

Seconded National Experts and Global Mobility

- Extending the Paradigm

Executive Summary/Abstract

Global Mobility is an expanding field of academic research, which identifies an increasing range of modern variants of people working abroad. The community of Seconded National Experts (SNEs) in the institutions, bodies and agencies of the European Union (EU) is a distinct category of internationally mobile employees, which has so far been neglected. This paper assesses the features of this influential group of people and compares them to other communities within the generally recognised expatriate community. The unique nature of SNEs and hence the challenges that need to be considered by human resource (HR) practitioners to ensure they achieve their desired goals at organisational and individual levels are identified. The findings suggest that expatriate typologies should be extended to include this unique community and provide further guidance to HR practitioners. Finally, areas for additional research are offered with the aim of learning from SNEs to extend international assignment theory.

Keywords: *International assignments, seconded national experts, global mobility*

Introduction

The complexity involved in global staffing decisions, as well as the significant costs involved at both a human and organisational level, are widely acknowledged, (Welch and Worm, 2006; Dickmann *et al.*, 2008; Caligiuri, Tarique and Jacobs, 2009). Accordingly, it is imperative to understand the different potential categorisations of international assignment (IA) to enable both effective management of the processes by human resource (HR) practitioners and the achievement of successful outcomes for each IA. Baruch et al (2013) provided a typology of global careerists to assist in this. Nevertheless, global mobility research has to date neglected to discuss Seconded National Experts (SNEs). The SNE is a defined term within European Union legislation, (Council of the European Union, 2014) and a small vein of literature on SNEs exists within the field of politics, governance and bureaucratic representation, for example (Suvarierol, Busuioc and Groenleer, 2013; Trondal, Murdoch and Geys, 2015; Sundström, 2016). The SNE community has several characteristics which distinguishes it from existing IA frameworks including, for example, the movement of individuals between separate organisations which might have conflicting agendas.

The majority of research in the field of expatriation and IAs considers the benefits and implications for private profit-driven multinational corporations (MNCs) and seeks to categorise the different types of assignees by career types or MNC organisational needs. In addition, there has been a focus on US MNCs (Collings et al 2007). In line with other papers seeking to expand this research (McNulty et al 2013; Collings et al 2007), this paper draws attention to a distinct European group of public sector IAs. It seeks to identify the characteristics of the SNE community, determine how best to categorise this within extant frameworks and consider the implications for our understanding of expatriation.

This paper argues that the SNE warrants specific consideration within existing IA frameworks given the inability to fit it into any existing categorisation and, more importantly, the consequences for expatriate theorisation and practical HR management. Such a new categorisation supports the need for flexibility within HR processes and systems. This will enable updated guidance for HR practitioners including in public sector organisations at a time when global changes, such as the “Brexit” phenomenon, create increasing levels of uncertainty and complexity (Cumming and Zahra, 2016).

The use of IAs outside the MNC community is known to be significant. Inter-governmental organisations (or IGOs) are organisations created usually by treaty between national governments and they rely heavily on many different forms of IA (Brewster, Boselie and Purpura, 2017). Such organisations vary enormously in purpose, design and management, and include highly recognised and influential global institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO). The position of an SNE as an ‘expert’ is fundamental as we explain below, and IGOs in particular have considerable reliance on technical expert staff provided under IA contracts. Similarly, the relevance of IAs seems significant in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and yet research is thin on the ground, (Anderson, 2001). Finally Selmer and Fenner (2009) in their research on US Department of Defense administrative staff on IA, suggest there is reason to believe that public sector IAs may be increasing in a world of geopolitical instability. Given that personnel costs are widely considered to be the most significant cost category across the IGO, NGO and public sectors, including the not-for-profit or Third Sector, the need to increase our understanding is significant (Liesink *et al.*, 2016). Our article aims to take a step towards a greater understanding of this broader community and the implications for theoretical development and practical understanding.

The contributions of this article are, 1) extending the theory of the reasons for IAs, 2) identifying the need to extend existing IA frameworks, 3) offering a series of propositions through which further investigation may improve the theory and understanding of IA use and 4) identifying new challenges for HR management.

This paper commences with a definition of the SNE before contrasting this international work form with extant typologies. A description of the context in which SNEs work is then offered prior to describing the research method. This enables the backdrop from which to explain the findings by reference to the traditional reasons for IAs and Baruch et al's (2013) typology of the dimensions of global careers. Our work identifies the potentially unique nature of the SNE community. The discussion section summarises the notable differences between the SNEs and other expatriate definitions offering both propositions to inform further research and exploring the managerial implications of the underlying issues. The paper concludes by considering the limitations of this research and a call for further study.

SNE Definition

The rules governing the employment of all staff within the organisations that manage and run the European Union (EU) are provided in Regulation No 31 (EEC), 11 (EAEC), (Council of the European Union, 2014). This document, originally drafted in 1962, is known as the Staff Regulations and includes the rules defining and governing the secondment of EU officials specifically under Articles 37, 38 and 39. These include the rules and procedures governing the use and movement of Seconded National Experts (SNEs).

The EU institutions and bodies are staffed primarily by "permanent officials" who have passed the *concours* examination and are appointed for life. In contrast the agency organisational construct was created to deal with specialist and more flexible levels of work need and as a result the majority of their employees (over 80%) are on temporary contracts

(Suvarierol, Busuioc and Groenleer, 2013). SNEs are a distinct subset of temporary employees working across the institutions, bodies and agencies (this paper hereafter uses the term ‘institution’ to denote all types of EU administrative organisations.)

According to the European Commission (EC) there are a wide variety of SNEs (European Commission, 2012):

“SNEs are typically seconded from the civil services of EU countries, so the vast majority are national, regional or local civil servants. As well as civil servants, experts from international organisations, universities, research centers and entities belonging to the public sector can also be seconded to the Commission, especially in areas where their unique skills and knowledge are specifically required by the Commission.”

An increasing presence of contracted non-permanent staff in bureaucratic public administrations has been identified as a move towards ‘contracted government’ (Murdoch and Trondal, 2013, p. 1) and SNEs represent a component of this – although an unusual one given that they are normally contracted from a regional or national government body (where they retain a permanent contract of employment) to a supranational government body.

The Role of International Assignments

Whilst Franko (1973) identified many of the same factors, traditionally credit is given to Edström and Galbraith (1977) for being the first and seminal paper to identify the principal reasons organisations used IAs (Caligiuri and Bonache, 2016). These were within the context of how an MNC controls its subsidiaries; namely to fill skills gaps, develop personnel competencies, and address organisational development needs. The benefits of IAs have been predominantly identified and researched in qualitative terms by reference to the purpose,

reasons or drivers for the use of IAs, sometimes summarised as the ‘role’ of expatriates (Kraimer, Bolino and Mead, 2016). This role appears to have developed in its strategic intentions over the last 50 years (Caligiuri and Bonache, 2016). The primary examples are listed in Table 1.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

Research has debated the interpretation of “organisational development” as a purpose for IAs. Initially it was mostly interpreted as consistent with the positive progression of an organisation into a more effective and productive state. Harzing (2001) however, concluded this was, in fact, more consistent with the concept of a parent body wanting to gain greater control and greater influence over the activities of its, perhaps wayward, overseas subsidiary by transferring its corporate culture out to the subsidiaries. This view was supported by Harzing’s analysis of several papers published in German, such as Pausenberger and Noelle (1977) and appears different to a more collegiate sense of sharing culture or maintaining morale as a reason for IAs (Welch, Welch and Tahvanainen, 2008). Harzing’s (2001) paper identified three core reasons for IAs: to control the overseas subsidiary (described as “bears”), to improve communications across the organisation (“spiders”) and to improve relational networks across the organisation (“bumble bees”).

Collings et al (2009) noted the importance of leveraging internal knowledge throughout an organisation as a competitive enabler, both for innovation and organisational learning. This could be improved through IAs. This perspective of knowledge transfer traditionally from HQ to subsidiaries and more recently in other directions, has been reported in several empirical studies (Harzing, 2001; Riusala and Suutari, 2004). Whilst an organisational development catalyst for the use of IAs might be consistent with strategic staffing, the latter can specifically lead to the use of IAs (McNulty, De Cieri and Hutchings, 2013). This might

generate a variety of benefits through an effective organisation-wide talent management agenda, to the coordination of launching new projects in a rolling strategic growth plan. Thus it starts to become apparent that separating out different reasons for the use of IAs may be misleading as they may happen in combination.

Tung's (1982) research arguably added a distinct category, 'start-up phase'. This is potentially similar to the purpose of recruiting and hiring locals or to start a brand-new business operation identified by Bossard and Peterson (2005). Whilst these may seem worthy of separate notation they could be considered a subset of addressing skills gaps. Although this is a list of the primary purpose of IAs generally accepted in extant literature, there is a tendency to view them 'in isolation rather than on a fully integrated basis' (Hocking, Brown and Harzing, 2004, p. 573) which may overly simplify reality.

Extant typologies of Expatriation

Simplistic models for the categorisation of IAs (e.g. Mayrhofer's (2001) four types of Organisational International Career Logics) have been identified as having limited value except as a starting point for analysis, due to the complexity of IA variations acknowledged in the literature (Baruch *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, the distinction between self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) and assigned expatriates (AEs) stands out and is consistently used within the global mobility literature since the path-breaking article by Suutari and Brewster (2000). This drew attention to the assumption and research focus upon IAs triggered by an employer sending an employee overseas and opened the literature to the investigation of self-initiated foreign work. Expatriates are considered different to migrants given the SIEs' intention to return home, (McNulty and Brewster, 2017) rather than permanently change their country of work (see Al Ariss (2010) for an example which challenges this distinction).

Traditional definitions of IAs by reference to the nationality of the individuals also exist. Examples include PCNs (parent country nationals), TCNs (third country nationals), HCNs (home country nationals), and EHCs (expatriates of host country origin, i.e. residents of the parent organisation's country who belong to the ethnicity of the host country). However, variations proposed to these acronyms have made their distinctions, practical usage and relevance challenging (McNulty and Brewster, 2017). In their extensive review of the terminology used to define the expatriate construct, McNulty and Brewster emphasise that in the first instance researchers would dramatically improve the capability to compare and contrast theoretical and empirical findings by simply ensuring the focus of every study is clearly defined. In an effort to resolve the confusion and the resultant jangle fallacy, McNulty and Brewster (2017, p. 20) offer the following definition for 'business expatriates': '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 an organization, by self-initiation or directly employed within the host-country.'

'Business expatriate', although potentially misleading through the inference that a business is a for-profit entity, includes people who are 'organizationally employed' (McNulty and Brewster, 2017, p. 17) and hence includes organisations run as businesses including the public sector and NGOs. McNulty and Brewster offer three other boundary conditions for their definition: the assignment is long term; the individual does not intend to seek permanent citizenship in the host location; and the assignment is within a legal business operation. Noticeably the definition includes both AEs and SIEs despite the distinct differences noted previously.

Baruch et al (2013) provided a comprehensive typology considering the dimensions of global careers and offering twenty international work patterns, each assessed through the lens of seven dimensions. These primary dimensions are, time exposure (short to very long term

foreign work), intensity of international contact (one to many cultures), breadth of interaction (predominantly work to holistic interaction), legal context (rights to stay/work in country), predominant instigator (individual or organisation-supported), cultural gap (for the assignee) and job/role needs (technical versus managerial). Contextual factors were added to these seven dimensions and Baruch et al. (2013) acknowledged the challenges of identifying separate categories. Despite these limitations, with their multiple dimensions the authors have expanded substantially on earlier narrower typologies. They provide a useful reference point to assess the SNE community.

The Context of the SNE

It is useful to outline the broader context of the EU in order to gain a better understanding of SNEs. There are 55,000 civil servants in the EU (European Union, 2016a), within 19 institutions and bodies, plus 48 agencies creating a total of 67 organisations responsible for running the EU's administration (European Union, 2016b). The largest two organisations are the European Commission (33,000 employees) and the European Parliament (6,000 employees). The EU is a 'meta-organisation' (Murdoch, 2015, p. 1684) defined as an organisation whose membership or ownership is a set of other organisations in contrast to a company owned by individuals.

In order to obtain an appropriate cultural and linguistic diversity, each EU organisation is required to track the details of employee nationality, and the recruitment process is required to identify and employ staff on the widest source of nationalities within the 28 member states. It is noticeable that the balance between diversity and merit within the management of the EU's human resources is in some respects treated equally (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2013, p. 1):

‘A broader aim should be to optimise the management of human resources in a European civil service characterised by its excellence, competence, independence, loyalty, impartiality and stability, as well as by cultural and linguistic diversity and attractive recruitment conditions.’

The contractual nature of employment of the SNEs leaves them with obligations both to the home or sending organisation (national or regional government) and to the host or receiving organisation (EU supranational institution) with the potential for conflict given that SNEs are required to ‘behave solely with the interest of the [host] in mind’ (European Commission, 2008, p. Art. 7:1a) and yet they are not contractually bound as employees to which these contracts apply. This combination of organisational affiliations is seen to create the possibility of “two cognitive frames, incentives and norms of appropriate conduct” (Murdoch and Trondal, 2013, p. 4) that may lead to conflicting sets of allegiance for individuals (Meyskens *et al.*, 2009).

As the host EU institutions normally only pay for the subsistence allowances (designed to cover living expenses) and relocation travel costs to ensure SNEs are not disadvantaged by working in their new location, there is normally a financial benefit for the host organisations compared to hiring other ‘local’ employees. The home has the opposite challenge as it must pay for the SNEs’ salary and normal related costs such as pension allocations whilst the individual is working for the host. The 2008 financial crisis resulted in a focus on the management of costs (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2013 Whereas 24 and Whereas 27) yet the number of SNEs in the EU Commission which represents 75% of total EU staff, has not fallen. This indicates the importance of SNEs to EU productivity.

There have been over 1,000 SNEs based at the EC for over a decade which represents approximately 10% of their full time policy-making administrators (Trondal, 2007; Murdoch, Trondal and Geys, 2015) and Murdoch (2015, p. 1683) states that the use of SNEs has “increased considerably” in recent years. Whilst global trends may be affecting other types of employee within the EU institutions to operate more as frequent flyers, commuters, virtual assignees, or other types of newer alternatives to the traditional expatriate, the use of SNEs continues.

The term secondment appears infrequently within peer-reviewed IA research. Whilst some introductory or high level descriptive literature uses the term secondment interchangeably with international assignment (Harris and Dickmann, 2005), where it has been used in relevant IA frameworks or descriptive reviews it refers to an assignment of a short period of one to 12 months (Baruch *et al.*, 2013). In contrast, an SNE normally spends a minimum of two years and a maximum of four years in post and the majority of cases require that individuals move to live and work in a new country taking their families with them. This paper uses the term ‘secondment’ consistent with its meaning for an SNE and hence consistent with the traditional long term nature of international assignments.

The Study

This exploratory study used triangulation of data sources (Denzin 1970) to identify different perspectives on the same phenomenon and provide validity to the findings. The different sources used were 1) extant literature regarding SNEs, 2) documentary information from the European Union, 3) expert opinion from critical parties in both the EU institutions’ HR community and in UK civil service organisations organising or strategically considering the use of SNEs, and 4) documentary information within the latter UK organisations.

Extant SNE Research: The initial literature review used keyword searches for ‘SNE’, ‘Seconded National Expert’ and ‘seconded’ in EBSCO and ProQuest literature databases. Within the generally recognised field of organisational expatriate literature in HRM, International Business, Global Mobility and Global Staffing journals there were limited references to the term ‘seconded’ and no references to the SNE community. However, a small group of authors has researched the impact of SNEs within the public administration and bureaucratic representation literature. This provided an awareness and background of the key features of the SNE group. A series of 11 published articles has been derived from four sets of quantitative and qualitative empirical data derived between 2004 and 2011. The focus of this research has been the impact of temporary staff on the EU decision-making processes. This offers useful information when considering the roles, relationships and dynamics of SNEs as a new group of IAs in Global Mobility literature.

EU Documentary evidence: EU publically available documentation was qualitatively assessed with a focus on SNEs and their inherent characteristics. This data was first accessed via the official website of the EU (http://europa.eu/index_en.htm) using search criteria “Seconded National Experts”, “SNE”, “Human Resources”, “Temporary Staff” and “seconded”. In addition, Freedom of Information requests and responses were reviewed using the same search terms. This generated a documents highlighting how each institution has its own criteria for SNE management, see for example ESMA (2011, 2015), and their respective websites were searched following a ‘snowballing’ or backtracking method (Nijs *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, as institutions are created in the EU, their respective founding regulations include how they will incorporate the use of SNEs, see for example EIOPA (2010) Article 29.. Analysis of publically available demographic data on the use of SNEs was also accessed. The investigation stopped when the saturation point was deemed to have been reached (Morse, 1994).

Interviews: Two face-to-face meetings, six phone-based discussions and four email based series of communications were undertaken with a range of representatives with HR responsibilities for secondments and SNEs in EU institutions and UK regulatory authorities. These took place between October 2014 and April 2015. Expert participants were selected based upon having significant individual working experience within the EU civil service system and being in senior leadership positions with direct experience with the community of SNEs.

These exploratory discussions were semi-structured interviews regarding the value and roles of SNEs. Initial questions explored SNE characteristics and their environment seeking to identify both written rules and procedures in addition to practical realities. These interviews were used to validate understanding and provide guidance into publicly available and generally internally known phenomena. The interviews were not recorded due to the potentially broader confidentiality restrictions on government activities. Written notes were made in the interviews and appropriate verification sought from each contact. The accuracy of a 2015 working paper version of this manuscript was confirmed by one of the interview participants.

UK Documentary Evidence: Comments within the above discussions suggested that the UK potentially took a strategic approach towards its provision of SNEs. Hence a review was undertaken of relevant documents from UK based national government bodies, which provide SNEs into the EU, including guides for human resource personnel. This was achieved using personal contacts in the City of London of individuals in academic, business and advisory positions, for example at the British Bankers Association.

The findings at each stage were reviewed and compared for underlying themes for the SNE community which were subsequently compared to extant typologies and broad overviews of

the expatriation field (Baruch and Altman, 2002; Baruch *et al.*, 2013; McNulty and Brewster, 2017).

The Role of SNEs

Turning now to the drivers for the use of SNEs, this paper offers comparisons of the features identified in Table 1. These distinctions are grouped to demonstrate i) those factors that have strong similarities between traditional IAs and SNEs, and ii) those factors where the interpretations are distinct and hence the impacts differ. These are summarised in Table 2 and described below.

(Insert table 2 about here)

IA and SNE driver similarities

Personnel Development: Evidence from interviews with SNEs supported the view that leadership development to enhance careers is a driver behind their reasons for taking a position. Sundström also found that the Swedish national bodies sending SNEs were doing so to develop the competencies and careers of their employees (2016, p. 136). In addition, the secondment can be seen as a reward for performance (Sundström, 2016). However, Sundström identified challenges upon repatriation including significant percentages not returning to their employer and failure to find new positions and promotions when they did so, which was supported in our interviews (Interviewee #8). These challenges are consistent with several decades of global mobility research (Kraimer, Bolino and Mead, 2016).

Communication and Relational Networks: The EC has used SNEs as a route through which to investigate the acceptability of proposals under development in its policy making teams to the member states that will be affected by those policies (Murdoch and Trondal, 2013). This is a clear example of using SNEs as communication networks. Empirical research also shows there is consistent and regular contact between SNEs and their national (home) organisations

(Trondal, Murdoch and Geys, 2015). Some of the evidence is mixed however, with SNEs reporting that their home organisations never initiate contact with them. Hence this is a one way communications network that tends to die away after the end of the assignment period (Suvarierol and van den Berg, 2008; Sundström, 2016). This is in contrast to the extant IA literature (Suutari et al., forthcoming).

Knowledge Transfer: The EU actively promotes the use of secondments from a knowledge transfer perspective (European Commission, 2008 Whereas 2),

“It is highly desirable to foster the exchange of professional experience in, and knowledge of, European policies by temporarily assigning experts from the administrations of the Member States to the Commission, even for short periods.”

This aim is noted by the British Bankers Association (2014) and by the empirical research on Swedish SNEs by Sundström (2016). The aim of the Swedish home organisations specifically includes “understanding the inside of the EU and how it works in practice” and “to ensure that the EU has good information and knowledge of Swedish values and positions” (Sundström, 2016, p. 137). Improving the flow of information and knowledge from the EU to the home organization is also specifically noted. This is supported where SNEs aim “to create a synergy between the Commission and member states through the exchange of expertise ” (Suvarierol, Busuioc and Groenleer, 2013, p. 913).

‘Start-up phase’: Some EU institutions are designated as agencies rather than institutions of the EU, which was designed to enable greater flexibility with respect to the use of staff and hence the greater use of SNEs (Murdoch and Trondal, 2013). This has parallels with the ‘start-up phase’ justification for using traditional expatriates.

IA and SNE distinctions

Several factors differentiate the SNE community from the traditional expatriate, which raises questions as to the relevance of the generally accepted reasons for using IAs described above. The differences and their consequences can be divided into the following five sections.

The sending unit exerts little control over the host - HQ control in an SNE context is turned on its head. SNEs move from national to supranational organisations. “By the nature of their contract, SNEs remain attached to two organizations simultaneously (European and national)” (Suvarierol, Busuioc and Groenleer, 2013, p. 915). However, some EU agencies such as the EBA have Boards of Supervisors staffed by representatives of the national regulatory bodies (or competent authorities) over whom much of their actions take effect. These competent authorities are those that provide the majority of SNEs to the EBA. This further complicates the interpretation of the relationship between home and host.

It is possible for home organisations (ESMA, 2011 Article 18) to pay the full remuneration costs of an SNE, but this rarely happens precisely because the EU wants to stop SNEs exerting undue influence, (Interviewee #4). In addition, the host has full authority to veto any SNE candidate from joining – a power that subsidiaries in MNCs often do not have.

Commentators argue that from the home perspective SNEs aim to influence hosts to produce legislation or decisions that favour the sending home institution (British Bankers Association, 2014) and our interviews supported this (Interviewee #3). In practice, however, little evidence exists that substantial influencing by SNEs of their host organization takes place (Sundström, 2016; Suvarierol, Busuioc and Groenleer, 2013, p.916 referencing Joana and Smith, 2002). Moreover, given that the group of SNEs in any one EU institution will normally be from several different nations, these may all be seeking to have competing influence at the same time, which differs to a traditional parent-subsidiary expatriation/IA influencing model.

There is no 'subsidiary' relationship and EU and partner organizations have distinct priorities. The EU believes SNEs should be used to fill skills and knowledge gaps first in the host organisation and, upon return, in the home unit (European Commission, 2012):

“Seconded National Experts (SNEs) have a dual role: they bring their experience of the issues they are used to dealing with to the Commission, and take back to their home administration the knowledge of EU issues which they acquire during their period of secondment.”

The idea that a national government body is ‘subsidiary’ to the supranational one is not consistent given the distinct priorities of the separate bodies. The core premise in the EU is that an SNE is an ‘Expert’ and hence brings technical expertise to address specific skills gaps. Empirical work confirms that SNEs are used for the purpose of recruiting specific expertise (Murdoch and Trondal, 2013) and for recruiting management knowledge (Trondal, Murdoch and Geys, 2015, p. 250). SNEs applying their specific expertise within an EU institution does not necessarily strengthen their home organization overall as the ownership of these entities is distinct.

Knowledge transfer and managerial activity is severely restricted. The activities of SNEs are legislatively restricted. This is a deliberate step to reduce the potential for undue influence by EU Member States, e.g.

‘SNEs may not perform middle or senior management duties, even when deputising for their immediate superior. Under no circumstances may an SNE on his own represent ESMA with a view to entering into commitments, whether financial or otherwise, or negotiating on its behalf’. (ESMA, 2011 Article 6)

SNEs are required to operate solely with the interests of the host in mind and shall not take any steps that would invalidate this independence (Interview #4). This would appear to reduce

the potential value that might be accorded from the SNE's existing knowledge of operations in other parts of the EU institutions because taking these into consideration might invalidate this independence, for example proposing solutions that create a compromise between two organisations, especially the home and the host. SNEs are not allowed to hold management positions (Sundström, 2016) and are prevented from decision-making on behalf of the institution (ESMA, 2011, p. 8). Furthermore, SNEs are required to meet secrecy obligations (ESMA, 2011 Article 7e), which would imply that when the SNE repatriates he or she should seek to 'unlearn' knowledge and not use it to the benefit of the home organisation.

Cultural transfer is restricted: There are specific examples within which EU institutions are encouraged to drive towards having consistent practices, procedures and consistent approaches, for example in the creation of a common supervisory culture (EIOPA, 2010 Article 29). Also, the Staff Regulations promote the employment of staff 'on the broadest possible geographical basis from among nations of Member States of the Communities' (Council of the European Union, 2014, p. 6). However, this does not directly equate to the transfer of culture as an identified reason for using SNEs. An alternative way to consider the issue is from an allegiance perspective (Black and Gregersen, 1992; Meyskens *et al.*, 2009) exploring how individual assignees change their allegiances from the home to the host during and after an assignment. Findings demonstrate that the SNEs switch allegiance to the host organisation for the duration of the secondment and then swiftly switch back upon repatriation such that there is little or no influence of the national body onto the supranational body during the secondment (Trondal, 2007; Trondal, Murdoch and Geys, 2015). This brings into question whether there can be any permanent transfer of organisational cultures in either direction between those involved in the SNE transfer.

Assignment goals and staffing patterns are different. Although there is support for strategic staffing perspective with SNEs for the home and the host, the aims can differ substantially.

While we have seen that knowledge and expertise gap filling is important to the hosts, a key aim from the hosts' perspective is cost saving as a long term strategic approach (Murdoch, Trondal and Geys, 2015). This is rarely the case in traditional international assignments. In turn, for sending organizations Suvarierol and van den Berg (2008, p. 104) note that SNE's are 'potentially key strategic instruments for the member states in maneuvering [sic] policy proposals'. Again, this is in contrast to the global mobility literature. Host organizations are not likely to have so much power and influence as the EU hosts. This might equate to 'inpatriation' but the key drivers in this scenario are less seen to be to influence the head office (Harvey, Speier and Novicevic, 1999).

If leadership development is one of the primary reasons for the home organization to send AEs to host units then individuals should experience leadership responsibilities and challenges. As we have seen this is explicitly restricted so the roles and learning opportunities in their host organization are often highly different from those in MNCs.

SNEs and the Differences to Existing IA Frameworks

We have established a range of contextual differences between SNEs and AEs. Based on this discussion we will now contrast SNEs with an existing IA framework. We have argued above that Baruch et al (2013) expanded the literature by presenting one of the broadest typologies of international work. We therefore use their seven key dimensions of expatriates in order to demonstrate the similarities and differences of SNEs to traditional categorisations.

1. Time of exposure:

SNEs normally spend a minimum of two years and an average of four years in position (Interviewee #8) which is in line with traditional expatriation. Moving from one SNE position to another is extremely rare, in contrast to traditional expatriates who sometimes go on multiple transfers. Short term project-based assignments (Meyskens *et al.*, 2009), do not

follow the SNE process. Baruch et al (2013) discuss how the time of exposure impacts on the importance of an assignee's ability to adjust to the new cultural dimensions. Preparation for this for SNEs from an organisational support or pre-socialisation perspective appears to vary and is sometimes very limited (Murdoch and Trondal, 2013) – similar to existing international assignment research (Doherty and Dickmann, 2012).

2. Intensity of international contact through work:

SNEs will often encounter significant intensity of international contact due to the over-riding desire of the EU to staff its organisations with a diversity of nations consistent with the diversity of its 28 Member States (Council of the European Union, 2014). Hence there is a strong likelihood of interaction with many nationalities at the host, which would not be expected in traditional expatriation (Baruch *et al.*, 2013).

Due to the location of key geographical centres of the EU, SNEs may be working in one country and yet living over the border in another (Suvarierol, Busuioc and Groenleer, 2013). This arises due to the small size of the countries in which key institutions reside such as Belgium, or the location of institutions close to international borders, for example Strasbourg in France. Whilst all these countries will be within the EU, nonetheless there will be cultural and economic implications of such changes. Whilst Baruch et al (2013) comment on the fact that the 'overwhelming majority' of expatriates will be living in the country of their host organisation and hence interacting primarily with one dominant culture, this may not be the case for SNEs due to the clustering of EU institutions in international cities such as London, Paris and Frankfurt. While this clustering may change as a result of Brexit as London-based EU institutions consider new locations for their operations (Grandhi, 2016), currently the intensity of international contact through work for SNEs seems to be higher than that of a typical traditional expatriate.

3. Breadth of interaction:

Interaction for traditional expatriation is anticipated to include both work and non-work life, i.e. broad and holistic contact beyond the work environment to include social dimensions. There is evidence of social interaction for SNEs through volunteer-run and, in some cases, officially organised support groups (Interviewee #3), especially for newly-arriving nationals from specific countries (Suvarierol, Busuioc and Groenleer, 2013). However, this may narrow rather than deepen the interaction to the extent it encourages an introspective focus with national compatriots rather than mixing with other nationalities, akin to the more historic impact of joining an expatriates' Country Club. A potential counter to this arises through SNE network groups such as CLENAD (Liaison Committee of the Detached National Experts) in Brussels. While the breadth of SNE social networks are difficult to compare to AEs' and SIEs' social connections, these are likely to support adjustment and performance, (Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2008). Overall, the EU's desire to promote the diversity of nationalities may enable many cultural communities of employees outside of the working organisation and hence SNEs could encounter a holistic interaction with new cultures considerably beyond the workforce interface.

4. Legal context:

Except on very rare occasions, all home and host countries for SNEs will be within the EU, or progressing towards membership of the EU, and hence the right to work in the host country will exist under the fundamental principle of the free movement of workers enshrined in Article 45 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (consolidated version 2012). The simplicity of the legal right to work for SNEs contrasts to the complex visa and social security requirements for businesses and organisations transferring AEs around the globe as a whole (Dowling et al, 2013; Dickmann & Smits, 2011)

5. International work instigator:

Much research has identified the three core stimuli for expatriates: self-initiated and self-funded by the secondee from outside an organisation; self-initiated from inside an organisation with organisational sponsorship and funding; and organisationally initiated and funded (Andresen *et al.*, 2014). The available research amongst SNEs indicates that self-initiation is relatively common. Of Swedish SNEs, “51 per cent claimed that they took the initiative themselves. Only one out of five respondents claimed that he or she was encouraged by a superior.” (Sundström, 2016, p. 137).

Where the SNE journey starts in the public sector, the secondment will be to a distinct EU institution – hence, in contrast to the Baruch *et al.* (2013) conceptualisation there are two organisations involved. Whilst they will in most cases be within the EU family of civil service institutions, they are nonetheless organisationally separate: the home (sending) institution being part of a national civil service family. Accordingly, the home and host will have different and potentially conflicting underlying priorities. This separation is evidenced, for example, by the requirement that an SNE gives up the email address of their home organisation whilst on secondment (Interviewee #5).

Consistent with the interview responses, a survey of all 1,098 active SNEs at the EC in 2011 reported that only 10% of SNEs were asked to take the position by their home organisation (Trondal, Murdoch and Geys, 2015, p. 261). This is a startlingly low number for organisation-sponsored moves. It seems that the importance of the home organization in the initiation of organisation-sponsored foreign work is far less extensive than what the ‘traditional’ expatriation literature leads us to believe (Edström and Galbraith, 1977; Harzing, 2001).

6. The extent of the cultural gap between an individual’s country-of-origin and the context in which the international work takes place:

The effect of the cultural gap between the organisations involved in IAs has been researched with inconsistent findings as to its importance (Gong, 2003; Gaur, Delios and Singh, 2007; Colakoglu and Caligiuri, 2008). An SNE is required to have fluency in at least one other language in addition to their native tongue. This suggests an SNE will have experienced other cultures through international travel and learning experiences. Such exposure has been shown to improve the outcomes of globally mobile workers (Lam and Selmer, 2004). A public sector bureaucratic culture might be expected to have similarities globally and, given that most SNEs are EU nationals, the cultural gap might be narrower than in other IA scenarios where a high degree of cultural agility is needed (Caligiuri, 2013).

7. Key cultural-related requirements of one's job/role:

The term Seconded National Expert implies SNEs have a highly technical element to their roles rather than a culturally-influenced role such as team leadership. Indeed the activities of SNEs are restricted including an inhibition on representing the institution they are seconded from, see for example ESMA (2011), which also supports the perspective of a limited culturally-related aspect of their specific roles. It seems there are similarities to other technical expatriated experts who do not have leadership roles. In comparison to the many assigned expatriates in MNCs who have broader roles, and in particular those on assignments that are meant to build global leadership skills (Dowling, Festive and Engle, 2013), the extent of cultural learning and sensitivity needed by SNEs for their work is on average lower.

Based on the seven dimensions discussed above, Baruch et al (2013) offer twenty main categories of IA, several of which are unrelated to the community of SNEs, including students studying abroad and the armed forces. Of the remainder the SNE community does not directly fit within any single category and appears sufficiently different to warrant its own category. In contrast, the SNE does fit the 'business expatriate' definition offered by McNulty and

Brewster (2017). The key four boundary conditions for their definition: organisationally employed, the assignment is long term, the individual does not intend to seek permanent citizenship in the host location, and the assignment is within a legal business operation are all consistent. The most noticeable distinctions for SNEs include the move between a home and a host that are organisationally distinct and yet related, the divergence of drivers for and hence value of SNEs, and the prohibition of SNEs to occupy leadership roles. Although the total number of SNEs may be small when considered in the global context of IAs, SNEs are nonetheless a potentially influential sub-category of IA given their governmental role and their impact on public administration decision-making. This warrants research attention as a source of extending the theoretical understanding and practical management capabilities of both SNEs and, more importantly, IAs in general.

Discussion

This paper introduces the SNE construct into the field of global mobility. Based on a review of the reasons given for using IAs in the literature we have identified a large number of differences to traditional AEs. Furthermore, distinctions between the SNE group and traditional attempts to categorise IAs have been highlighted using literature in the field of public administration and interviews with participants involved in the SNE domain.

The SNE might at first inspection be assumed to fit the traditional description of long-term expatriation. Our analysis indicates that there are numerous differences evident when comparisons are drawn with the reasons behind the use of traditional expatriation and IA frameworks. We argue that a new category of public sector IA is warranted in the global mobility literature. This raises several questions as to the theoretical understanding of IAs as a genre and the issues that HR practitioners need to be aware of. Theoretical and empirical investigation of these issues may assist in extending knowledge not only about SNEs, but

about other forms of IAs. Based on the identified differences we present several issues below as a basis for propositions enabling future research. These include the divergent organizational interests between home and host, the higher potential of organizational conflict, the complexity of individual and organizational benefit accrual, and unusual knowledge transfer patterns.

Divergent Organizational Interests: The drivers and reasons behind the use of traditional IAs has seen limited research in recent years given the depth of more historic investigations post Edström and Galbraith (1977). The SNE circumstances raise uncertainties as to whether the strategic and tactical instigators are understood. The home is perceived to be seeking to influence the host's culture and decision-making, and yet the host has taken explicit action to limit the influence of SNEs from the diverse home organizations. For instance, SNEs are barred from taking on leadership positions. In turn, the EU is seeking to influence the culture, policies and procedures of the various home organizations – an aim that has parallels to reverse take-overs and is an extremely unusual phenomenon in global mobility research. This is analogous to the subsidiary seeking to control and co-ordinate the parent's activities. This situation has potential for substantial goal conflict (Ferner, Edwards and Tempel, 2012). Without clarity and openness regarding the different drivers for using IAs in the home, in the host and for the SNE, managers will struggle to achieve their local goals. The same considerations may apply to IAs in general.

PROPOSITION 1a: Greater clarity regarding the differences between the different parties' drivers for the use of SNEs and IAs will generate greater goal clarity for individuals and organizations.

PROPOSITION 1b: Greater goal clarity will allow more targeted action and is likely to generate more positive outcomes in the views of various stakeholders

Organisational Conflict: Edwards, Marginson and Ferner's (2013) conceptualisation of the integration and differentiation between sister organisations illustrates the complexity of their interdependence and the potential consequences for employment practices. IA literature, however, often overlooks or provides only a limited evaluation of the potential conflict of interest between the home and host organisations, see for example the ROI (Return on Investment) literature (McNulty and De Cieri, 2013; Welch, Steen and Tahvanainen, 2009). The possibility of organisational conflict for SNEs is clear given that the home and host are distinct organisations where conflicting goals can be expected. Line-managers of IAs need to consider how to address these conflicts in their day-to-day activity and HR managers will need to consider how to ensure that the sending organisation achieves its expected outcomes within this challenging milieu.

PROPOSITION 2: The greater the conflict and lack of symmetry between the goals of the home and the host, the lower the organisational value created by SNEs and IAs to their key stakeholders.

Individual and Organizational Beneficiaries: The conflict between individual benefits and organisational benefits for IAs has been previously identified (Yan, Zhu and Hall, 2002; Dickmann *et al.*, 2008). There appears to be a disconnect between hosts focusing on technical needs from SNEs and homes sending SNEs for developmental and strategic needs. For SNEs, this is likely to entail a gain in greater technical expertise but less so in leadership skills. In addition, the concentration on expert insights means that the value added to the organization occurs essentially during the foreign work rather than afterwards. This is in stark contrast to traditional control and coordination assignments of AEs but also to the common global leadership development initiatives where the value to both individuals and organizations can endure (McNulty and Inkson, 2013; Suutari *et al.*, forthcoming). Overall, the restriction to

technical learning affects the outcomes for the individual, home and host in relation to the short and long-term value these stakeholders had anticipated.

PROPOSITION 3a: In comparison to ‘traditional’ corporate international assignees, SNEs acquire on average fewer leadership and managerial skills.

PROPOSITION 3b: The majority of the organisational value created by SNEs arises during the assignment and to the host, whereas the organizational value created by non-skills gap filling IAs is spread between the home and the host, and occurs during and after the assignment.

Knowledge transfer: Given that SNEs are technical experts, the ability to permanently transfer knowledge to the host will affect the value paradigm. Harzing et al (2015) noted that expatriates may not maximise knowledge transfer effectiveness back to their home unit during their placement - this could be triggered by a lack of communication or a lack of face-to-face contact. Given that the SNE context includes two distinct organizations, it is likely that this situation is worse for SNEs than for AEs. In addition, there is such a variety of (national) interests where SNEs from many (nationally diverse) home organizations work within an EU institution that the ability for their original employer to plan knowledge transfer (Bonache and Brewster, 2001) is severely restricted. The only way forward is for their home organizations to encourage them to influence decisions. This is not just an issue of absorptive capacity, but also of absorption willingness (Minbaeva *et al.*, 2003). However, it is precisely this willingness that is lacking as the EU seeks to limit the influence of SNEs – a substantial difference to the context of a traditional AE in MNCs. Line-managers and home-based managers may need to look at their intra-organisational systems in order to holistically maximise the knowledge transfer for SNEs.

PROPOSITION 4a: SNEs and IAs generate different types of knowledge transfer. SNEs transfer technical insights to the host and organisational/behavioural understanding of the host to the home. AEs transfer a much broader array of knowledge, skills and organizational/behavioural understanding to host and home.

PROPOSITION 4b: Distinct processes will be needed between home and host, dependent upon their relationship, in order to maximise organisational knowledge transfer for SNEs and IAs.

We have developed a number of propositions affecting all stakeholders – home, host and individual. We hope that these lead to a better understanding of the SNE phenomenon as well as nuancing our insights into IAs. All of these points raise uncertainties for HR practitioners seeking to rationalise and simplify the management of SNEs and IAs whilst maximising the value that they derive for all concerned. Gone are the days of two or three different IA policy options. SNEs may change country for work purposes and yet not need to move house through geographical proximity whilst at the same time moving from a national entity to a supranational one creating concomitant needs for cultural training. The anticipated benefits to the host may be of a different nature to those of the home. The dynamics and challenges for HR practitioners are increasing.

Conclusion and Limitations

Our work has investigated the underexplored phenomenon of SNEs and outlined a large number of differences compared to traditional ways of looking at IAs, especially in relation to AEs. We have expanded on the drivers for global mobility and identified the need to augment existing IA frameworks in order to incorporate SNEs. The discussion has provided insights into new challenges for global mobility and HRM and we have developed a set of propositions which help to improve the theory and understanding of IAs. Overall, the SNE

community seems to have distinct differences to categories within existing IA frameworks and an important role in government policy. These differences raise questions about historical understanding and assumptions regarding IAs in general. There is, therefore, a strong case to add this phenomenon as a new type of global mobility.

SNEs have been sent beyond the EU institutions which draws attention to the need to extend research into other public sector organisations, IGOs and NGOs. Large communities of IAs are understood to exist beyond the MNC and many of these are established to provide highly technical and highly skilled expertise similar to an SNE, for example at scientific IGOs such as CERN in Switzerland. We call for further research to develop the theoretical understanding of these different groups and the implications for SNEs and IAs in general.

There are, of course, limitations to our research. The interviews were exploratory, limited in number and investigative in nature and yet generated evidence that was supported by the published materials in the public administration field and documentary materials. However, given the scarcity of work that investigates SNEs from the perspective of global mobility our conclusions and suggestions should be seen as tentative. We call for further research into the field of SNEs and their expatriate environment. There is limited evidence to suggest that numbers of SNEs will reduce *per se*, except perhaps given threats to the long term existence of the EU such as the Brexit process. Therefore, exploring SNEs offers an opportunity for focused research to extend understanding and theory for SNEs and the wider IA genre across career management in Europe, global mobility and organisational learning. We have developed a range of propositions that can help on this journey and would encourage research in this promising and important field of investigation.

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Table 1 - Primary reasons for the use of traditional International Assignments/Expatriates

Organisational reasons	Description
Personnel development	Sending high potential staff to develop skills and global leadership capabilities
Improve communication networks (spiders)	Improving the exchange of information in multiple directions
Improve relational networks (bumble-bees)	Build working relationships throughout the organisation
Knowledge transfer	Move knowledge from one part of the organisation to another
Cultural transfer	Spreading the HQ culture overseas for collegiate working and a consistent vision
Start-ups	Sending business leaders, project specialists or technical experts to create new businesses, projects or products overseas
Skills Gaps	Sending experts from HQ for leadership roles
Organisational Development (bears)	Spreading the HQ culture overseas for control purposes
Strategic staffing	Global Talent Management Agenda, launching new projects

Table 2 – Comparisons between the reasons for the use of SNEs and traditional IAs

Organisational reasons – similarities IAs and SNEs	SNE perspective	Information Source
Personnel development	Yes. Evidence consistent with general IA research that significant numbers of SNEs may leave after repatriation. Also seen as a reward	SNE literature Interviews
Improve communication networks (spiders)	Yes. Questionable long term effectiveness	SNE literature Interviews
Improve relational networks (bumble-bees)	Yes. Questionable long term effectiveness	SNE literature
Knowledge transfer	Yes. EU legislation refers to this as a desired outcome. Technical expertise from the national body to the supranational, and knowledge of processes and procedures in the opposite direction	SNE literature Interviews Grey literature
Start-ups	Yes. In the context of agencies	SNE literature Interviews
Organisational reasons – distinctions	SNE perspective	
Head Office Control	Quest for control is turned on its head. Host controls (need for) positions & has veto on staffing. Distinct priorities of different organizations	SNE literature EU legislation Interviews
Knowledge Transfer (Skills Gaps) and Managerial Activity severely restricted	Arises in the opposite direction to the traditional expatriate – regional/national to supranational. Predominantly technical. Management positions restricted	SNE literature EU legislation Interviews
Organisational Development (bears)	Referred to in theory and discussed in the corridors, but empirical research provides mixed evidence	EU legislation Interviews Grey literature SNE literature
Cultural transfer	No. EU legislation refers to this as a desired outcome. Evidence shows SNEs switch allegiance during their assignment and then switch back afterwards. Linked to the aim for national heterogeneity	SNE literature EU legislation
Working Patterns and staffing perspectives differ	Separate organisations. SNEs in host organizations help home colleagues. Strategic (long-term) resourcing elements for host talent pipeline is absent	SNE literature Interviews