accordingly. Hence, organisations should develop mechanisms to support leaders in balancing autonomy with guidance, delegating, and empowering to ensure employee well-being, which will lead to high performance.

6. Conclusions

Given the growing significance of the concept of virtual expatriates, the study is particularly timely and important. The research found that virtual expatriates experience a paradox of autonomy at work and are aware of the conditions under which autonomy leads to general well-being and high performance. VE perceive organisational support as a protective buffer. Significantly reduces the risk of stress and poor performance. The study provides powerful evidence of the importance of an organisational framework and supportive leadership in transforming autonomy into a key driver of performance.

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