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Received 18 July 2022
Revised 12 February 2023
22 May 2023
19 June 2023
Accepted 19 June 2023

Career success of expatriates: the impacts of career capital, expatriate type, career type and career stage

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper investigates whether career capital (CC) development abroad, expatriate type, career type and career stage affect expatriates' career success in terms of perceived marketability and the number of promotions.

Design/methodology/approach – The study presents findings from a 2020 follow-up study among 327 expatriates, including assigned expatriates (AEs) (n = 117) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) (n = 220), who worked abroad in 2015 and 2016. Among that group, 186 had continued their international career, while 141 had repatriated. Structural equation modeling with robust maximum likelihood estimation was used to test this study's hypotheses. MPlus 8.6 software supported the analysis.

Findings – The study outlines that CC developed abroad positively impacts perceived marketability and the number of promotions. Second, repatriates reported a greater degree of perceived marketability than those continuing an international career. Career type did not predict the number of promotions. The expatriate type did not influence any of the career success measures. Finally, expatriates in their late-career stage did not achieve a similar level of career success as those in other career stages.

Research limitations/implications – All the expatriates were university-educated Finnish engineers and business professionals, and the career benefits of expatriation could differ for different sample groups. The study calls for more context-sensitive global careers research. The findings have positive implications for self-guided career actors considering working abroad. Organizations could focus more of their global talent attraction, management and career efforts on SIEs.

Originality/value – To analyze the impacts of these four antecedents on the career success of expatriates, the authors cooperated with two Finnish labor unions in 2020 to explore the careers of 327 expatriates, having surveyed the same group in 2015/2016. Such follow-up studies are not very common in expatriation research since it is difficult to keep track of expatriates who change locations and employers.

Keywords Career success, Perceived marketability, High-density global work, Assigned expatriates, Self-initiated expatriates, Career capital, Career type, Career stage

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Expatriate work is a form of high-density global work that offers extensive learning opportunities. That is because expatriates face cross-border transitions, need to adapt to different cultural and institutional environments and deal with non-work disruptions caused

Career Development International
Vol. 28 No. 4, 2023
pp. 406-425
Emerald Publishing Limited
1362-0436
DOI 10.1108/CDI-07-2022-0196

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Funding: The authors acknowledge the financial support from the European Union's H2020 research and innovation programme under Marie Sklodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 765355.

by their international movements that impact their personal lives (Shaffer *et al.*, 2012). The high density of expatriate work is often also due to increased task challenges (e.g. a wide variety of tasks and high-level organizational positions) and greater autonomy (Mello *et al.*, 2023). Due to the developmental opportunities and challenging work experiences that expatriation offers (Kraimer *et al.*, 2022), expatriates feel capable of taking on more demanding jobs and have high career expectations (Dowling *et al.*, 2013). In turn, they may not always have the career they expected after expatriation (Suutari and Brewster, 2003). There has been growing interest in understanding the career impacts of expatriation and also the antecedents of expatriate career success (Suutari *et al.*, 2018b).

Career success is "the accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in time in a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur *et al.*, 2005, p. 179). It is typically divided into objective and subjective career success (Spurk *et al.*, 2019). The focus of the present study is perceived marketability as a measure of subjective career success and the number of promotions as a measure of objective career success. Perceived marketability is defined as an individual's belief that they are valuable to their current employer (perceived internal marketability or PIM) and/or to another employer (perceived external marketability or PEM) (Eby *et al.*, 2003). Promotion is defined as "any increase in level and/or any significant increase in job responsibilities or job scope" individuals receive throughout their careers (see Ng *et al.*, 2005). Regarding expatriates' career success, the nature of high-density global work ties into contemporary career theories, such as boundaryless and protean career theory (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022). These theories emphasize self-career management, where individuals capitalize on career transitions by acquiring career competencies instead of being hindered by inherent instability (Shaffer *et al.*, 2012). Essentially, acknowledging the influence of these contemporary career landscapes when defining objective and subjective career success entails a shift in focus. It moves away from external, organization-defined success measures towards internal, individual-centric success measures (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022). This transition underlines the importance of personal values, goals and psychological fulfillment in evaluating career success.

Expatriate career success following working abroad is a controversial topic. Both positive (e.g. Ramaswami *et al.*, 2016) and negative (e.g. Benson and Pattie, 2008) career outcomes have been reported. That divergence emphasizes the importance of understanding the antecedents of career success. In addition, career impacts may vary due to contextual factors, which merit further attention in expatriation research (Andresen *et al.*, 2020a). The present study identifies four important antecedents in the context of expatriation that warrant further attention: Career capital (CC) developed abroad, expatriate type, career type and the career stage of expatriates. They are outlined below.

First, CC theory, rooted in the concept of intelligent career theory (Arthur *et al.*, 1995), defines career capital as a "stock" of competencies valued within the career field (Inkson and Arthur, 2001; Bourdieu, 2011). This "stock" represents an investment that individuals make in their careers through different "ways of knowing". These "ways of knowing" are considered the "forms or currencies" of CC (Inkson and Arthur, 2001, p. 51), contributing to the development of "intelligent careers" (Arthur *et al.*, 1995, p. 19). CC development has been suggested to impact career success as the greater the stock of CC, the greater the probability of career success in today's turbulent career environment (Guan *et al.*, 2019). Although companies may not always recognize or value CC developed abroad (Ren *et al.*, 2013), it can be connected to career success as expatriates may benefit from their developed competencies in their future jobs. CC theory is built on the intelligent career model (Arthur *et al.*, 1995; Parker *et al.*, 2009; Brown *et al.*, 2020) has been described as a hybrid theory (Spurk *et al.*, 2019) incorporating several aspects of different career theories. Those include boundaryless career theory (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) and protean career theory (De Vos and Soens, 2008).

CC theory underlines individuals' role in managing the development and success of their careers (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009; Baruch and Sullivan, 2022; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012). While a body of research has addressed the development of CC (e.g. Dickmann *et al.*, 2018a, b; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008), the impact of the developed CC on career success among expatriates has not been sufficiently explored (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2016).

Second, it has been argued that expatriate type may impact career patterns and career success (Andresen and Biemann, 2013). Traditionally, the focus has been on assigned expatriates (AEs) who have been sent abroad by their employer (Bolino, 2007) and are therefore supported by that employer during expatriation (Andresen *et al.*, 2014). However, more recently, scholars have directed attention to self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) as a separate expatriate type who have searched for a job abroad on their own initiative (Cerdin and Selmer, 2014). An SIE will typically lack organizational career support (Andresen *et al.*, 2020c) and may thus be more vulnerable during career transitions. Such differences may have career consequences for expatriates (Brewster *et al.*, 2021). Taking up a call for more research, we analyze the impact of the expatriate type on career success (Suutari *et al.*, 2018b).

Third, we analyze the impact on their career success of whether expatriates repatriate back to their home country or continue their international career in the longer term (Biemann and Braakmann, 2013; Benson and Pattie, 2008). Person-environment fit theory (Bretz *et al.*, 1994) highlights the importance of a fit between job demands and the CC of an individual. Expatriates should benefit from their CC when that fits with the requirements of their next job(s) (Dickmann and Doherty, 2008). Career success is influenced by context (Eggenhofer-Rehart *et al.*, 2018; Spurk *et al.*, 2019); thus, repatriates and those continuing their international careers may differ in the extent of fit. Evidence remains limited, and more research is called for on career success among those who repatriate (Chiang *et al.*, 2018) and those who continue their international career (Suutari *et al.*, 2018b).

Fourth, individual contextual factors, such as the career stage of individuals, are important when trying to understand the career impacts of expatriation. According to the life span theory (Super, 1957), a career is an ongoing life process of constant development during career stages (McMahon and Patton, 2018). Career movements at different career stages seem to influence competency development and career outcomes (Zacher and Froidevaux, 2021). We include the career stage antecedent in this study because it is important to career success (Spurk *et al.*, 2019) but has not been studied much in the international career context.

To analyze the impacts of these four antecedents on the career success of expatriates, we cooperated with two Finnish labor unions in 2020 to explore the careers of 327 expatriates, having surveyed the same group in 2015/2016. Such follow-up studies are not very common in expatriation research since it is difficult to keep track of expatriates who change locations and employers. The present study contributes to understanding expatriate career success in several respects. First, while there have been several studies on CC, the present article provides new evidence on the impact of such development on expatriates' career success. Second, our study provides new comparative evidence on the career success of AEs and SIEs. Third, we can add much-needed evidence on those expatriates who continue their careers abroad, as earlier studies on career success have been carried out mostly among repatriated employees. Finally, we contribute by adding the angle of different career stages to the career success research among expatriates.

2. Conceptual framework and hypothesis development

Figure 1 illustrates our conceptual framework, depicting the suggested antecedents (CC developed abroad, expatriate type, career type and career stage) of expatriates' PIM, PEM and the number of promotions they have had. These relationships are explained in more detail in the following sections.

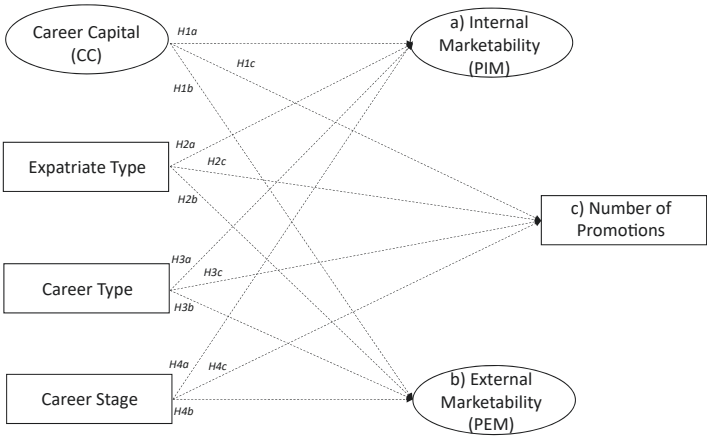

Figure 1.
Conceptual framework

2.1 Expatriate career success

The career outcomes of expatriation are increasingly of interest to scholars. However, the evidence is still quite limited overall and focuses on AEs who have repatriated. In contrast, findings on the career success of SIEs and those who continue their international careers remain limited (Suutari *et al.*, 2018b). The findings are also quite controversial (Mello *et al.*, 2023).

Scholars define objective career success as factors everyone can observe and measure (e.g. number of promotions), while subjective career success is a perceived perspective of career success in which individuals evaluate the experience of achieving career outcomes that are meaningful to them personally (e.g. perceived marketability) (Spurk *et al.*, 2019). As outlined earlier, we adopt the concept of perceived marketability as a measure of subjective career success and the number of promotions as a measure of objective career success. In the next section, we introduce the four antecedents of career success analyzed.

2.2 Antecedents of expatriate career success

In light of the high-density nature of expatriate work, we have adopted several antecedents relevant to research on expatriate careers. Two of those antecedents (CC developed abroad and career stage) have been studied in domestic settings (Spurk *et al.*, 2019) but not in the context of international career research, while others are specific to the international career context (expatriate type and job location).

2.2.1 Career capital development. Expatriates are in a heightened state of learning owing to the high-density nature of their work, and their transitions across borders present associated learning opportunities. Researchers have recently used the CC Theory (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994; Parket *et al.*, 2009) to understand what expatriates learn abroad through a competency development framework (e.g. Dickmann *et al.*, 2018a, b; Jokinen, 2010; Mäkelä *et al.*, 2016; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012). This theoretical framework refers to a "stock" of competencies valued within the career field (Inkson and Arthur, 2001; Bourdieu, 2011). It assumes that people invest in their careers through different "ways of knowing," viewed as the "forms, or currencies, of career capital" (Inkson and Arthur, 2001, p. 51) from which "intelligent careers are made" (Arthur *et al.*, 1995, p. 19). The theory refers to the CC framework, where knowing-how, knowing-whom and knowing-why are designed to be universally applicable across various career contexts (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022).

First, knowing-how refers to human and cultural capital, equipping an individual with the necessary work-related skills, knowledge and understanding to excel in their role (DeFillippi

and Arthur, 1994). Second, knowing-whom or social capital, refers to professional relationships and reputations both within and beyond our professional lives (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). Finally, knowing-why refers to individual motivation and personal meaning, providing the individual with a sense of purpose, identity and drive in their work (Arthur *et al.*, 1995).

As expatriates typically develop CC abroad (Shaffer *et al.*, 2012), it is not surprising that they often have high expectations of their future career success (Suutari and Brewster, 2003) and a strong belief in their marketability (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2016). We can also expect that the greater the CC developed abroad, the greater the perception of marketability. Despite this, expatriates may be disappointed by the nature of the jobs they are offered in their next career stages, as employers may not recognize the knowledge and competencies developed internationally (Ellis *et al.*, 2020). While not all expatriates experience positive career outcomes in terms of promotions following expatriation, expatriates who accumulate more CC abroad should have greater career success in the longer term than those who accumulate less CC.

Although CC developed abroad has received some attention, it has rarely been used to understand the consequences of accumulated competencies in the longer term (Dickmann *et al.*, 2016). The evidence is limited, but Mäkelä *et al.* (2016) report in the case of AEs that particularly knowing-how CC is connected with perceived marketability after working abroad. No quantitative empirical studies have analyzed the impact of CC on the number of promotions among expatriates. CC theory would indicate that development abroad can lead to greater perceived marketability and more promotions in the future. Based on the CC framework and the arguments presented above, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. CC developed abroad is positively related to expatriates' (a) PIM, (b) PEM and (c) the number of promotions.

2.2.2 Expatriate type: AEs and SIEs. Both AEs and SIEs have international careers, but the logic of career trajectories differs to some extent between the two types (Andresen and Biemann, 2013). As SIEs search for their job abroad alone, their foreign sojourn implies moving between organizations simultaneously with physical transitions across national borders. In contrast, AEs are sent abroad by their employer; thus, while they move across borders, they normally stay with the same employer both when going abroad and when repatriating. This difference leads to essential variations in career patterns. An SIE would not usually have the same level of support as an AE, who is more likely to have access to a repatriation program, for example (Andresen *et al.*, 2014; Ho *et al.*, 2016) and benefits derived from internal connections within the company.

Furthermore, when AEs are sent abroad, the costs of doing so are normally so high that they are typically used in demanding professional and managerial jobs. In contrast, an SIE's search for a top job can be impeded by a lack of social connections in the host country (Andresen *et al.*, 2020b, c), and SIEs might have periods of underemployment, which adversely affect their career progress (Chwialkowska, 2020). An SIE may hold a lower hierarchical position (Koveshnikov *et al.*, 2022) and have less-challenging responsibilities than an AE (Suutari and Brewster, 2000). It is also more common for AEs to work for large MNCs than it is for SIEs to do so (Andresen *et al.*, 2015): SIEs are more likely to work for smaller local companies offering fewer career opportunities. The situation may spur SIEs to seek new employment opportunities more often than AEs do. Overall, when looking for new career options, SIEs tend to have more job and organizational transitions than AEs, both while they are abroad and upon returning home (Biemann and Andresen, 2010). Finally, SIEs also tend to stay abroad longer, while AEs typically have fixed-term contracts with an expectation of a return after a few years (Koveshnikov *et al.*, 2022). Due to their extended stay abroad and the starting point of leaving the employer in the home country, SIEs' connections back to their home country are weaker than those of AEs (Suutari *et al.*, 2018a). Consequently,

integration into the home country's job markets can be more challenging for SIEs if they repatriate (Begley *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, it is more likely that AEs perceive themselves to be more marketable than SIEs.

Similarly, because AEs have more demanding jobs abroad, their future promotion opportunities should benefit from those experiences. In contrast, SIEs often struggle to find suitable roles during career transitions (Andresen *et al.*, 2014). Expatriation may offer better promotion opportunities for AEs, as many MNCs expect their employees to have an international experience before progressing to more senior positions in the company. A multinational might then use expatriation as one element in their talent development programs (Suutari *et al.*, 2018b). In light of these arguments, we form the following hypothesis:

H2. People who gained international work experience as an AE will have a greater (a) PIM, (b) PEM and (c) number of promotions than people who gained international work experience as an SIE.

2.2.3 Career type: longer-term expatriates and repatriates. Career trajectories and career success are also strongly constrained by structural factors such as job market realities (Guan *et al.*, 2019). If expatriates are to have successful career trajectories that involve crossing borders, they must find a fit between their CC and their employer's demands (Dickmann and Doherty, 2008). Person-environment fit theory emphasizes such fit, which refers to the environmental conditions that can facilitate or hinder the use of resources such as CC that will impact performance and outcomes (Bretz *et al.*, 1994). The theory addresses how the interplay between individuals' characteristics and those of the environment affects career success (Spurk *et al.*, 2019). Having had high-density jobs abroad, expatriates may struggle to find jobs that offer a good fit with their accumulated CC. Person-environment fit theory could thus help understand why some expatriates have more successful careers than others.

We have more evidence on the careers of those who have repatriated than those who continue building longer-term global careers either by continuing as expatriates in the same country or by re-expatriating elsewhere (Suutari *et al.*, 2018b). However, there is increasing interest in longer-term global careers following reports that around 40–70% of expatriates have undertaken several assignments abroad (Jokinen *et al.*, 2008; Cerdin and Pargneux, 2010). Accordingly, further research into the careers of global workers who continue to be employed abroad longer term would be welcome (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018a).

Fit theory would suggest expatriates achieve a better fit if they continue in international job markets where they can leverage their international CC when it is highly valued by international recruiters. Firms do not always manage the careers of repatriates well (Valk *et al.*, 2015) and those repatriating can find it hard to optimize their CC (Doherty and Dickmann, 2009). That sub-optimal career progression can mean experienced international workers find integration back into their home-country job market challenging (Begley *et al.*, 2008). An outcome is that repatriates' perceptions of their marketability can be expected to decrease after repatriation. In turn, as CC is, to some extent, context-specific, the opportunity to use such capital may also be greater if a person continues to work abroad (Jokinen, 2010). Therefore, we expected that such better fit would result in a higher perceived marketability among those who continue their international careers than among repatriates.

In addition to the extent to which expatriates' CC may be valued by employers, a good match between job requirements and their CC is likely to positively influence expatriates' performance, which should strengthen their claims for promotion (Suutari and Brewster, 2003; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008). Nevertheless, repatriates have often been disappointed in the number of promotions offered and thus in their career progress (Chiang *et al.*, 2018). Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. Repatriates have a lower degree of (a) PIM, (b) PEM and (c) number of promotions than those who continue their international career

2.2.4 Expatriate's career stage. The career stage of individuals has been discussed as an essential factor in the career success of employees in general (Spurk *et al.*, 2019), but the topic has received little attention in international career research. Zacher and Froidevaux (2021) suggest that the career stage is associated with both personal and contextual characteristics, which may, in turn, jointly impact career outcomes. Consequently, life span theory relates the career to an ongoing life process of constant development during career stages (McMahon and Patton, 2018).

Expatriates' CC varies in different stages of their careers (Demerouti *et al.*, 2012). In the early-career stage, their CC is often not yet extensive (Upadyaya and Salmela-Aro, 2017) and expatriate workers are still building their careers to target more demanding jobs at higher organizational levels. Therefore, high-density global work may extensively boost their CC by offering learning opportunities unavailable in the home country. New career opportunities can emerge following such developmental experiences, and there is evidence that expatriates who have their first expatriation earlier in their careers perceive they have greater PIM (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2016). In the mid-career stage, expatriates usually have a substantial level of CC and have achieved some stability in their careers (Super, 1957). Overall, such expatriates may value greater stability and work-life balance in their careers (De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

However, expatriates at the mid-career stage may still also be concerned with opportunities to develop new competencies (Phillips *et al.*, 2002). Those competencies can speed their advance to top positions (Salmela-Aro and Upadyaya, 2017) or at least maintain good performance to secure their role. This group of individuals represents a very attractive employment pool for employers owing to their experience and advanced level of CC. Finally, individuals in the late-career stage normally have a high level of CC (Roberts *et al.*, 2006) that can be expected to positively affect career success. However, it may also be that a new expatriation has little impact on their CC. In that stage, expatriates may also face age discrimination (Benson and Pattie, 2008), which can be detrimental to their career. Many employers are interested in recruiting individuals in the early or mid-career stages because they potentially have a long career with the organization (Riach and Rich, 2010). In some societies, there is also a belief that older people may not have as much drive to succeed as their younger colleagues (Kooij *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, we might expect expatriates in the late-career stage to derive less benefit from their expatriate experience in terms of promotions than those in earlier career stages.

While previous research has not included career stage as an antecedent of expatriates' career success in the longer term, it has been reported that as AEs get older, they receive fewer job offers (Benson and Pattie, 2008). Being at a more advanced career stage also appears to weaken the perceived employability of SIEs (Makkonen, 2015). Therefore, with increasing career maturity, mobility across borders may become more challenging due to fewer employment and job options. It can be expected that perceived marketability decreases when reaching the late-career stage.

An advanced career stage has been found to decrease the home-country perceived marketability of AEs (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2016). We expect expatriates' international work experience at different career stages to influence their views on their perceived marketability and the number of promotions achieved in the longer term. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4. The career stage of expatriates will influence the (a) PIM, (b) PIM and (c) number of promotions of expatriates.

3. Method

3.1 Sample

The data were collected through an internet survey involving expatriate members of two Finnish trade unions: *The Business School Graduates* and *Academic Engineers and Architects in*

Finland TEK. All graduates in these fields can join a trade union. Typically, members also subscribe to the union's unemployment fund; however, it is also possible to be a member without subscribing to that fund (e.g. entrepreneurs with a business degree have their own activity group within the union). The unions offer many services, including career guidance, various training events and other social networking activities and other member benefits (e.g. insurance, journals, etc.). Union memberships are attractive to individuals and members tend to remain association members, even after changing jobs, including when they become self-employed or work overseas. Since union membership figures in Nordic countries are high, this sample is likely to be representative of Finnish graduates working abroad in these fields.

The two unions were able to identify and follow up with individuals working abroad in 2015 and 2016, and we sent them a follow-up questionnaire in 2020. This is an important benefit of administering surveys in cooperation with unions since other sources (e.g. employers and websites) can struggle to contact respondents who have left their employer or changed countries. It is unlikely that any other source would facilitate the collection of such a representative database and would, in 2020, be able to provide the contact information of those who were expatriates—whether AEs or SIEs—in 2015 and 2016 and information on whether they then worked abroad or had repatriated. Table 1 provides more details about the sample.

The survey was circulated to 422 individuals. After reminders, 219 survey responses were returned (51.90%). We made an additional open call to members who had worked abroad in 2015 and 2016 through the online communication channel of the union to expand the dataset. We also checked that there was no difference in the career success of expatriates of the subsamples (i.e. the follow-up sample and the open-call sample). The extension effort led to 108 further responses. Ultimately, we obtained 327 responses from 117 AEs and 210 SIEs.

3.2 Measures

The present study relies on validated multi-item scales. To address concerns over common method variance, we first divided the questionnaire sections when entering scales for predictors and outcomes. Furthermore, we guaranteed respondents anonymity and encouraged them to be as honest and spontaneous as possible when replying (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

Sample description (N = 327)

Gender	Male	62.08%
	Female	37.00%
Educational background	Business field	43.12%
	Engineering field	56.88%
Expatriate type	AEs	64.22%
	SIEs	35.78%
Career type	Long-term expatriates	57.19%
	Repatriates	42.81%
Function	Accounting and finance	19.88%
	Marketing and sales	17.43%
	R&D	15.29%
	General administration	14.68%
	Technical functions	10.70%
	IT and data processing	7.65%
	Other	14.37%
Age in years (mean/SD)		46.3/10.32
Organizational position (mean/SD)*		6.7/1.83
Number of expatriations (mean/SD)		1.9/1.54

Note(s): *Scale from 1 (lowest level) to 10 (highest level)

Table 1.
Sample description

3.2.1 Dependent variables. Perceived marketability is often divided into internal (PIM) and external (PEM) dimensions (Eby *et al.*, 2003). We, therefore, adapted two scales to suit the expatriation context. First, PIM was measured with three items (sample item: "After working abroad [in 2015/16], there were many opportunities available for me in my company"). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.776. Second, the PEM was also measured by three items (sample item: "After working abroad [in 2015/16], I obtained/could have easily obtained a comparable job with another employer"). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.809.

To assess the number of promotions, we asked expatriates to share how many promotions they had achieved since the previous survey in 2015/2016. The number of promotions is a typical way to assess the objective career success of expatriates (Kraimer *et al.*, 2009; Breitenmoser *et al.*, 2018).

3.2.2 Independent variables. We used the *CC scale* to measure CC development (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018a, b). The participants were asked: "To what extent did your international work experience (2015/16) develop the following abilities?" A 7-point Likert scale anchored with *did not improve/increase at all* (1) and *improved/increased very much* (7) measured all items. CC was operationalized as a multidimensional scale with three dimensions—knowing-how, knowing-whom and knowing-why CC—as subfactors of CC. The three ways of knowing are related and complement each other (Inkson and Arthur, 2001). The scale consists of 28 items measuring expatriates' development of CC while working abroad (see Dickmann *et al.*, 2018a, b for the items). Cronbach's alpha was 0.947.

Our survey asked the respondents whether they had been sent abroad by their employer or had sought a job abroad on their own initiative. Those who had been sent abroad were the AE expatriate type and coded zero, while the others were designated the SIE type and coded one.

We identified career type by asking whether the respondents were still working abroad or whether they had been repatriated. Repatriates were coded as 0 and those who had continued their international careers as 1.

In the career field, major life spans and developmental models associate an age frame with each career stage (Zacher and Froidevaux, 2021; Super, 1980) and most scholars have adopted an age category as the basis for career stages (Dutta *et al.*, 2021). Age category has been considered a valid indicator of career stage (Dutta *et al.*, 2021; Salmela-Aro and Upadyaya, 2017) due to the effect of age on individual personality (Caspi *et al.*, 2005), the meaning of work (Kooij *et al.*, 2011), job attitudes (Ng and Feldman, 2010) and behaviors (Ng and Feldman, 2008). Therefore, we followed the operationalization by Salmela-Aro and Upadyaya (2017), similarly to Dutta *et al.* (2021) and coded career stage as early-career stage 0 = under 35 years old; mid-career stage 1 = 35–49 years old; late-career stage 2 = 50 years old and above. The career stage was dummy-coded for the analysis, with the early-career stage as a reference group.

3.2.3 Control variables. We controlled for gender because studies show gender impacts the career success of expatriates. For instance, female managers are less satisfied with their careers after expatriation than their male counterparts (Ren *et al.*, 2013): Men were coded with zero and women with one. As we had expatriates representing two unions from different fields (expatriates with an educational background in business or engineering). We controlled for the impact of that by coding those with a business education *zero* and those with an engineering education *one*. In addition, it has been reported that the more transitions expatriates experience abroad, the more pronounced is the influence of expatriation on their career success (Shaffer *et al.*, 2012; Kraimer *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, we control for the number of expatriation assignments. Finally, we controlled for the hierarchical position of expatriates, as that has been reported to be relevant to expatriates' career success (Cavazotte *et al.*, 2021; Wurtz, 2022; Tornikoski, 2011; Suutari and Brewster, 2003). Following Mäkelä *et al.* (2022), we asked respondents to rank their current position in their organization on a scale of one to 10 (a continuous variable), with ten representing the highest level, five or six a medium level and one the lowest level.

4. Results

4.1 Preliminary analysis

We first performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to check if the model fit the data. The standard suggestions (e.g. Hu and Bentler, 1999) are that the model fit is acceptable when comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.90/.95, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = 0.90/.95, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) <0.06/.08 and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) <0.08. Due to a negative disturbance variance, we constrained the disturbance of knowing-how to 0.001. Similarly, we constrained the disturbance of the knowing-why subfactor, self-knowledge, to 0.001. The fit indices of the CFA with chi-square (X^2) = 838.29, degree of freedom (*df*) = 479, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.06 and SRMR = 0.08 indicate an acceptable fit. We also tested for common method bias (CMB) using the common latent factor (CLF) method. The model comparison showed no CMB-related issue, as the zero models did not differ from the unconstrained model ($p > 0.05$). Most of the factor loadings related to the CMB factor were also non-significant.

4.2 Hypotheses testing

To test the hypotheses, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) with robust maximum likelihood (MLR) estimation. We used the MPlus 8.6 software (Muthén and Muthén, 1998-2017). We applied full information maximum likelihood to account for missing information. The results of the SEM are presented in Figure 2.

Using MLR estimation showed acceptable fit indices for the estimated model (X^2 = 1377.79, *df* = 749, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.05 and SRMR = 0.06). The educational background of expatriates was a significant predictor of *PIM* (β = −0.152, $p < 0.05$). The results indicate that respondents from the engineering field perceive they have a greater degree of PIM than those from the business field. Furthermore, the organizational position was a significant predictor of PIM (β = 0.248, $p < 0.01$), PEM (β = 0.235, $p < 0.01$), as was the number of promotions (β = 0.141, $p < 0.05$). A higher organizational position leads to greater PIM, PEM and to more promotions. The other controls were not significant.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that CC developed abroad would positively relate to expatriates' (a) PIM, (b) PEM and (c) the number of promotions. The results in Figure 2 clearly show that the development of CC is positively related to expatriates' (a) PIM (β = 0.364, $p < 0.001$), (b) PEM (β = 0.205, $p < 0.01$) and (c) the number of promotions (β = 0.141, $p < 0.05$). The data therefore support Hypotheses 1a, 1b and 1c.

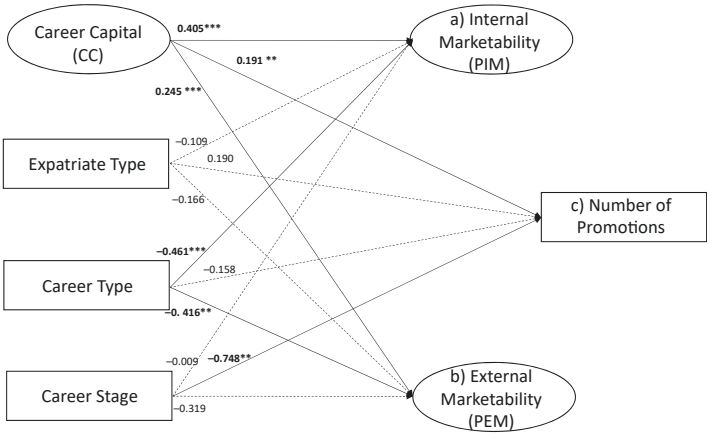

Figure 2.
Results of SEM

Hypothesis 2 proposed that people who had acquired international work experience as an AE would have a greater (a) PIM, (b) PEM and (c) number of promotions than people whose international work experience stemmed from being an SIE. None of the above relationships was significant [1]. Therefore, the data do not support Hypotheses 2a, 2b and 2c.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that expatriates who repatriate would have a lower (a) PIM, (b) PEM and (c) number of promotions than expatriates who continue working in international job markets. Surprisingly, the results show that repatriates perceived they had a higher degree of (a) PIM ($\beta = -0.194$, $p < 0.01$) and (b) PEM ($\beta = -0.210$, $p < 0.01$) than expatriates who had continued working in international job markets. However, career type did not predict the number of promotions. As the findings were not in line with the hypothesis, the data do not support the hypothesis.

Finally, we predicted that the career stage of expatriates would influence (a) PIM, (b) PEM and (c) their number of promotions. Using the early-career stage as a reference group, the results show that career stage is not relevant for PIM and PEM. However, the data show that expatriates in the late-career stage ($\beta = -0.417$, $p < 0.001$) have fewer promotions (0.417) than expatriates in the early-career stage. The results do not show a significant difference between the early and mid-career stages regarding promotions, PIM and PEM. To compare the late and mid-career stages, we changed the reference group from the early to the mid-career stage. We found that expatriates in the late-career stage have fewer promotions ($\beta = -0.306$, $p < 0.001$) and lower PEM ($\beta = -0.340$, $p < 0.001$) than expatriates in the mid-career stage. These findings indicate that the career stage is connected with the number of promotions and PEM, which indicates Hypotheses 4b and 4c are supported, while Hypothesis 4a is not.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The goal of the present study was to investigate whether CC developed abroad, expatriate type (AEs and SIEs), career type (longer-term expatriates vs repatriates) and career stage impact perceived marketability and the number of promotions among expatriates. We aimed to extend the literature by applying a set of important antecedents and related theories that are important in the context of high-density global work and have been underutilized in international career research (Mello *et al.*, 2023).

Our results indicated that CC developed abroad is indeed connected with PIM, PEM and the number of promotions expatriates achieve, as CC theory would predict. Competency development should lead to future career success (Ramaswami *et al.*, 2016). Previous studies report that repatriates are often disappointed about their career outcomes when companies do not recognize or value the CC they developed abroad (Begley *et al.*, 2008; Valk *et al.*, 2015). Such experiences would naturally be reflected in their perceptions of their marketability and affect the number of promotions awarded. Our findings challenge this rather negative overall view by providing more positive data for Finnish expatriates as the extent of CC developed abroad is connected with career outcomes. At the same time, it emphasizes that all expatriate jobs and overall expatriation experiences are not similar and thus CC development abroad varies from case to case.

Second, there has been discussion in the literature that SIEs might have less career success after their expatriation than AEs because they are less likely to benefit from organizational career management support (Tharenou, 2013). An SIE might also have fewer opportunities to acquire transferable capabilities and build networks that could benefit their career (Mäkelä and Suutari, 2013). The consequences for SIEs could involve enduring high risk, uncertainty and insecurity (Richardson and Mallon, 2005). The scarcity of available comparative studies between these groups means research evidence is very limited. Our data show that PIM, PEM *and* the number of promotions were equally pronounced in both groups, a finding in line with observations by Suutari *et al.* (2018b) in the context of an even longer-term career follow-up.

This raises an important question: Could it be that the literature overemphasizes the limits on the career success of SIEs? As the numbers of SIEs and self-initiated repatriates increase (Andresen *et al.*, 2013), employers are working more frequently with such people and might have begun to value their experience more than previously assessed (Collings *et al.*, 2011). As an outcome of having such positive career experiences, SIEs' perceptions of their marketability could have strengthened. Similarly, their chances of being promoted would have improved if their experiences were more highly valued. This change would be good news for people interested in working in different cultures who are sufficiently motivated to forge their own career paths in this highly internationally interconnected world.

Third, contrary to expectations, the results show that repatriates perceive a higher degree of PIM and PEM than those who continue working abroad, while there was no difference with regard to the number of promotions between the two groups. The results here prompt the question of why repatriates were more optimistic about their market value than those who continued living abroad, despite possible repatriation challenges (Chiang *et al.*, 2018), especially given that no such difference was observed in the number of promotions. One interpretation is that after expatriates have found repatriation jobs, they feel more certain about their perceived future marketability at home than those who continue to work abroad. Indeed, it might be that once repatriates have secured their first job back in their home country, they notice that their domestic and overseas experience is valued more strongly (Begley *et al.*, 2008). Consequently, their perceptions of their marketability may strengthen over time. In addition, the international business environment may be perceived as an uncertain career environment. Experienced global careerists, who often work on fixed-term contracts, have reported frequently being concerned about their next career move (Suutari *et al.*, 2012). The uncertainty can persuade some expatriates to frequently consider employment opportunities beyond their current employer and across countries. Concern about the next career move—including the decision to stay abroad or return to the home country—might override an expatriate's optimism concerning their perceived marketability. Overall, the actual considerations, processes and drivers of such perceived marketability considerations merit further exploration. The finding may also be somewhat related to the specific context of the (Finnish) labor market in which foreign work experience may be particularly highly rated (cf. Andresen *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, our findings signaled differences in PEM and the number of promotions across the career stages. First, we found that expatriates in the late-career stage have fewer promotions than expatriates in the early-career stage. Second, we found that expatriates in the late-career stage had fewer promotions and lower PEM than those in the mid-career stage. These findings provide evidence of the relevance of the career stage as an antecedent in expatriation research. In turn, no differences were identified with regard to PIM. Our findings on differences across career stages might be related to older people hitting a career plateau and the reduced availability of promotions at higher hierarchical levels (Smith-Ruig, 2009). Employees at this stage are also less interested in putting in discretionary effort to achieve career progress, as many of them are already in a position that matches their expectations (Flaherty and Pappas, 2002). The most experienced expatriates in the late-career stage may thus look for other issues, such as securing a better work-life balance (Salmela-Aro and Upadyaya, 2017) or career stability (Super, 1957) instead of career progress. In contrast, the focus is more on performance and on working for promotion during the mid-career stage, and individuals have a higher level of CC than people at an early-career stage. These differences may distinguish PEM and promotions during different career stages.

Like all research, our study has some limitations. First, all expatriates were university-level educated engineers and business professionals. Expatriate employees with a lower level of formal education or who have different career competencies and expectations might not see the same career benefits from expatriation. While it is common that expatriate research

focuses on such elites, future research among less-educated expatriates and perhaps low-skilled expatriates would be welcome (Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2019). Second, all expatriates were Finnish. While they had acquired overseas working experience in various countries, different cultures might value international work experiences differently (Andresen *et al.*, 2020a), which might influence the results. Finland is a small society that depends on international trade; accordingly, international experience may be valued more highly there than in some other cultures. Overall, there is insufficient research on how the institutional context impacts the career success of expatriates in relation to both the home-country and host-country experiences of the expatriate. With regard to career stages, we used an age-based operationalization of career stages, an approach that might have limitations stemming from there being elements other than age involved with career-stage thinking. Theories such as Levinson's life stage developmental model (Levinson, 1986) and Super's lifespan model (Super, 1980) consider adult lives as a progression of stages influenced by age but also incorporate the individuals' degree of development in terms of performance and learning that might be more pronounced in particular career phases (Nagy *et al.*, 2019; Kraimer *et al.*, 2019) as individuals of the same age may be at different career stages (Aryee *et al.*, 1994; Kooiji *et al.*, 2008). Future studies might therefore explore other measures of career stages besides age-based measures.

Similarly, we need further research on the career success of global careerists because the nature of their careers and their career outcomes can differ from those of people with largely domestic careers (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018a, b). Concerning the different types of expatriates, AEs and SIEs, the field would benefit from more comparative and larger-scale quantitative studies. The available evidence, particularly that for SIEs, comes from small-scale qualitative studies. Such studies may also have focused on particular types of SIE, such as academics (Selmer and Lauring, 2011) or nurses (González *et al.*, 2021). The research stream would benefit from greater awareness of the context in which we study career success to avoid inaccurate interpretations (Andresen *et al.*, 2020a).

Our research has a range of practical implications. Individuals would benefit from understanding the career implications of working abroad. While the literature often discusses that companies do not recognize the CC developed abroad (Chiang *et al.*, 2018), our findings indicate that such development is connected with CS in the long run. This finding should encourage individual to expatriate as jobs abroad are typically found to be more developmental than previous jobs individuals have had and that they have opportunity to transfer their CC into the next country (Oleškevičiūtė *et al.*, 2022). In fact, many modern career theories stress the development of various aspects – including those that are represented within CC – but may underplay the need for CC transfer and the need for sensitivity to various time horizons (Oleškevičiūtė *et al.*, 2022; Mayrhofer and Gunz, 2023). As the career impacts of expatriates are similar to AEs and SIEs, the findings also indicate that if such opportunities are not available within company individuals could get the same career benefits by self-initiating their expatriation. If expatriating with career benefits in mind, the recommendation would be to expatriate at earlier career stage than in later stages. More comprehensive insight into the contextual levers that impact their career success could inform decisions on whether to seek work abroad as an AE or SIE and also whether to repatriate or continue working abroad. While such decisions are obviously complex and driven by various factors, our research illuminates promotion and perceived marketability aspects hitherto neglected.

In the light of our findings, the competency development of expatriates can be seen as an organizational asset that helps to achieve organizational goals (Harzing, 2001). Both SIEs and AEs constitute a workforce that should be considered when MNCs need to respond to the drivers of global mobility, such as leadership development programs, transferability of knowledge and filling competency gaps and control and coordination (Collings and Scullion, 2012; Collings and Sheeran, 2020). Our study presents evidence that CC acquired from

expatriation justifies the organizational investment in global work. We confirm that organizations should offer career support to AEs in finding suitable jobs during and after expatriation assignments (Doherty and Dickmann, 2009). In addition, the positive perspective of CC by SIEs, despite their lack of organizational support, shows they can be a less costly alternative pool of highly skilled and motivated global workers. That finding should thus prompt organizations to reconsider their approaches to securing global talent to ensure they expressly factor in how to source and manage SIEs and how to guide their careers. Organizations should understand the high-density nature of expatriate work to successfully implement such initiatives, which would enable them to better match the job opportunities available for expatriates and repatriates. In addition, organizations would also benefit from recognizing that a variety of individual contexts, such as career stage, impact expatriates' learnings and career outcomes, which should encourage organizations to implement a more flexible career progression system in terms of inclusion and diversity (Shortland and Perkins, 2022). Of course, the creation of such a flexible approach is no easy task: Placing expatriates and repatriates into jobs matching their competencies during and after expatriations requires an individual-level analysis of expatriate experiences, related development and changed career interests. We hope the current article will help organizations develop the sensitivity and insight to undertake such an endeavor.

Note

1. PIM: $\beta = -0.109$, $p = 0.446$; PEM: $\beta = -0.166$, $p = 0.222$; and number of promotions: $\beta = 0.190$, $p = 0.446$

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