

# Dynamic global careers: a new conceptualization of expatriate career paths

Yvonne McNulty

*School of Human Development and Social Services,  
SIM University, Singapore, and*

Charles M. Vance

*Department of Management, Loyola Marymount University,  
Los Angeles, California, USA*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Most studies of expatriates have explored global careers as unfolding within assigned or self-initiated expatriation contexts in a predominantly linear fashion. The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize that expatriates' career progression is facilitated by frequent moves between domains, with an increasing overlap among assigned-expatriate (AE) and self-initiated expatriate (SIE) contexts.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Underpinned by findings from extant literature, the authors review and integrate studies of expatriation and careers to conceptualize an AE-SIE career continuum.

**Findings** – The authors debunk the idea that AEs and SIEs are a type of expatriate *per se*, but instead is indicative only of their career orientation in terms of where they choose to sit on the AE-SIE career continuum at any point in time. Specifically, individuals pursuing global careers in international labor markets include up to eight types of expatriate who retain varying degrees of AE vs SIE characteristics dependent on the point they choose along the continuum.

**Practical implications** – The tension that dynamic global careers cause for multinational enterprises (MNEs) is not necessarily “bad”, and that by accepting and accommodating changes in career orientation MNEs will be able to make clearer and more consistent global staffing decisions.

**Originality/value** – The authors provide a new, improved conceptualization of linear and non-linear global careers and of the challenges global career actors face throughout their career development both at home and abroad. They further show that while career orientation explains why expatriates engage in various types of international work experiences, their typology adds explication of the various types of expatriate who pursue global careers.

**Keywords** Expatriates, Careers, Critical

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

More expatriates are rejecting the “one assignment” concept of expatriation and are instead adopting a “career” approach, stringing re-assignments into meaningful sequences that meet their long-term personal and professional aspirations for building career capital (Stahl and Cerdin, 2004; Thomas *et al.*, 2005; Dickmann and Harris, 2005). Career capital is defined as expatriates' energy, values, skills, and networks built up over their working lives, thereby acquiring competencies usable within, as well as across, companies (Dickmann and Doherty, 2008). These “global careers” are pursued across national and organizational boundaries in different forms of multinational enterprises (MNEs), including private, public, non-profit and domestic organizations, and are on the increase (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2015; Cappellen and Janssens, 2010b; Reis and Baruch, 2013). Expatriates pursuing global careers represent an emerging and potentially critical component of MNEs' overall talent pool and global staffing strategy (Baruch *et al.*, 2013; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012).



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In this paper, we re-examine the dynamic nature of global careers and their development. In “dynamic global careers”, expatriates engage in linear (i.e. rational, carefully planned) and non-linear (i.e. intuitive, spontaneous, unpredictable) career trajectories (Mendenhall and Macomber, 1997), and shift their orientation from assigned expatriation to self-initiated expatriation[1], or to other variations, to personally enact their global careers. Changes in expatriates’ career orientation, we believe, can lead to global staffing challenges for the MNE, where tensions and competing demands between MNE and expatriate needs may result in losses of talent. We seek to view global careers through a new alternative paradigmatic perspective, and thus to provide fresh insights for utilizing global staffing strategies. We suggest that the tension that dynamic global careers cause for MNEs is not necessarily “bad,” and that by accepting and accommodating changes in career orientation MNEs will be able to make clearer and more consistent global staffing decisions and thereby enhance organizational performance.

While research has improved understanding of the factors that ensure global career success (e.g. Cappellen and Janssens, 2010a; Suutari, 2003), only a few studies (e.g. Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Baruch and Reis, 2015; Crowley-Henry, 2012; Suutari and Makela, 2007) have addressed the extent to which a linear career focus that ignores expatriates’ long-term career self-management may impede scholarly understanding of global careers. The focus on linear vs non-linear career trajectories is deliberate. Whereas linear careers are predictable on the basis of “inflexible ladders” and “cause-effect” relationships (Crowley-Henry, 2012, p. 130), non-linear careers are flexible, unpredictable, complex, opportunistic, and even chaotic: even expatriates themselves may be unaware how “cause” may ultimately lead to the desired “effect” (Mendenhall and Macomber, 1997). Our goal is to provide a new, improved conceptualization of linear and non-linear global careers and of the challenges global career actors face throughout their career development both at home and abroad.

While most studies of expatriates have explored global careers as unfolding within assigned-expatriate (AE) or self-initiated expatriate (SIE) contexts in a predominantly linear fashion (Shaffer *et al.*, 2012), we argue that career progression is facilitated by frequent moves between domains, with an increasing overlap between AE and SIE contexts (Altman and Baruch, 2012; Tharenou, 2013). We argue that global careers typically unfold along an AE-SIE career continuum, the AE end featuring complete company control of the expatriate’s career, and the SIE end featuring complete individual control of the career. Thus, as the career progresses, it can unfold at different points along the continuum, according to necessity, opportunity, and even personal desire. We further suggest that due to expatriates’ inability to rely on MNEs’ traditional forms of linear career progression to provide international skills and experience and to ensure “lifetime employability,” they are increasingly pushed into self-managed dynamic global careers. Conceptualizing global careers in this longitudinal fashion will assist understanding of the challenges MNEs face in deploying, developing, and retaining their expatriate staff.

We first outline the elements of global careers, including their definition, their evolution within international labor markets, and their traditional and non-traditional forms. We then introduce and explain the AE-SIE career continuum and how movement along it is facilitated by push and pull factors specific to individuals and companies. We apply psychological contract theory to explain individuals’ career choices, and agency theory to propose how MNEs can both mitigate and facilitate movement on the career continuum to their advantage in talent management. We conclude by discussing implications for practice and for future research.

### **Elements of global careers**

Global careers are those in which individuals enacting them have international coordination responsibility, working with people from many cultures, and are a flexible and dynamic

type of international working experience (Cappellen and Janssens, 2010b). Global careers do not necessarily require expatriation, often being facilitated domestically (Tharenou, 2005). Our focus is on expatriates who engage in global careers via business employment, expatriates being defined as legally working individuals who reside temporarily in a country of which they are not a citizen in order to accomplish a career-related goal, being relocated abroad either by their organization or by self-initiation and directly employed within the host country (McNulty and Brewster, 2017). Although many expatriates are traditional parent-country nationals (PCNs) employed by MNEs, their wider employment and career context exists within international labor markets, where demand and supply of skilled labor circulates as organizations seek competitive advantage through talent acquisition. The factors that drive employees on to international labor markets include professional and personal aspirations, family and personal life, supply of and demand for one's occupation, politics, personal finances, and personality (Dickmann *et al.*, 2008; Hippler, 2009). For expatriates, the value thus gained is undeniable: international experience acquired through continuous global mobility can be a critical asset (Vance, 2005; Carpenter *et al.*, 2001), and those with talent willing to cross geographical borders and to engage in employment know that they are in demand (Stahl *et al.*, 2002).

### Global career “orientations”

Career orientation is defined as a pattern of work-related preferences that, in expatriates, may or may not remain stable through one's working life (Gubler *et al.*, 2014). Studies of expatriate careers suggest that a global career is typically facilitated in one of two categories of career orientation. On the one hand, assigned expatriation provides traditional career management, controlled and directed by the organization to facilitate a match between organizational and individual needs in pursuit of continuing competitive advantage (Andresen *et al.*, 2012; Tharenou, 2013). AEs' careers typically unfold within one firm, which seeks to help individuals improve their career advancement within the company through multiple assignments (Jokinen *et al.*, 2008). AEs are predominantly PCNs expatriating out of the parent-company headquarters to which expatriates typically return.

In contrast, expatriation enacted through self-initiated expatriation represents an alternative and increasing pattern (Doherty *et al.*, 2013; Cerdin and Selmer, 2014), characterized by individuals taking control of their careers outside of the confines of the organization, thereby abandoning corporate intervention and security in favor of autonomy and flexibility. An individual pursuing an SIE strategy may have an “internationalism” career anchor, i.e., an intrinsic desire that typically predates any international experience, to live and work in a foreign environment (Bozionelos *et al.*, 2015; Sutari and Taka, 2004). SIEs are therefore perceived as “entrepreneurial”, and their careers may be “inter-organizational” as well as “inter-occupational” (Parker and Inkson, 1999, p. 76).

### The AE-SIE career continuum

Our goal here is to re-think the traditional AE career conceptualization that has dominated the literature of the past three decades, predominantly in the form of PCN expatriation (e.g. Cerdin and Pargneux, 2010; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008). While recent research about SIEs has shown that PCN expatriation is becoming less popular, this research is not yet fully integrated into new theories of expatriates, beyond typologies and taxonomies (Andresen and Biemann, 2013; Baruch *et al.*, 2013), and therefore fails to provide a more complete picture of the global career phenomenon and its implications for global talent management (GTM) (see McNulty and Brewster, 2017 for a recent commentary). In this paper, we aim to debunk the idea that expatriates are either “pure” AEs governed by complete company control over their careers or SIEs who retain complete individual control of their careers. Rather, they interchange. We further argue that the terms “AE” and “SIE” do not represent a

type of expatriate, but are indicative only of expatriates' career orientation and position on the AE-SIE career continuum at any point in time. Specifically, individuals pursuing global careers in international labor markets include up to eight types of expatriate who retain varying degrees of AE vs SIE characteristics dependent on the point they choose along the AE-SIE continuum.

### *Types of expatriate*

To illustrate our point, we draw on prior studies to categorize eight types of expatriate (outlined in Table I): PCNs (Edstrom and Galbraith, 1977; Torbiorn, 1997); third-country nationals (TCNs; Scullion and Collings, 2006; Torbiorn, 1997); foreign executives in local organizations (FELOs; Arp *et al.*, 2013; Arp, 2014); expatriates of host-country origin (EHCOs or "returnees"; Thite *et al.*, 2009); inpatriates (or "reverse expatriates"; Moeller and Reiche, 2017; Reiche *et al.*, 2009); permanent transferees (PTs; McNulty, 2013; McNulty and Brewster, 2017); localized expatriates (LOPATs; McNulty, 2016; ORC Worldwide, 2004; Tait *et al.*, 2014); and expat-preneurs (Vance *et al.*, 2016). As future research progresses, more expatriate types may emerge. In different contexts, all the types constitute the majority of global careerists. While career orientation explains why expatriates engage in various types of international work experiences (Suutari and Taka, 2004), our typology adds explication of the various types of expatriate who pursue global careers.

Identifying various types of expatriate is important because each type will dictate for MNEs: how the expatriate is to be selected, compensated, and trained; where they should be looked for within international labor markets; how they may be assisted to manage their global careers; and how they may be retained for short- and long-term performance gains, taking into account their career orientation and its likelihood of change. While retention is important, what matters more is the MNE's ability to predict which types of expatriate are more or less likely to pose retention problems in relation to global staffing goals, and to select expatriates accordingly. If long-term performance gains are required, then PCNs, inpatriates, and EHCOs would be good choices and would need to be managed differently in terms of cultural, family, and career support compared to other types (e.g. LOPATs and PTs) for whom short-term performance gains would be more likely required and expected.

### *Movement along the AE-SIE career continuum*

Extant literature has shown that just as SIEs might engage in assigned expatriation, PCNs can (and do) engage in self-initiated expatriation (Andresen and Biemann, 2013; Tharenou, 2013). Thus, while a global career can unfold entirely as a PCN (i.e. AE orientation) or as a PT or LOPAT (SIE orientation), career orientation can also change, often opportunistically, to fit the individual's professional needs and personal circumstances (Baruch, 2004; Mendenhall and Macomber, 1997). In Figure 1 we suggest that movement along the AE-SIE continuum can be bidirectional; for example, LOPATs would tend to have a SIE orientation, but might still, under the right circumstances (e.g. for career advancement, higher remuneration, or the chance to live and work in a sought-after location), take up employment as a PCN. Similarly, PCNs with an AE orientation have been shown to possess SIE-like characteristics (Altman and Baruch, 2012; McNulty *et al.*, 2013), with an increasing number, after initial assignment as PCNs, engaging in expatriation as LOPATs, thus moving to the middle of the continuum in a kind of "no-mans-land", neither fully SIE (due to their initial company sponsorship), nor fully AE (due to their defection).

Case 1 illustrates dynamic movement along the AE-SIE continuum, involving various forms of international career.

Douglas's job moves have the hallmarks of a dynamic global career: an SIE orientation that led him into professional emigration to, and self-employment in, Australia; then back to

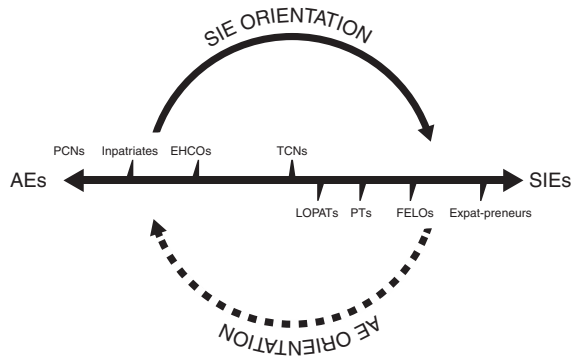
Expatriate type	Definition	Where to find	Seminal literature
PCNs: parent-country nationals TCNs: third-country nationals	Citizens of headquarters country location of company, from which they are sent abroad Originate from neither the home country where corporate “headquarters” is located, nor the host country where they are employed, but a third country where they have lived either temporarily or permanently before agreeing to move to the host country	Home country Host-country region	Edstrom and Galbraith (1977) and Torbiorn (1997) Scullion and Collings (2006) and Torbiorn (1997)
EHCOs: expatriates of host-country origin/ returnees	Permanent resident of the parent country but belongs to ethnicity of host country and is hired and/or transferred by the parent-country organization to the host location on a temporary assignment or permanent transfer	Host country	Thite <i>et al.</i> (2009)
FELOs: foreign executives in local organizations	Foreign individuals at executive level who hold local managerial positions supervising host country nationals (HCNs) in local organizations where they have their headquarters	Host country	Arp <i>et al.</i> (2013) and Arp (2014)
PTs: Permanent transferees	Employees that resign from the home country office and are hired by the host country office of the same MNE but for which there is no return (repatriation) to the home country, no guarantee of company-sponsored reassignment elsewhere and only local terms and conditions offered in the host country	Host country	McNulty (2013) and McNulty and Brewster (2017)
Inpatriates: reverse expatriates	HCNs and TCNs of a subsidiary sent to parent-country headquarters on an international assignment to provide them with an international perspective, exposure to corporate culture and a network of contacts	Host country	Moeller and Reiche (2017) and Reiche <i>et al.</i> (2009)
LOPATs: localized expatriates	AEs who, after completing a long-term assignment contract, then transition to full local terms and conditions in the host country as directed by either the employer or at their own request	Host country	McNulty (2016), ORC Worldwide (2004) and Tait <i>et al.</i> (2014)
Expat-preneurs	Typically SIEs who: (1) after spending a significant amount of time in a local market leave their MNE to start a new business in the host country; or, (2) relocate to a host country and start a new business there without any prior exposure in that market	Host country	Vance <i>et al.</i> (2016)

**Note:** While it is indicated where the various types of expatriate are likely to be found and sourced from, contemporary expatriation has shown that assignees can, in fact, be found anywhere given their increasing movement on international and local labor markets

**Source:** Adapted from McNulty and Inkson (2013)

**Table I.**  
Types of expatriate

the UK in a type of repatriation; next as an inpatriate in Walldorf; and then as a TCN to Vancouver. During his next move, as a LOPAT in Hong Kong, he was able to fully engage his SIE career orientation, but then moved to Beijing as a PCN mostly to satisfy his desire for China job experience. His next move is likely to be as a TCN to Bangkok, but who knows?



**Figure 1.**  
AE-SIE career  
continuum

### Case 1. Douglas McTavish – professional “Career Backpacker”

Douglas McTavish, a 43-year old Scot, migrated to Sydney in his early 20s, hoping to “backpack around the world” undertaking professional employment. A lawyer, Douglas had ten years of self-employment in Australia, then self-initiated a move to London, now with a Singaporean wife and children, and dual British and Australian citizenship, to work as legal counsel with German-based company SAP, which offered opportunities for overseas work, sometimes requiring partial or full localization in a particular location. Transfers followed, first to corporate HQ in Walldorf (Germany) as an inpatriate, then to Vancouver as a third country national (TCN), and most recently to an Asian VP role, with a Hong Kong base, as a LOPAT, a move that brought his wife and children back to their Asian roots.

After four years in Hong Kong, Douglas realized that while he had allowed the company to direct his moves, missing from his CV was a stint in Mainland China, to which he had traveled many times but which he now yearned to experience full-time as an assignee. By now in his mid-40s and with Hong Kong permanent residency, Douglas also wanted to direct and control his own relocation and work. But he knew that SAP planned to transfer him in a year’s time to South America. Then his luck changed: a UK-based competitor was aggressively seeking to expand into the Mainland China market and Douglas was successful in getting the job, as a PCN. The Beijing assignment came with full benefits he had not enjoyed in his Hong Kong role because he was localized. Although the terms and conditions of the Beijing assignment enable the company to “calls the shots,” Douglas does not mind. In three years’ time, when he will be expected to relocate to Bangkok, he knows he will have enough China experience under his belt to take charge again and move where the opportunities take him.

### Dynamic changes in career orientation

Douglas’s expatriate career path is dynamic because it is characterized by varying degrees of company control and self-management, i.e., he displays both an assigned and self-initiated career orientation, engaging either one as it relates to career preferences and/or personal family decisions. Recent literature has reported this trend. Altman and Baruch (2012), for example, introduced the concept of “self-initiated corporate expatriates” – assignees who seek out and gain an international assignment from within their firm (cf. Doherty *et al.*, 2013) – a group exceeding half in the small samples hitherto examined (Altman and Baruch, 2012; McNulty *et al.*, 2013; Richardson *et al.*, 2013). Andresen and Biemann (2013) also found that SIEs hired abroad often undertake PCN-like expatriation in which their organizations transfer them elsewhere and provide support at various stages. McNulty (2013) identified corporate AEs with a “SIE orientation” who did not technically fit the label of “pure” AE or SIE, but sat somewhere between them. For example, a traditional AE with a SIE orientation would of their own volition apply to take up employment with another company while abroad, thereby transitioning from

PCN into LOPAT status (Figure 1). While such assignees cannot be characterized as having a pure SIE orientation, in that their original impetus to go abroad was facilitated and operationalized by the company, their employment has nonetheless become self-directed. In a similar vein, Tharenou (2013, p. 338) conceptualizes SIEs as corporate, managerial expatriates who “independently cross both country and organizational boundaries to seek work in a new organization which recruits them from the local labor market” (in our case exemplified by Douglas’s PCN-move to Beijing with a new employer, from his LOPAT-based job in Hong Kong). In Figure 1, such moves are illustrated by “AE orientation” but only as a dotted-line connection to the AE part of the continuum. This implies that although expatriates engaging in these moves appear to be enacting AE-type mobility, they are really only “pretending” to do so in order to leverage career mobility for personal gain. We would argue that once an expatriate has experienced the freedom that SIE mobility entails, he/she is highly unlikely to willingly revert back to permanent AE mobility unless for personal benefit (indicated by the solid line connecting SIE orientation to the AE part of the continuum).

It is increasingly apparent that the long-held view of a fixed AE or SIE orientation requires re-thinking. While commentators (e.g. Briscoe *et al.*, 2012; Harzing, 2004) highlight similar issues, and some studies suggest that AE and SIE status are becoming less permanent (e.g. McNulty and Inkson, 2013; Richardson *et al.*, 2013), the emergence of “global staffing” as a field of study, and of new contemporary forms of expatriation (e.g. self-directed, localization[2]) raises important questions: to what extent should movement along the AE-SIE career continuum be accounted for? And what would the costs and benefits from such movement be to helping the managers of MNEs address the many global staffing challenges they face, e.g., shortages of assignees (Collings *et al.*, 2007)?

Movement along the AE-SIE career continuum resulting from changes in career orientation is not contingent on a change of employer. While McNulty *et al.* (2013) found that 40 percent of predominantly PCN and TCN expatriates were seeking job opportunities in the external labor market during their assignment, only a small percentage left to join another company. Therefore, a clear distinction exists between intent to leave and actual departure that can involve vastly different amounts of time, energy, and disruption to one’s personal and professional life. For this reason, expatriates often favor internal rather than external job changes. Altman and Baruch (2012) argue, for instance, that self-initiated corporate expatriates can instigate SIE-type job moves with the same employer, while Tait *et al.* (2014) found that PCNs were just as likely to become LOPATs with the same employer as to remain home-based expatriates on full compensation packages (see McNulty and Brewster, 2017 for key differences). While FELOs and expat-preneurs are defined by external job changes (e.g. where a FELO leaves an MNE to join a local organization, and expat-preneurs become self-employed), the remaining six types of expatriate can instigate movement on the AE-SIE career continuum without leaving their employer. Thus, neither expatriates’ engagement with international labor markets (as any one of eight types of expatriate) nor their movement along the AE-SIE continuum is necessarily a problem for the MNE, even if it results in their departure. The primary problem, rather, lies in the unpredictability of who moves, when, and why, which presents a much larger challenge for MNEs seeking to deliver effectively on their global staffing strategy. What seems necessary, then, is to develop more effective ways to balance the tension between MNEs’ corporate goals and the personal goals and aspirations of their expatriate employees (McNulty *et al.*, 2013; Stahl *et al.*, 2002).

### **Theorizing dynamic global careers – for practice**

Our conceptualization of dynamic global careers is based on two key elements: first, changes in career orientation resulting from push and pull factors (Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010); and second, the utilization of repatriation as a step in, not an end of, global career development. By this we mean that repatriation is a career transition (cf. Feldman, 1991) – a

temporary stay in the home country before returning abroad. Both elements imply that instability and unpredictability are expected characteristics of an expatriate career that then result in its dynamic development, where non-linear forms of progression can be expected (Baruch, 2004; Mendenhall and Macomber, 1997). A further element is, third, personal agency, whereby personal career aspirations and family factors can motivate individuals to live and work abroad utilizing a broad range of expatriate types (Table I). In this section, we utilize psychological contract theory to explain how and why movement along the AE-SIE career continuum occurs. A psychological contract is an individual's subjective belief about the terms of his/her exchange agreement with an employer, usually in an indirect, unwritten form of communication between them (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009; Rousseau and Tijoriwala, 1998). We next use agency theory to propose how MNEs can mitigate and/or leverage movement on the AE-SIE career continuum to their advantage. To bring our conceptualization to life, we then present a second case.

*Psychological contract theory to explain dynamic global careers*

Movement along the AE-SIE continuum results from push and pull factors that impel expatriates to engage with international labor markets for their own advantage, even if in some cases they are reluctant to do so (e.g. because of job security concerns). This perspective supports recent assertions that boundaryless-ness is not necessarily replacing traditional linear careers but is representative of a career orientation that many individuals choose to pursue (Baruch, 2006; Clarke, 2012). Pull factors that drive voluntary expatriate career decisions include the desire to increase one's career capital (Dickmann and Doherty, 2008; Suutari and Makela, 2007). Push factors (i.e. factors that force unwanted expatriate career decisions) include poor psychological contract fulfillment (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009) leading to weak job embeddedness ("the totality of forces that keep people in their current employment situations"; Feldman and Ng, 2007, p. 352). Noting the subjective nature of assessing psychological contract fulfillment (ranging from met expectations and over-fulfillment to unmet expectations, breaches, and violations; Ho, 2005), McNulty *et al.* (2013) found that expatriates' dissatisfaction with some types of compensation (e.g. local-plus)[3] combined with a perceived lack of HR and career management support frequently led to perceptions of poor psychological contract fulfillment.

Whether expatriates are pushed or pulled into movement along the AE-SIE continuum is important. Those who are pulled are likely to have always had, or at some point acquired, an SIE orientation that only becomes apparent when they venture abroad. Such an intrinsically held orientation can remain dormant until awakened by the right employment opportunity pulling them to initiate searches for international jobs. These expatriates' experience relates directly to research on building global competencies for an SIE career path (Vance, 2005) and expatpreneurs (Vance *et al.*, 2016). Conversely, those who are pushed into dynamic global careers may have had an initial AE orientation that has, over time, shifted to an SIE orientation due to their MNE's expatriate management practices.

Changes in career orientation have been linked to a number of factors. Some scholars (e.g. Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007; Stahl *et al.*, 2009) suggest, for example, that poor psychological contract fulfillment arises predominantly from: goal conflict between expatriates and their employers; the outcome uncertainty of international assignments; and diminished employment relationships arising from geographical distance and cultural differences. McNulty *et al.* (2013) found that poor career management support, compensation challenges, and inadequate relocation assistance were moderator variables for perceptions of poor psychological contract fulfillment among expatriates. We contend that poor psychological contract fulfillment is likely to increase expatriates' SIE orientations, resulting in a higher likelihood of job mobility preparedness, and movement along the AE-SIE continuum, including intent to leave for another company or to enter self-employment. Conversely, higher levels of psychological contract fulfillment may be



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expected to reduce movement along the continuum and to strengthen expatriates' intent to retain their existing career orientation. Psychological contracts, and the sense of injustice resulting therefrom, are therefore important predictors of expatriates' commitment to the organization in terms of intent to leave (Guzzo *et al.*, 1994), satisfaction with expatriation practices (Pate and Scullion, 2010), and adjustment (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009). Thus:

- P1. Higher levels of psychological contract fulfillment mitigate the extent of expatriates' engagement with international labor markets and likelihood of changing employers.
- P2. The strength or weakness of the psychological contract determines expatriates' likelihood to engage in movement along the AE-SIE career continuum.

Our focus on psychological contract theory provides a valuable perspective on why expatriates may engage in dynamic global careers rather than traditional, linear, company-controlled careers. By drawing attention to the transactional and relational elements (e.g. career management, compensation, and HR support; McNulty *et al.*, 2013) of expatriates' employment contracts, as well as other aspects of career, adjustment, and family (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009), psychological contract theory highlights expatriates' reliance on employer support due to the higher risks, ambiguity, and uncertainty inherent in international assignments where they must adjust, perform, and contribute value to various stakeholders, including themselves (Pate and Scullion, 2010; Yan *et al.*, 2002). Thus, stable and fulfilling psychological contracts in which expectations are met or exceeded are likely to positively influence employee attitudes and actions in terms of knowledge transfer and repatriation outcomes (Lazarova and Caligiuri, 2001), and to induce increased trust and commitment (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009). Poor psychological contract fulfillment, on the other hand, can result in high receipt-promise disparity, ranging from unmet expectations to violated promises (Ho, 2005).

### **Practical implications arising from dynamic global careers**

Expatriates who seek to develop and grow their global careers through international assignment opportunities can create both problems and opportunities for MNEs. On the one hand, those pursuing dynamic global careers whose career orientation is open to change due to personal or professional drivers can be problematic because they welcome the stimulation that expatriation facilitates and may as a result be inherently less loyal to their employers (e.g. when shifts from AE to SIE occur and careers become increasingly self-directed). Such openness to change enables expatriates to engineer international work experiences for themselves, often without corporate help, which can result in their changing in expatriate type. Because such expatriates expect high outcomes and are proactive in directing their careers, they can be hard for MNEs to retain (McNulty *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, the pool of talent that international labor markets make available can help MNEs to solve three global staffing problems: (1) shortages of suitable candidates (Collings *et al.*, 2007); (2) controlling the costs of global mobility (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2015); and, (3) the loss of knowledge and/or knowledge transfer due to expatriate turnover (Kraimer *et al.*, 2009). Savvy companies can employ certain types of expatriate according to their particular staffing challenges, e.g., EHCOs or FELOs when skilled talent is not available locally (problem 1), PTs when cost considerations are paramount (problem 2), and LOPATs when knowledge transfer is needed over a longer period of time (problem 3).

The value of international labor markets to MNEs rests, therefore, not only in attracting, recruiting, and retaining "typical" talent (i.e. PCNs with an AE orientation) as prior studies suggest (Doherty *et al.*, 2013; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008), but in understanding how to use the full range of talent of the various types of expatriate available to them. This requires identifying the types of expatriate in the global talent pool (Table I), their differences in career orientation (Figure 1), and where they sit or can be expected to move along the AE-SIE career continuum and why (Case 1). It also requires that to meet their overall global staffing

requirements companies combine their internal and external labor markets (“buying talent” vs “developing talent”). If MNEs conceptualize global careers as dynamic, there will be implications for them due to the different types of expatriate that are employed and deployed, and their differing career orientations.

If dynamic global careers are emerging as a new type of (unpredictable) expatriate career path, then expatriates’ personal agency will play a crucial role in decisions related to their movement along the AE-SIE continuum. MNEs seeking to manage expatriates’ personal agency to their own advantage will in turn face the critical problem of mitigating changes in career orientation, and conversely the opportunity to leverage changes in career orientation when it occurs.

#### *Agency theory to explain dynamic global careers*

A problem MNEs face is not how to avoid having expatriates whose career orientations may change, but how to mitigate changes in expatriates whose career orientation is critical to an organization’s competitive advantage or GTM program. To show how an MNE might use knowledge of a dynamic global career model to engage in strategic GTM, we use Case 2.

David’s case is a good illustration of a company utilizing different types of expatriate – in this case, one individual who becomes a TCN, inpatriate, and EHCO, respectively – in order to achieve its much longer term global staffing goals of employee retention, succession planning, and knowledge transfer. The case further illustrates that push and pull factors often substantially influence career orientation (in this case, a personal desire (pull) for children to live in their passport country). The primary lesson from David’s situation is that, in terms of talent loss, movement along the AE-SIE continuum can be just as damaging to a global staffing strategy as movement out of the organization. For example, if a PCN self-initiates leaving a location where much was invested in his or her presence, moves to another location, and simultaneously switches to LOPAT status with the same employer, he or she may disrupt a succession pipeline, or damage the progress of a long-term project. (In the pharmaceutical industry, for example, research-related intellectual property depends on knowledge transfer and ongoing residency in particular locations). Likewise, an

#### **Case 2. David Khan – exceptional employee**

Malaysian David Khan’s 20-year career has been typical if not predictable. A “company man” with a European-headquartered car manufacturer, David joined the organization directly from graduate school. Working his way up the organization via in-country moves, first to Kuala Lumpur, then to Penang, he eventually secured a place in the coveted “international management (IM) cadre” – a small, prestigious group of high-potential employees selected to rotate through various four-year international assignments according to the company’s needs and requirements. Over the next 15 years, David, his wife and their growing family have enjoyed full expatriate packages, with tours of duty in Tokyo, Detroit and Amsterdam (as a third country national), and to Berlin (as an inpatriate), building up his expertise in each new location and becoming an indispensable international manager for the company. As a global employee, he also was afforded tax equalization status (as needed) to his native Malaysia, further bolstering his salary package. Despite his high-flying and satisfying career, David nonetheless wonders if the expatriate life is still for him. As he approaches his mid-40s, foremost in his mind is that his children, all of whom were born abroad, have no cultural links to Asia or to their homeland, Malaysia. He would like to live in Malaysia again, even briefly, but knows that the IM cadre does not offer assignments in South-East Asia, thus leaving him with only two options: to quit his job and find employment with another company in KL, hopefully as a LOPAT; or to repatriate with his current employer. He spoke to his boss about the dilemma and was surprised by the outcome: instead of resigning or repatriating, he was offered a three-year assignment to KL on full global employee status as a returnee (EHCO), on the condition that he agree to relocate next (with his family) to Houston or Sao Paulo. Such is the strength of his ties to the company, and the importance of his role, that his employer has agreed to make an “exception” in order to keep him.

inpatriate who, after shortly repatriating back to his or her home country, self-initiates a corporate move to another location as a TCN may inadvertently disrupt the intent of the initial inpatriate assignment to building local leadership talent.

*Mitigating changes in career orientation.* To address the problem of mitigating changes in career orientation for an expatriate whose talent is critical to an organization's competitive advantage, we apply the principal-agent stream of agency theory (i.e. the efficiency of contract alternatives: Eisenhardt, 1989). Utilizing two of the three established agency variables (information systems and outcome uncertainty: Eisenhardt, 1985), the principal-agent approach accurately captures the contractual problems and difficulties that MNEs face when sourcing, selecting, deploying, retaining, and managing expatriates who may ultimately be engaged in dynamic global careers. By applying agency theory we imply that: incentives and self-interest are paramount among some types of expatriate; and personal agency is likely to be higher for SIE-oriented expatriates than for AE-oriented expatriates.

The first agency variable, formal information systems, is an important commodity for MNEs that, if implemented effectively via clear and transparent principal-agent communication, can help to build, among expatriates, stronger psychological contracts that increase perceptions of met expectations and/or over-fulfillment. When expatriates receive enough (trustworthy) information from MNEs that the outcomes expected from their international assignments will result not just in (typically explicit) increased corporate return on investment, but also in directly beneficial gains to the expatriate, goal conflict and self-interested behavior are reduced, at least for the duration of their contract. Thus:

- P3. Investing in clear and transparent communication (information systems) is a means by which MNEs can control agent opportunism and self-interested behaviors among expatriates and mitigate their movement toward self-determination on the AE-SIE continuum.

The second agency variable is outcome uncertainty, which frequently arises from information asymmetry (deception) or economic incentive misalignment, resulting in poor psychological contract fulfillment among expatriates (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009; McNulty *et al.*, 2013). When expatriates perceive they are acquiring (whether compulsorily or voluntarily) a greater proportion of the risks associated with international assignment mobility than are their MNE employers, there is likely to be increased agent opportunism in the form of self-interested behavior. Expatriates, like organizations, have uncertain futures, and often address their concerns by moving along the AE-SIE continuum, including leaving their employer to pursue better opportunities elsewhere. Thus:

- P4. Deceptive communication (information asymmetry) increases expatriates' likelihood of engaging in movement along the AE-SIE career continuum.

There are numerous sources of outcome uncertainty, including the MNE's ability to guarantee employment or future international assignments upon repatriation (Stahl *et al.*, 2002); and issues of change in expatriate compensation (e.g. from the balance sheet/full package to cheaper host-based local-plus and localization compensation models: McNulty, 2016; Tait *et al.*, 2014). In other words, when there are fewer ties to bind expatriates to MNEs, there is likely to be reduced loyalty and fewer sacrifices required in order to engage in inter-company mobility, including movement along the AE-SIE continuum. Thus:

- P5. When outcome uncertainty decreases for expatriates, they are less likely to engage in movement toward greater self-determination on the AE-SIE career continuum.

*Leveraging changes in career orientation.* The opportunity that MNEs are presented with because of expatriates' personal agency is how to leverage to their advantage the

often-inevitable movement of their existing expatriate employees along the AE-SIE continuum, and to find and leverage appropriate expatriate talent from the external labor market. Here, we apply a third agency variable – risk – and adapt it to the various types of risk preferences that expatriates have, or develop, when engaging in expatriation. For example, AE-oriented expatriates are likely to have a lower risk profile and in turn to: take fewer chances associated with host-location preferences; engage in fewer sequential assignments without first repatriating; and avoid host-based compensation. Conversely, SIE-oriented expatriates, whose risk profile is likely, due to the self-directed nature of their career orientation, to be higher in terms of increased levels of agent opportunism and self-interested behavior, would likely do the opposite to the above: take more chances with host-location preferences; engage more often in sequential assignments without first repatriating; and consider host-based compensation. Further, SIE-oriented expatriates are unlikely to neither find issue with geographical distance from MNE headquarters nor narrow vs wide cultural distance in the host location, or to be overly concerned with the effectiveness of family support provided (Doherty *et al.*, 2013).

When MNEs select candidates for particular roles, they should consider the risk preferences of expatriates, which can: influence employees' commitment to their career as well to their employer; and lead to higher or lower expatriate performance outcomes and adjustment relative to the performance requirements of their particular assignment. Thus, being attuned to the risk preferences of the different types of expatriate will help the MNE determine expatriates' likely position (at least initially) on the AE-SIE continuum, and in turn, which types are more or less suited to achieving particular performance outcomes. For example, PCNs, TCNs, and inpatriates are more suited to long-term and potentially successive re-assignments that require knowledge transfer and corporate governance, and feed into succession plans, because their risk preference for change is low and they are likely to remain in their designated type longer. In comparison, PTs, FELOs, and LOPATs who have a higher propensity for risk taking and changing, or have already changed expatriate type (from AE to SIE orientation) would be more suited to shorter one-off assignments focused on specific time-limited aims and objectives. For MNEs to be effective in developing a successful global staffing strategy, alignment of expatriates' risk preferences to expatriate type and expected performance outcomes is therefore critical. Thus:

*P6.* The effectiveness of an MNE's global staffing strategy increases when the risk preferences of expatriates relative to expatriate type are understood and are aligned to job performance outcomes.

Understanding the risk preferences of expatriates in relation to personal agency illustrates that certain types of expatriate are more suited to particular international roles. Expatriates with a strong SIE orientation may leave one organization to join another, but one company's turnover problem may be a talent pool opportunity for another. Expatriates who engage regularly with international labor markets may provide a viable external labor market solution for companies looking to meet their global staffing needs. MNEs therefore need to develop flexible and adaptive global staffing strategies that are attuned to the various types of available expatriates and to the nature of the global careers expatriates may be pursuing.

### **Conclusion**

A primary contribution of our conceptualization of dynamic global careers is to counter the idea that expatriates moving along the AE-SIE career continuum are less desirable employees who should be avoided because their loyalty and commitment are low and their likelihood of leaving the MNE is high. Rather, SIE orientation and movement on the

continuum are likely to become detrimental only to the extent that MNEs are unable to understand, leverage, and manage changes in expatriates' career orientation. Thus, movement on the continuum does not imply that expatriates are ruthless "self-interest maximizers" whose self-serving behaviors shaft their organizations (Hambrick, 2005, p. 106). While critics of agency theory (e.g. Gapper, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005) may be correct in their view that its application in scholarly research is narrow and has tended to represent employees as selfish and in an "ideological trap" of opportunism (Gapper, 2005, p. 103), we argue that as a characterization of expatriates this is far from accurate. Our conceptualization of dynamic global careers might indeed suggest the opportunism view, particularly when such careers are pursued in a non-linear and opportunistic fashion across organizational boundaries, causing retention problems. However, we view global staffing in more realistic and practical terms: employees have always had expectations about the *quid pro quo* their organizations are willing to provide in exchange for their labor, and expatriates are no different (Thomas *et al.*, 2005). Indeed, recent studies (e.g. Baruch, 2006; Stahl *et al.*, 2002) have begun to challenge the long-held view that expatriates tend to minimize personal agency in their interactions with MNEs because they remain grateful to them for supporting and sponsoring international career opportunities on their behalf. While this belief is not groundless (Clarke, 2012), there has nonetheless been a clear (and some would argue, irreversible: McNulty and Inkson, 2013) shift in employment relationships that were previously dominated by the interests of the MNE. Today we see negative outcomes when financial incentive misalignment occurs and expatriates, rather than performing services on behalf of the MNE (the principal), pursue their own economic interests (as agents) without necessarily suffering any of the consequences incurred to the MNE.

We further contribute to the literature by building on recent research (e.g. Baruch and Reis, 2015; Crowley-Henry, 2012; Suutari and Makela, 2007) to suggest that expatriate careers develop as a result of a sequence of opportunities taken and rejected that create linearity or non-linearity. We have illustrated our conceptualization through the application of psychological contract theory to show: why expatriates pursue linear and non-linear career opportunities; how dynamic global careers unfold; and the push and pull factors that drive expatriates' global career decisions. Using the "AE-SIE career continuum" as the basis for our argument, we then explained how expatriate careers are likely to evolve in the future. We further applied agency theory to propose how MNEs can mitigate and leverage movement on the AE-SIE career continuum to their advantage to build effective global staffing programs that will improve their talent management (Carpenter *et al.*, 2001). Drawing on two complementary areas of theory (psychological contract theory and agency theory) to integrate the various disciplinary studies about expatriates and to yield an improved perspective on the complexities inherent in managing global staff, this paper contributes to the literature by conceptualizing contemporary international mobility as a dynamic phenomenon, with implications for developing theory and guiding future research.

## Notes

1. We also include here expatriates assigned by non-profit and public sector organizations and agencies, in keeping with our inclusive "MNE" terminology.
2. Localization is where assignees are paid according to host-country compensation and benefits with typically no expatriate package benefits made available over the long term; see McNulty (2016).
3. Local-plus compensation is where assignees are paid according to the salary levels, structure, and administration guidelines of the host location, as well as being provided with limited "expatriate-type" benefits such as transportation, housing, and dependents' education in recognition of their "foreign" status; see McNulty (2016).

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### Corresponding author

Yvonne McNulty can be contacted at: [yvonnemcnulty@unisim.edu.sg](mailto:yvonnemcnulty@unisim.edu.sg)

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