6 The influence of international assignments on the career success of self-initiated expatriates. The 'high-density' nature of global work

Rodrigo Mello

ABSTRACT

Expatriate work is defined as high-density work that affects employees' career outcomes. In particular, self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) are a diverse group that usually stay longer abroad compared to other types of expatriates. This chapter reviews studies addressing the objective career success (OCS) and subjective career success (SCS) of SIEs after their international assignments (IAs). It explores what is the individual career impact of IAs on SIEs is. In so doing, the chapter provides an overview of the research on the career impact of IAs on SIEs as measured against certain career sub-dimensions (e.g., promotions, salary, career satisfaction). It is concluded that SIEs' high-density working experiences influence their career success. That is because their physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, non-work disruption, greater challenge, and autonomy expose SIEs to a greater degree of transitions, whether internal (e.g., identity changes or perceptions of success) or external (e.g., jobs, organizations, and countries). Therefore, perceptions of career success seem to be influenced by a number of those challenges and changes.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 30 years, interest has grown in global forms of employment as organizations have extended their operations overseas (Briscoe et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2010; Stahl et al., 2002). Despite questions regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global mobility and remote working (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Jooss et al., 2020; Selmer et al., 2021), the number of international assignments (IAs) has grown significantly over the past year as globalization has taken hold, and their importance to companies and expatriates has grown accordingly (Adams & van de Vijver, 2015; Dan Wang et al., 2021).

Previous empirical studies have found that the work requirements of expatriate jobs are higher than jobs in the domestic-market (e.g., Shin et al., 2007). Consequently, international career scholars have defined global work as constituting a high-density work experience that has substantial effects on the career trajectories, motivation, and career competencies of employees (Kraimer et al., 2022; Shaffer et al., 2012; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998). Global work may therefore impact career outcomes as IAs require expatriates to relocate internationally and interact with people from different cultures, which may disrupt their work and non-work routines (Kraimer et al., 2022; Peiperl & Jonsen, 2007; Shaffer et al., 2012,).

Overall, working abroad is reported to be both a challenging and highly developmental experience (Mello et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, evidence on the career impact of expatriation is still relatively limited (Brewster et al., 2014; Suutari et al., 2018). In addition, most academic research about expatriates from the 1970s onwards has involved assigned expatriates (AEs). AEs are people on an assignment to subsidiary units abroad that are financed by the company to accomplish an organizational objective (Selmer, 2017). However, as we moved into the twenty-first century, researchers recognized that not all expatriates were AEs as some were not assigned by any organization (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Expatriates who initiated and financed their own IAs (self-initiated expatriates or SIEs) started to increase in number but were neglected by scholars (Andresen et al., 2012; Mello et al., 2021). It has been argued that SIE careers are even more boundaryless than those of AEs (Biemann & Andresen, 2010). Therefore, the analysis of key empirical evidence may shed light on what we really know regarding SIEs' career success.

Given that background, this chapter aims to shed light on how IAs impact the career success of SIEs, regardless of whether they repatriate or continue living abroad. Studies on expatriates have defined career success as accomplishing desirable, positive psychological, or work-related outcomes following international work experience (Holtbruegge & Ambrosius, 2016; Ng et al., 2005; Suutari et al., 2018). Scholars have divided the measure of career success into objective and subjective forms (Ng et al., 2005). Objective success entails measurable, comparable, and tangible indicators of a person's career situation (e.g., position in the firm hierarchy and salary). Subjective success denotes perceptions of a career based on criteria deemed essential to the individual, including factors such as work-life balance, career satisfaction, or career fulfilment (Arthur et al., 2005; Gunz & Heslin, 2005; Heslin, 2003; Ng et al., 2005).

This chapter provides an overview of key empirical studies addressing the career impact of IAs on SIEs as assessed against certain career sub-dimensions (e.g., promotions, salary, and career satisfaction). First, the chapter outlines the characteristics of high-density global work. Then, the two types of expatriates (AEs and SIEs) are introduced to justify the focus on SIEs in the current research. Finally, career impacts are analysed based on empirical studies addressing SIEs' objective and subjective career success. Some studies indicate negative outcomes (e.g., Begley et al., 2008), and others positive outcomes (e.g., Guo et al., 2013), while some others suggest that there are both positive and negative consequences (Andresen, 2021). Hence, the chapter also aims to uncover the reasons for such diverse findings.
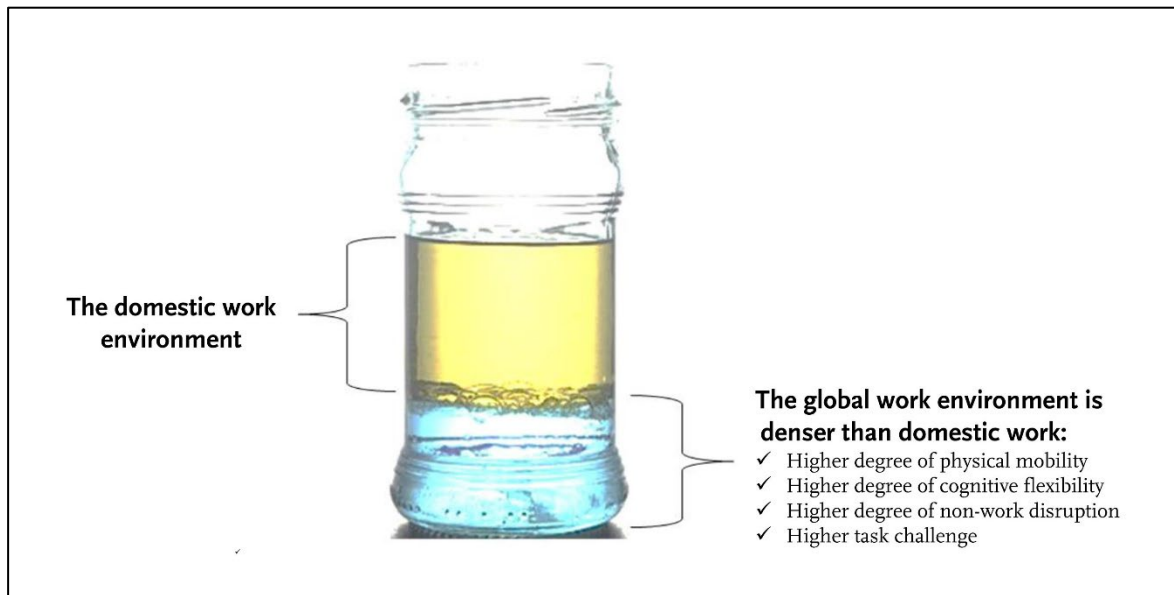
THE HIGH-DENSITY NATURE OF GLOBAL WORK

Before moving to a review of influential studies on SIEs' career success, it is necessary to discuss the nature of expatriate work. This step explains why such experiences have such a pronounced impact on careers. Scholars borrowed the concept of density to differentiate domestic location work from global work (Mello et al., 2022). Density is a word used to describe how much space an object or substance takes up (its volume) in relation to the amount of matter in that object or substance (its mass) (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2022). So, density is the amount of mass per unit of volume. If an object is heavy and compact, it is high-density. Scholars have suggested that global work is a high-density work experience. First, based on Peiperl and Jonsen's (2007) characteristics of global work, Shaffer and colleagues (2012) differentiate three aspects of global work: physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and non-work disruption. Then, Mello et al. (2022) extended the high-density conceptualization by adding two characteristics: task challenge and autonomy.

Physical mobility is defined as the degree to which the work role requires that the employee travel or relocate internationally (Shaffer et al., 2012). The number and length of IAs may provide an objective measure of expatriates' physical mobility and relate to the subjective aspect of being exposed to the stress of mobility when adapting to different cultural and institutional environments. Cognitive flexibility is defined as the degree to which the global work requires role incumbents to adjust their thought patterns and scripts to effectively interact with people and adapt to situational demands across cultures (Shaffer et al., 2012). Cognitive flexibility is related to the job itself, and, therefore, is different from psychological mobility, which is related to individual differences (Shaffer et al., 2012). Non-work disruption differentiates most international jobs from work in the domestic context and is defined as the degree to which the work role requirements disrupt or interfere with the employee's everyday activities and routines outside of work and is a particularly salient element to many international employees (Shaffer et al., 2012). Put simply; it is harder to separate personal and professional life in international career settings than in domestic ones.

The extension of the high-density conceptualization by Mello and his co-authors (2022) considers expatriate job characteristics. The higher task challenge perspective is based on studies arguing that expatriates may have more responsibilities and, thus more demanding jobs than they had previously in the domestic job environment (Solomon, 1995; Suutari & Brewster, 2003). That heightened responsibility may require that expatriates diversify their learning abilities (Mello et al., 2022) to deal with a greater variety of tasks abroad (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2009) while operating under different cultural and institutional

norms (Mello et al., 2022). In addition, empirical studies often report that expatriate jobs entail greater autonomy owing to distance from the home country (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2009). At the same time, expatriates might have less help (Harzing, 2001), whether from HQ in the case of AEs (Reiche et al., 2011) or from personal networking in the case of SIEs (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014; Melo et al., 2021). Figure 2 illustrates the characteristics that make global work a high-density work experience.

Figure 2: An illustration of the characteristics of the high-density nature of global work

Therefore, this chapter argues that such a high-density experience impacts expatriates' career success. The heightened demands on expatriates might be even more challenging for SIEs who have little or no organizational support.

CONTRASTING THE CAREERS OF AEs AND SIEs

During the last 20 years of expatriation studies, scholars have noticed two types of expatriates. Assigned expatriates have been defined as employees whose organization temporarily relocates them to another country to accomplish an organizational goal (Harrison et al., 2004). On the other hand, self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) usually engineer their own expatriation to a country of their choice to pursue personal and career development experiences (Jokinen et al., 2008) often with no definite period in mind (Tharenou, 2013). While these assignments are separate types of assignments, it is important to note that individuals can change from one type of assignment to another. For instance, AEs might not wish to return to their home country and self-initiate themselves into a second IA

(McNulty & Vance, 2017). In research, the focus is typically on their recent assignment, i.e. individuals are classified into these categories on the basis of their recent job.

Regarding motives, groups of AEs and SIEs stress different aspects. For example, researchers found that career factors were seen as important by both AEs and SIEs (Melo et al., 2021). At the same time, location and the host country's reputation were significant factors for SIEs (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2010). Lifestyle is an essential career anchor for both AEs and SIEs but is more critical for SIEs (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2010). Overall, family-related concerns play a central role among SIEs. They have fewer company-related motives to consider in their decision-making (Richardson, 2006). At the same time, SIEs are likely to be less strongly motivated by the job than AEs (Cerdin, 2013). Further, push factors such as a desire to escape the economic environment of their home country or to escape personal problems are reportedly more commonly among SIEs than AEs (Suutari et al., 2018).

The matter of context encompasses organizations and their geographic locations. It seems that SIEs often work in lower hierarchical positions than AEs (Doherty et al., 2011; Jokinen et al., 2008), and their jobs may not be as demanding as those of AEs (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Hence, often AEs have more complex jobs than SIEs. In addition, AEs move internationally within the boundaries of one organization, while SIEs typically search for a job in different countries and across different employers (Andresen et al., 2012). Consequently, work experience seems to be part of an AE's organizational career development, supported mainly by HRM professionals. At the same time, SIEs tend to follow an individualized career path, handling all the transfer complications themselves, and are more vulnerable to cultural and institutional constraints (Andresen & Biemann, 2013). That might demand a greater degree of career adaptability to achieve career success (Jannesari & Sullivan, 2019). Therefore, it has been argued that the careers of SIEs might be more boundaryless than those of AEs (Biemann & Andresen, 2010).

Therefore, having different starting points and job experiences abroad may influence expatriates' personal development and growth (Andresen & Biemann, 2013; Suutari et al., 2018) and leads to different career outcomes among the two types of expatriates. Career success outcomes of SIEs have clearly been less studied (Andresen et al., 2020; Brewster et al., 2021; Suutari et al., 2018). Therefore, the following section provides an overview of key empirical studies addressing career success among SIEs.

THE EFFECTS OF IAs ON SIEs' CAREER SUCCESS

The research reported in this chapter identified eight articles addressing objective and or subjective career success among SIEs (see Table 5). Table 6 provides an overview of studies assessing the sub-dimensions of career success.

N	AUTHORS	YEAR	JOURNAL	TITLE
1	Andresen	2018	International Journal of Human Resource Management	When at home, do as they do at home? Valuation of self-initiated repatriates' competences in French and German management career structures
2	Biemanna and Braakmannb	2013	International Journal of Human Resource Management	The impact of international experience on objective and subjective career success in early careers
3	Begley, Collings and Scullion,	2008	Employee Relations	The cross-cultural adjustment experiences of self-initiated repatriates to the Republic of Ireland labour market. Employee Relations
4	Froese and Peltokorpi	2013	International Journal of Human Resource Management	Organizational expatriates and self-initiated expatriates: differences in cross-cultural adjustment and job satisfaction
5	Felker	2011	International Journal of Training and Development	Professional development through self-directed expatriation: Intentions and outcomes for young, educated Eastern Europeans
6	Guo, Porschitz and Alves	2019	Career Development International,	Exploring career agency during self-initiated repatriation: a study of Chinese sea turtles
7	Markkonen	2015	Journal of Global Mobility	Perceived employability development of Western self-initiated expatriates in local organizations in China
8	Suutari, Brewster, Mäkelä, Dickmann, Tornikoski	2018	Human Resource Management	The effect of international work experience on the career success of expatriates: A Comparison of assigned and self-initiated expatriates

Table 5: Bibliographic sources in the review

Studies SIEs	Number of studies	OCS			SCS		
		Salary	Promotion	Job offer	Career satisfaction	Job satisfaction	Perceived employability
SIEs	4	0	1 (study: 5)	1 (study: 5)	0	0	3 (studies: 3, 6, 7)
AEs/SIEs	4	1 (study: 2)	1 (study: 8)	1 (study: 8)	2 (studies: 2, 8)	1 (study: 4)	2 (studies: 1, 8)
Total	8	1	2	2	2	1	5

Table 6: Identified studies on the career success of SIEs

Objective career success

Our review started with studies addressing dimensions of OCS and identified three studies reporting findings on three OCS factors: salary, promotions, and job offer (Biemann & Braakmann, 2013; Felker, 2011; Suutari et al., 2018).

First, Biemann and Braakmann (2013) surveyed a mixed sample of AEs and SIEs among German expatriates in the first five years of their careers. The study concluded that an IA positively impacts the salary of expatriates and repatriates. The study also found the result to be robust when controlling for differences between AEs and SIEs. Unfortunately, the authors did not provide further analysis of those differences.

Second, Felker (2011) explored the experiences of well-educated Eastern European SIEs who moved to Western Europe searching for career opportunities not available in their home countries. Felker conducted 22 in-depth interviews with workers living in Ireland, England, the Netherlands, Poland, and the Czech Republic and found that the SIEs were working in positions for which they were considerably overqualified. Moreover, the respondents did not feel they were offered promotions that matched their expectations.

Finally, Suutari and colleagues (2018) examined the career success of Finnish AEs and SIEs eight years after their initial IA. They found that the two different categories of expatriates had received equal numbers of promotions in that period. The only identified difference was that AEs accepted job offers 75% of the time they were offered whereas SIEs only accepted 50% of the opportunities they were offered to change jobs. Furthermore, the analysis indicates that 72% of AE job offers were internal compared to 47% for SIEs. In the short term, AEs' careers are much more likely to unfold with one employer. In contrast, SIEs tend to look for and change jobs more energetically on their own initiative, as they had when moving abroad. Among the study's respondents, significantly more AEs than SIEs had repatriated to Finland, supporting earlier arguments that SIEs tend to live longer abroad (Doherty et al., 2013).

Subjective career success

Seven expatriation studies address three dimensions of subjective career success (SCS): career satisfaction, job satisfaction, and perceived employability (Andresen, 2018; Begley et al., 2008; Biemann & Braakmann, 2013; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013; Guo et al., 2013; Makkonen, 2015; Suutari et al., 2018).

First, Biemann and Braakmann (2013) assessed not only the OCS of both AEs and SIEs but also their SCS. The study found that an IA positively impacts the satisfaction of repatriates, and again, that the results are robust when controlling for differences between AEs and SIEs. However, Suutari et al. (2018) found

that expatriate type, whether AE or SIE, made little difference to the expatriates' experiences of the impact of IAs on career satisfaction.

Froese and Peltokorpi, (2013) surveyed a mixed sample of AEs and SIEs working in the greater Tokyo area (Kawasaki, Saitama, Tokyo, and Yokohama). They found that SIEs have lower job satisfaction than AEs and argued that this is the case because SIEs more often work under host-country national supervisors.

Finally, five studies analysed the impact of an IA on perceived employability. Guo et al. (2013) interviewed 20 Chinese SIEs who had returned to China after spending at least three years working abroad. Most informants reported increases in their perceived employability stemming from skills development when abroad (Guo et al., 2013). However, Finnish SIEs working in local organizations in China did not view their assignments as contributing to their perceived employability (Makkonen, 2015). Irish SIEs struggled to find Irish employers who recognized their experience as a positive attribute and thus thought their IA was detrimental to their careers (Begley et al., 2008). Among the studies comparing AEs and SIEs, Andresen (2018) reported mixed findings on the career impact of IAs. The study found required employability competence profiles differ significantly in France and Germany, which affects the perceived employability of expatriates. Andresen's study does not, however, compare the position of SIEs and AEs. Finally, Suutari et al. (2018) examined a mixed sample of AEs and SIEs and found no difference in the respondents' perceived external or internal marketability, whether in the home job market or internationally. While some key differences between AEs and SIEs have emerged, there is clearly room for more investigation.

RESEARCH ON HOW IAs IMPACT THE CAREER SUCCESS OF SIEs

This chapter illustrates that empirical studies focused on SIEs indicate variations in their career success. The evidence overall is limited and is affected by some limitations. In addition, despite the evidence of the differences in career outcomes by expatriate type (Suutari et al., 2018), the career impact of undertaking a self-initiated assignment has clearly been less frequently studied (Mello et al., 2021). We identified just eight critical studies, only two of which addressed the OCS of SIEs (Felker, 2011; Suutari et al., 2018). The limited empirical studies investigating SIEs might be because as a group SIEs are difficult to contact. After all, variations in the jobs held by SIEs undermine their identification due to the vast diversity of the SIE group (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014; Selmer et al., in press). Hence, a better categorization of SIEs' jobs seems warranted.

Concerning OCS, international career scholars need to deliver more empirical studies addressing more career success outcomes among SIEs, such as salary (Suutari & Brewster, 2003) and promotions (Suutari et al., 2018), and might even investigate the extent to which SIEs reach top positions and the time taken

to do so (Schmid & Wurster, 2017). In summary, OCS among SIEs should be further investigated. Alternative OCS measures could include job security (Nabi, 1999), accumulation of competencies (Shaffer et al., 2012), and even whether expatriates have an office or own a house (Osei-Tutu et al., 2018). Success may also be expressed differently according to the cultural and institutional environment to which people are exposed (Andresen, 2021). For example, in neo-liberalist systems, where the state has a reduced role in society, having children attending costly private schools may indicate OCS values more often than in societies where the education system is a state responsibility and free for citizens. The measurement of career success should be adapted to the career context in which individuals place themselves (Briscoe et al., 2021).

With regard to SCS, SIE research identifies three measures: career satisfaction, job satisfaction, and perceived employability. The evidence is limited and also, to some extent, controversial. Despite the mainly positive view of Guo et al. (2013) of SIEs' perceived employability, other studies seem to present negative or mixed findings. Consequently, further research would be necessary to compare the SCS of SIEs in different contexts.

With regard to career or job satisfaction, empirical studies generally seem to use a unidimensional approach (based on an average respondent score) to explore or measure the general career satisfaction of SIEs (Briscoe et al., 2021). However, career scholars have repeatedly suggested applying a multidimensional approach such as recognition, quality work, meaningful work, authenticity, and development (Shockley et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2013). Moreover, it is suggested that cross-cultural and/or comparative country research (Briscoe et al., 2021) could be used to explore career success beyond a single country context. The rationale is that giving meaning to a particular career success dimension in expatriates' minds could be affected by different country contexts (Kase et al., 2020).

One of the main questions in the subjective dimension of career success is the importance of a given achievement in a particular context. Individuals might experience a high sense of achievement on a particular dimension without attaching relatively greater importance to it (e.g., salary increments) (Argyris, 1982; Katz & Kahn, 1978). However, Briscoe and colleagues (2021) argued that individuals' particular aspirations might be driven by less objective achievements, such as well-being. The environment could influence changes to a specific meaning ascribed to success (Vos et al., 2020). It seems SIEs stay abroad longer than AEs while immersed in a high-density work experience (Suutari et al., 2018) and that they engage in local networks more intensively (Doherty et al., 2013). They are also a more diverse group (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014) and may, therefore, interpret the various contexts that they are embedded in broadly. Therefore, they may experience a higher variation in the meaning they attach to career success factors

and dimensions. In Summary, SIE careers are more boundaryless than AE careers (Biemann & Andresen, 2010), as they may experience a greater degree of transition, which can lead them to change their perception of career success more often than AEs do (Andresen & Biemann, 2013), and develop a global career identity (Kramer et al., 2012; Mello et al., 2022; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007). Future studies should track these internal transitions to capture what success really means to SIEs.

Finally, this chapter observed how scholars assess SIEs' career success. Most studies address it at a single point in time, with no control groups (e.g., domestic-market employees). Few studies compare the career success of expatriates with the career success of employees in a domestic market (e.g., Biemann & Braakmann, 2013) or establish a comparison point in time, at which expatriates compare their career progress before and after their IAs (e.g., Suutari & Brewster, 2003). When scholars collect data shortly after IAs, they are limited to immediate outcomes depending upon the repatriation itself, and cannot assess the cumulative effects over time (Fuller, 2008; Mello et al., 2021). Further, career mobility is generally considered to be unevenly distributed over an individual's career timeline (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2014; Mello et al., 2021). More time sensitive, longitudinal studies would augment our understanding of the relevant phenomena.

CONCLUSION

This chapter provided an overview of the research on the career impact of IAs on SIEs as measured against certain career sub-dimensions (e.g., promotions, salary, career satisfaction). The work of SIEs is so diverse (Selmer et al., in press) and dense (Mello et al., 2022) that it affects their career outcomes. Nevertheless, the evidence is limited and inconclusive (Mello et al., 2021; Mello et al., 2022). So, why do SIEs appear to diverge in terms of career success achievements? This chapter indicates that the high-density working experience influences the career success of SIEs. That is because their physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, non-work disruption, greater challenge, and autonomy expose expatriates to a greater degree of transitions, whether internal (e.g., identity changes or perceptions of success) or external (e.g., jobs, organizations, and countries). Therefore, perceptions of career success seem to be influenced by the volatility of those challenges and changes.

Our work indicates a broad array of practical implications. Organizations should identify and hire SIEs in their local markets, and thus avoid moving employees to countries where the cost of adaptation might be too high (Dickmann & Baruch, 2011). In addition, organizations should track SIEs' (and AEs') internal transitions (e.g., identity, the meaning of success) to retain talent (Mello et al., 2022). Finally, an awareness of the differences among expatriate types may be

important to develop support mechanisms. These might, for instance, be supporting individuals who plan their international careers by facilitating an understanding of the challenges they will likely face. This could then be used to identify the resources necessary to succeed (Dickmann & Mello, in press; Mello et al., 2021; Mello et al., 2022). Overall, it would surely be good for career success if organizations were to increase their insights and support levels, enabling individuals to be better prepared and to make superior decisions.

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