Assignment Purposes

Due to high costs and risks involved for both organizations and professionals, international assignments must be carefully considered and justified among decision makers. They fulfill several functions, to note: filling a temporary lack of skills in a certain location; carrying out projects or building client relationships in new markets; developing careers and training programs; transferring skills across internal networks of expertise; and finally, fostering a corporate culture across new subsidiaries. Although any of these purposes can be found in any industries, their prevalence varies according to the arrangements of work, technology and market developments found across different industries.

While 'most international moves are project related' (Millar and Salt 2008: 43), a significant share (about a third) of international assignments responds to skill gaps found in remote locations. Another segment (a quarter) of assignments is devoted to career development of key talent. In the case of financial firms, the rationale for assignments stems from the need to transfer specific skills and to nurture networks of exchange that will ultimately actualize business performance and profitability (Beaverstock 2005). Overall, mobile assignments often serve multiple purposes simultaneously. Although ranked differently in importance during planning and evaluation stages, chance of approval is increased when multiple purposes and needs can be achieved efficiently.

Certain purposes are more typically found in knowledge-economy industries. Survey reports confirm anecdotal evidence that, in low information-intensive industries (such as energy), the majority of international assignments refer to project and client development. Whereas short-term training is often seen in that industry, the proportion of career development assignments is small in more mature industries. Conversely, the picture is different in the ICT-intensive industries. In finance, more than 70 per cent of international assignments are due to knowledge transfer and career development issues. In the high-tech sector (computer and pharma), project development and skill gap are the predominant purposes. Such differences of mobility purpose between mature and emerging sectors can be explained by the singularity of the knowledge economy, where innovation, knowledge and human interaction play a central role in business making.

Alternatives to Long-Term Assignments

Until recently, long-term assignments lasting more than a year and up to the three years have been the norm. Lack of adaptation of worker and family, poor performance, resignation and poaching are common occurrences. According to anecdotal evidence, international assignments cost three times the annual salary of the employee (such estimate includes direct and indirect costs with recruiting, selection and training, additional rewards and family relocation compensation packages, in addition to learning-curve loses, and repatriation costs). Not surprisingly, contrary to finding by Millar &

Salt, cost reduction is a priority in decisions over mobility, mentioned by approximately 75 per cent of survey respondents.

Therefore, alternatives to such long-term assignments are being sought by most organizations (55 per cent of survey respondents). The most common solution has been the short-term assignment, defined as one-time deployments lasting less than one year (adopted by a third of companies). Next is 'localization' of expatriate employee, referring to the decision to keep the expatriate locally. Obviously, this requires the positive will and acceptance of the employee and their family in order to succeed. Other common alternatives involve the hiring of local employees at the foreign location, commuter assignments, and regular business travel. Commuter assignments refer to the regular and oscillatory movement between two locations, whereas business travel involves trips from a base to and from a variety of contingent locations. Finally, though still rare, 'virtual teams' comprise remotely located colleagues engaging in real-time audio-visual communication by means of teleconferencing technology.

The rise of these alternative forms of international assignment is reflected in the growing importance of intangible resources in the knowledge economy. Information, ICT, talent and human labor become critical in the management of work and innovation in cross-functional and transnational sites. This is evinced in the comparison between two industry groups used in this study (see figure above). In conventional (low-tech) industries, the nature of production and investment still largely determines the relatively predictable relationship between highly-skilled professionals and mobility. Productive systems based on mass production and efficiency (rather than innovation), long-term capital-intensive investment cycles, and high barriers to new competition are factors defining the patterns of corporate mobility in conventional manufacturing and extractive industries. Having largely streamlined operational processes, oil and gas companies do not have room to reduce costs by exploring alternative forms of mobility.

Conversely, in organizations of the high-tech, finance and creative sectors, a wider variety of mobility types can be expected. According to survey reports, more than 60 per cent of knowledge-based firms are pursuing alternatives to long-term assignments. That is slightly more than the general all-industry average. But this drive is may be mitigated by the need to mature corporate cultures and build trust beyond international borders, such as in the case of top finance firms (Morgan, 2001). As noted, face-to-face interaction is intrinsic to service production at the point of demand (Beaverstock, 2004: 158). It is important to remark that short-term assignments can be very common in finance, but not usually related to client, business or career development, but rather to internally technical or operational issues.

Comparatively to organizations with a lower ICT-incidence, larger high-tech companies tend to favor hiring local talent or localizing expatriates on a permanent basis. Not surprisingly, digitized teleconference-

based 'virtual teams' are also more common (adopted by 10 per cent of respondents vis-à-vis the 1 per cent all-industry average). Localization and connectivity represent ways by which knowledge-intensive organizations seek to optimize performance, while also reducing the costs and risks of international relocation. 'Virtual mobility tends to be used as a complement [rather than a substitute] for business travel.' (Millar and Salt, p. 44). However, it must be asked what is being done with the time and resources freed by telecommunication. Gains in time productivity are often redirected to extra work, extra time that will be dedicated to more business prospection, resulting in additional travel, sales efforts and work per capita. In other words, as telecommunication reduces the need to travel, savings in time are reinvested in intensifying work rhythms rather than enriching them.

Technical ideologies of mobile professionals

Despite the highly structured forms of mobility found in mature transnational organizations, senior professionals possess extensive international experience. According to one of the survey reports, they are more than twice as experienced as the average expatriate (23 per cent of energy sector expatriates have prior international experience, vis-à-vis the 10 per cent all-industry average). In oil companies, they are seasoned engineers with a concern for safety and operational issues. The harsh, insalubrious nature of operational activities forges a resilient ('thick-skin') professional culture, as employees express low expectations about the far regions they are assigned to. Some of these companies develop special bonds with key personnel, offering them

Table 2: Types of IM alternatives employed at different industries

	General Benchmark	High Tech	Finance	Energy
Short-term assignments	33%	30%	50%	Standard Drill
Hire local employees	14%	30%	10%	N/A
Localization	12%	30 %	20%	N/A
Virtual teams	1%	10%	1%	no

Source: GMAC 2008 reports (data adapted by authors).

stability during economic downturns. This loyalty offsets job offers from competitors in a context of scarce talent. Evidence suggests that attrition rates in mature sectors tend to be lower than in more dynamic, volatile – in a word 'flexible' – work environments of emerging knowledge-based industries.

Yet, international exposure does not necessarily translate in cross-cultural sensitivity, as detected in anthropological studies (Nowicka 2009; Werbner 2008; Hannerz 1996). According to functional requirements, international business is typically carried out in bubble-like environments, as exemplified in the business trip cycle interconnecting airport, limo, office, restaurant, hotel, or expat village. Although cross-cultural training is increasingly provided to expatriate assignees and spouses during pre-departure, the implicit orientation, as epitomized in energy sector mammoths, is that contact with the foreign host culture is to be carried out with caution, controlled or even minimized. Not uncommonly, international exposure is limited to the servant staff and colleagues of multinational teams at the workplace. As these technical professional ideologies explicitly profess, national background is unimportant in an egalitarian workplace, and transparency over performance is paramount, to the point that some professionals may personally share salary information with colleagues in ways that would be considered egregious in urban environments.

Nevertheless, the work and social life of expatriate professionals is not an easy one. Even in work settings self-fashioned as 'neutral', performance and rewards are often affected by gender, age and ethnic differences, taking either a cooperative or competitive direction. For example, a multinational ethnic make-up is valued in high-end knowledge sectors as diversity in the workplace is deemed resourceful in delivering innovative solutions. However, as documented in the scholarship, expatriate professionals often report gaps in their bonding with other expatriate or native colleagues, as reflected in the difficulty to develop meaningful relationships beyond the family unit (Beaverstock 2005: 256-7). According to survey reports and anecdotal evidence, cross-cultural training has some positive effects in facilitating their adaptation overseas. It is somewhat surprising that such training programs are only optional in most cases, given the considerable financial and emotional risks underlying international relocation.

Conclusion

This study has sought to identify forms of professional mobility that hold a stronger connection with the emerging knowledge economy. To this end, we compared portfolios of mobility leveraged across high-tech and low-tech industries (defined by their relative ICT spending). It was assumed that ICT-intensive industries more acutely express key processes of the knowledge economy: digitalization, mobility and flexibility. We then reviewed opinion survey reports on international relocation, exploring parameters that are commonly defined in the analysis and practice of internationally mobile professionals:

mobility policy standardization, mobility purpose, alternative forms of mobility, and cross-cultural training.

As key findings, knowledge-intensive organizations appear to employ a more dynamic, diverse and contingent array of mobility practices, comparatively to what has been found in more conventional industries (those with a lower ICT incidence). This reaffirms the claim that 'there is an intimate relationship between types of international mobility and knowledge transfer, but this relationship may vary by sector and company' (Millar and Salt, p. 46). In our analysis, instead of using general theories of industrial development, we evaluated differences across these portfolios in relation to labor processes that are typical to the knowledge economy. We have argued that the more dynamic, variegated and contingent forms of mobility seen in knowledge-intensive organizations are closely related to, and probably reflect, broader economic and technological pressures from flexible capitalism (Brinkley 2008; Thrift 1997; Abramovitz 1996; Harvey 1989).

The knowledge economy has emerged within the current global flexible capitalist system which remotely interconnects industries across distant regions, using information technologies as a basic component of productive processes. But these technologic-economic regimes have also intensified work rhythms and controls, undermining work-life balance in unwilling, uncontrollable and exploitative ways as frequently experienced by highly-skilled professionals. While this study has noted some of the effects of international relocation on corporate expatriates and their families, further studies are required to define the extent by which flexible capitalism has intensified such stresses of residing overseas.

As it appears, mobility and 'flexibility' are closely related under current economic regimes. The more globally integrated and information-centric an industry is, the more mobile, unstable and episodic work appears to become (Perrons, 2007; Ong, 1999). With the decline of welfare systems, job stability has been replaced by job employability. Professionals no longer expect to develop careers in the same organization until retirement. Instead, they become mercurial, often in unwanted forms: long commutes, excessive traveling, ubiquitous connectivity, multi-tasking, uncertain promotions, job insecurity, much of which related to the job-hopping phenomenon. In brief, mobility can contribute to the exploitation of highly-skilled workers; in the knowledge economy mobility refers not only to practices and regimes of spatial movement but also to the multiple occupational and life possibilities these workers confront. More specifically, occupational mobility (promotions, employability) is regularly associated with demands to become spatially mobile as determined by international organizational regimes.

The often romanticized 'nomadic worker' must be rethought under these broader conditions. It is true that 'the traditional expatriate is now disappearing, to be replaced by the 'nomadic worker' whose ultimate international mobility meets the challenges of international business in globalization' (Beaverstock 2005:

246). Nonetheless, this claim relates to the circumstances of emerging knowledge-intensive organizations. As mobility is intensified by dynamic industries and as peripheral markets gain relevance in the global system, 'the level of expatriation from a home to a receiving country may be expected to decline over time.' (Millar & Salt, 2008: 42). The growing complexity of flows, directions and durations of international mobility has departed with the classical center-to-periphery model, and is now engendering a model of multiplicities characterized by flexible, multi-purpose, short-term and digital moves across international economies.

Not to be neglected, expatriate professionals and families are culturally confronted by the realities they experience at foreign societies and workplaces. They need to develop networks of support, nurturing forms of relationship that are rhizomatic rather than rooted, usually nostalgic, limited, ephemeral and probably never completely satisfying. As noted in survey reports, spouse adaptation is a main concern for HR managers. Contrary to popular belief, adaption to 'similar' countries is surprisingly difficult, as expectations of easy adaptation backfire: underlying an apparently familiar linguistic, ethnic and religious makeup are hidden differences in meanings, expectations and behavior which quickly erode optimistic assumptions (Leiba-O'Sullivan, 2002). In addition to cultural, income and psychological bumps arising from relocation, if life at home is not so easy, what to say of the uprooted and 'flexible' settings experienced in alien lands: new beginnings, new challenges, new emotions (Tharenou, 2008; Linehan, 2001).

As corporate professionals 'become transnational' in order to foster professional careers (Beaverstock 2005: 256), the problem of adaptation can be reframed: what type of mobile subjectivity is being forged under 'flexible' regimes of the knowledge economy is the key question at hand. To better adapt to organizational requirements, mobile workers incorporate psychosocial dispositions necessary to succeed in international environments. Corporate cultures as sets of expectations, behaviors and rewards may uphold values of homogeneity (such as among rig-oil engineers) or heterogeneity (among business development professionals). Probably only a minority of 'nomadic workers' would fully embrace a permanently mobile career, such as depicted in the fictional movie *Up in the Air*. Given the levels of assignment refusal, failure and turnover among expatriates, 'soft skills' become ever more relevant even in a compressed world. In other words, flexible work requires flexible personalities (not necessarily in a positive sense of the word). In the meantime, the wellbeing of families remains a private concern rarely addressed by organizations. As a cause and effect of economic globalization, mobility affects corporate expatriates both in terms of material opportunity as well as of emotional challenge, all of which representing problematic embodiments of the knowledge economy at the individual and family levels.

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