

15. Careers in turbulent environments: the impact of ‘Brexit’ on career motivations and behaviour in the United Kingdom

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INTRODUCTION: LIVING AND WORKING AS A FOREIGNER IN THE UK BEFORE AND AFTER BREXIT

This chapter explores some of the effects that the ‘hostile environment’ policy of the British government, the referendum decision to leave the European Union (EU), the ensuing period of heightened uncertainty and the eventual exit of the United Kingdom (UK) from the EU have had on the careers of international workers. Using insights from the career and hostile environment literatures, it concentrates on institutional, psychological and interactional perceptions that impact individuals’ career motivations and behaviours.

In 2012, the UK Home Office, under Home Secretary Theresa May, introduced a number of legislative and administrative measures to encourage immigrants who did not have the express legal right to live in the UK to leave the country. It also increased the difficulty for foreigners to obtain indefinite leave to remain or to acquire British citizenship. Some institutions and commentators, such as the United Nations Human Rights Council, have argued that this approach has had some negative consequences, such as fostering xenophobia (Bulman, 2019) or stoking fear, stress and anxiety among a large segment of the British society in relation to immigrants (Cole, 2020). These policies have been referred to as a ‘hostile environment’ approach (Cole, 2020).

The referendum in relation to leaving the EU in 2016 and its aftermath, leading to the eventual withdrawal of the UK from the EU on 31 January 2020, has led to a substantial reduction of the rights and entitlements of EU citizens in the UK. Gone are the days that EU citizens had freedom of movement into

the UK and the automatic right to stay and work. In this climate, EU citizens living in the UK have felt a spotlight on their national identity. This has prompted them to reflect on the extent to which they feel they belong and are welcome in the UK. Politicians have reinforced these concerns, with Theresa May calling EU migrants ‘queue jumpers’ (Kuenssberg, 2018), criticizing the cosmopolitan ‘citizens of nowhere’ (May, 2016) and invoking the ‘hostile environment’ (Bowling and Westera, 2018; Cole, 2020). Interestingly, the ‘hostile environment’ approach had already had some effects before the Brexit referendum in that EU citizens’ rights and entitlements were sometimes challenged in relation to welfare provision. For instance, Czech and Slovak nationals could find their welfare payments stopped and their ID documents retained by British authorities, which would curtail their freedom of movement (Guma, 2020). Guma and Dafydd Jones hold that Brexit has led to an ‘othering’ process of migrants and expatriates in the UK. They argue that the sense of belonging to a society – one that is created by an open-ended and permanent process of building connections and attachments – has been impacted, even disrupted, by Brexit (Guma and Dafydd Jones, 2019).

While much of the literature has concentrated on the political, legal and economic aspects of the Brexit process in relation to international workers, this chapter traces some of the perceptions, motivations and behaviours of EU citizens living and working in the UK. These careerists have experienced a turbulent environment shaped by manifold changes to their legal rights, but they have also seen intensive public discourse regarding living in their host country. This raises the issue of their perceptions of their host environment and in what ways it may be perceived as hostile. This chapter suggests that the UK may be seen as a ‘hostile environment’ by immigrants following Brexit and examines the impact of this change on people’s careers.

HOSTILE ENVIRONMENTS AND THE CASE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

There is no agreed definition of what a hostile environment actually consists of or how to define it. Some authors concentrate on natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, flooding or health-related dangers (Gannon and Paraskevas, 2019). Many writers in human resource management (HRM) focus on man-made physical threats when exploring hostile environments (Bader, Schuster and Dickmann, 2019), maybe because of their potential high impact on employees and because organizations can take action to prepare their staff and/or to manage some of these dangers. While the UK does experience terrorist incidents from time to time, the threat levels are far lower than those of many countries (such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Pakistan) that the literature on working abroad con-

centrates on. This does not mean that foreigners living in the UK do not feel physically threatened (Guma and Dafydd Jones, 2019), but this is likely to be comparatively infrequent and often less severe.

Hostility, as perceived by foreign workers, can also stem from institutionally hostile environments. Historically, the literature has covered issues of corruption, economic and political uncertainty as well as legal threats. Corruption (Greppin, Carlsson, Wolfberg and Ufere, 2017) as well as information deficits (Suder, Reade, Riviere, Birnik and Nielsen, 2019) have an impact on how secure and fairly treated foreign careerists may feel. Legal threats may be perceived by expatriates if they feel that the judicial system or its implementation is unjust (Forstenlechner, 2010). It is important to investigate the career effects of legal regulations and their implementation in countries, especially where such legal provisions are substantially changing over time. The UK's 'hostile environment' approach and its decision to leave the EU is likely to create dynamic responses by foreign careerists.

Host environments can also be experienced as psychologically hostile by expatriates. The treatment of gender may be seen as discriminatory (Al-Waqfi and Al-Faki, 2015), predominantly to the detriment of women. Expatriates may also feel discriminated against because of their race and sexual orientation (Moeller and Maley, 2018). Religious affiliation and practice can result in a perception of being discriminated against (Al Ariss and Özbilgin, 2010). In the UK some of these have led to increased anxiety and a feeling of non-belonging by expatriates from the EU (Guma and Dafydd Jones, 2019). The effects on their physical (do they stay in their host country?) and psychological (what drives them?) career journey needs to be explored in more depth.

No man (or women) is an island. The day-to-day experience of expatriates is shaped by interactions with locals and other co-workers. Interactions between locals and expatriates are shaped by a multitude of elements, including historical events, relations and attitudes of the host population and the ongoing discourse regarding immigration. At times, there are conflicts and harsh words are being used (Doucet and Jehn, 1997), but their impact on expatriates' career motivations and their decision to stay in their host countries or to leave is not well understood.

The physical, psychological, institutional and interactional threats outlined above are likely to impact foreign careerists and their motivations and behaviours. The UK Home Office's decision to create a 'hostile environment' has had a range of repercussions. These impact the space in which expatriates navigate their careers. We explore and illustrate this using two cases: first, Thomas, an EU citizen who first studied and then worked in the UK, and second, Sophie, an EU citizen who started to work in the UK after her studies and some work experience in Austria. We trace the development of their thinking and acting in the evolving career space over time.

THOMAS AT THE MERCY OF THE ELEMENTS: FROM BRITANNIA RULES THE WAVES TO BRITANNIA WAIVES THE RULES

Thomas grew up in Northern Germany and attended school in Germany and the UK. Upon finishing school Thomas applied to study medicine. He was accepted at Brasenose College (founded 1509), a part of the University of Oxford. Thomas successfully attended the six-year degree course and subsequently completed his foundation medical training. He then worked as a junior doctor for three years in the UK, which at the time had a severe shortage of such doctors. Thomas met his girlfriend in Oxford. She was also studying medicine and was a junior doctor during the same time as him.

Thomas loved studying in Oxford. People were generally setting personal and educational goals and were striving to achieve these. Even though his social environment would often talk about history, Hitler and the Nazi times, he did not perceive this as especially hostile or critical of him. However, this perception was severely challenged over time when he sensed that the ‘hostile environment’ policy was having a substantial impact on living in Britain. He described a number of different hostilities being played out.

Physical hostilities. While Guma and Dafydd Jones (2019) describe a number of incidents that threatened either foreigners physically or their property, Thomas has never experienced physical hostilities directed at him for being a foreigner in the UK. The most shocking, but not physically threatening, encounter was in a supermarket when an older person, according to Thomas probably a veteran from World War II (WWII) who had overheard a conversation, shouted at him:

Bloody Germans – you are taking all our money.

Psychological hostilities. Thomas observed that when he moved to the countryside and into working in General Practice, medical practices and hospitals, the nature of the discourse around him changed. He remembers that history – and in particular the Nazi history of Germany and the Hitler period – was referred to by others at least once a day. This made him feel uncomfortable as it was loosely implying some debt to the UK even though he had been born several decades after WWII. In addition, he observed that because Theresa May had formulated the ‘hostile environment’ policy and had focussed on illegal immigrants, it had become more common to see expatriates more critically. In terms of careers and working life his conclusion was:

As a foreigner you have to work harder.

Interactional hostilities. In general, Thomas did not experience many interactional hostilities when he was studying at school or in Oxford. However, this changed substantially when working further afield as a junior doctor. Thomas recalled that about every second patient would ask him:

Your accent is not from here – so, where are you from?

He continued to say:

These [patients] would never have asked 'you are black – so, where are you from?' but some of these patients came across as racist to me.

He argued that the hostile environment and, later on, the Brexit discussion emboldened people to think more about 'being British' and to distinguish other nationalities more distinctly. Thomas argued that a number of his patients wanted to make a compliment, but they actually insulted him. He recounted interactions such as a patient saying to him at the end of a hospital stay:

At the beginning I did not know whether I wanted to accept you as a doctor. I had a bad feeling about it. But you are actually quite good and nice.

He interpreted this as a form of xenophobia and that several patients might have preferred a British doctor.

Institutional hostilities. Having fallen in love with a British national and working in the National Health Service (NHS), Thomas and his partner began to develop long-term plans for their future. They envisaged living in the UK and hoped to become General Practitioners (GPs) in due course. Even though Thomas was clear that he did not want to give up his German nationality, he began applying for British citizenship as he had lived sufficiently long in the UK. He regarded the application as expensive – its fee was in excess of £1,000 – and as highly complex, with detailed requirements to prove where he had been on each day in the last five years. He asked for help from Citizens Advice¹ and also from Oxford City Council, who admitted that they found working through the form highly demanding and, at times, confusing. So, an Oxford University educated doctor and some British professionals found it challenging to fill out the required paperwork – an interesting situation, he argued, given that many other applicants are bound to have a less sophisticated educational background.

Thomas believed that he would fulfil all the required demands to be able to be granted British citizenship but commented that unlike in other legal systems the actual decision is in the remit of the Home Office (Minister) rather than precisely depicted and defined by law. After his application was reviewed, he

received a letter asking for further information – in his reading due to the official working on the application having space for interpretation. He thought that this official was using his/her power to put pressure on him, so as to ultimately bring about a situation that could lead to a rejection of his application. He argued that officials would have room for interpretation and would systematically use it against applicants.

The *Sacharbeiter* [official working on the application] used their power to demand impossible things because they want to reject you ... I had submitted everything and now they wanted it again, verified, in too short a time ... This *Sacharbeiter* [official] could have found out that I was a student in Oxford – it is all on the website, even with my exam results ...

The letter Thomas received was dated 25 October, arriving on 29 October. In it, Thomas was given until 4 November to provide all sort of documents which had to be verified by authorities. He regarded this as nearly impossible due to the short time frame. One example of this was that the Home Office official had refused to accept his degree even though an original certificate had been submitted. In addition, there was no possibility to talk to/contact the official working on his application (the name is withheld) to discuss his situation. Therefore, Thomas wrote a letter to the Home Office outlining his conundrum, which was responded to by a final rejection of this application. In the rejection letter the Home Office indicated that it may focus on the applicant's status again and that the government might take action to forcibly remove Thomas from the UK.

Ultimately, this put Thomas under enormous pressure and led to him moving to Germany with his British girlfriend. Thomas has since married his British partner, who has become a German citizen. Both now work as doctors in the German health system. Thomas explained that, in retrospect, a few years ago he fully assumed that he would spend the rest of his life working in the UK. He indicated that he still had a strong attachment to Britain and that he, overall, loved his time there. However, he mused that the minor and major xenophobic interactions, the public discourse that focussed on immigrants as cheating the state and the welfare system made him feel unwelcome. He started to doubt the UK government's intentions and found this confirmed with the actual Brexit vote and the country's journey to leave the EU. His motivation to stay had become strongly aligned to holding British citizenship as a precondition to continue to live in the UK, and the rejection of his application changed his (and his wife's) career plans substantially. In fact, given that the UK is short of doctors, he still believes that the UK has undergone an act of self-harm.

SOPHIE: LONDON A 'SAFE HARBOUR'

Sophie grew up in Tyrol, Austria and studied Communication Sciences and English at the University of Salzburg. After completing her studies and working for a few years she met her future husband (a British national) while she was travelling in Australia. In 1989 both decided to move to London. After arriving in the UK (over 30 years ago) Sophie and her partner soon got married and settled in London. Since then, Sophie has been a UK resident and after Brexit she registered under the EU Settlement Scheme.

Sophie describes her start in London as difficult, especially career-wise. The economic situation was poor and it was difficult for her to find a job. She was already in her early 30s and was refused employment based on the argument that either she was overqualified or she did not have enough work experience. Eventually, she found a job at a market analysis company that needed a German-speaking analyst. Her task was to interpret the economic market data of German-speaking countries and Scandinavia for policy support. Sophie has been on a steep learning curve, which has boosted her career substantially. After a while she changed her job three times. First she worked for a trade magazine, and then, after four years, for a USA asset management company, before finally working for a UK asset management company.

After living in London for more than ten years she said she noticed a shift in her identity as she had difficulties imagining living in a German-speaking country again. In 2010 she received a lucrative job offer to work in Zurich, but she refused it because she was not willing to leave London.

Sophie enjoys living in multicultural London. However, since 2016, when further Home Office policies were introduced that facilitated a 'hostile environment', she has perceived some changes, although most of those changes have not affected her personally. For example, Sophie has never experienced any physical hostilities directed at her for being 'non-British'. Reflecting on this, she identified that living in London has made the difference. One of her European friends shared with her quite different experiences from other parts of England.

Living in the North [of England] or in the countryside would have made an enormous difference as I would be constantly reminded that I am 'non British'.

In terms of psychological hostility, Sophie felt deeply embedded in the multicultural environment of London, which she identified as a 'safe harbour'. Additionally, she reflected on the fact that she is married to a British man and

that has given her access to a different world. However, she was also aware that perspectives can change depending on the situation.

As soon as you are identified as a foreigner you need to justify why you are here.

In line with that, Sophie has experienced the Brexit vote as a traumatic event that affected her personally as it encumbered some of her friendships.

I did not actually believe that they would go through with it [Brexit] quite a long time after because it seemed just so mad. ... At that time, I was also shocked about some people I knew who voted in favour of leaving based on very, very little information. It was emotion that drove it and nothing else and quite a few of them subsequently changed their mind and said if I had to make the decision again, I would not have voted leave.

Overall, Sophie felt well integrated and valued, socially as well as work related, and has not experienced any interactional hostilities. In her view, working in a highly international environment has a strong influence on the extent to which you are exposed to potential hostilities. Most of her European friends who lived outside London had quite different experiences. Specifically, if they have been identified as a foreigner based on their accent. In that case, a common comment has been that they are 'just' tourists in this country.

Sophie, who is almost 60 years old, could not envision living elsewhere or moving with her husband to Austria. So far, she concluded, she has not experienced any institutional hostilities. On the one hand she does not want to give up her Austrian citizenship while on the other hand she feels well protected under the EU Settlement Scheme. She concluded:

All the things have not changed my choice to live in London. Austria is nice but in the long run no, London feels like my 'safe harbour' where I can immerse myself in a multicultural environment.

As we can see from these cases, international career journeys are fascinating, multi-faceted and, ultimately, highly personal as individuals embark on their own voyages. As with sea travel, the elements that impact on one's vessel are very important. In Sophie's case she experienced a lot of headwind at the beginning of her career in the UK but felt less disrupted by Brexit. Thomas was faced with a number of strong counter-currents and was subjected to the elements with little control over the ultimate outcome with respect to his British citizenship and work/life in the UK. In its proud history Britannia has ruled the waves, but through the Brexit process it might be felt that Britannia has waived the rules. Not only was Britain the first country to leave the EU, shattering a decades-old unwritten rule to not leave the 'club', but crucially,

administrative qualities such as fairness and transparency of bureaucratic processes were seen by Thomas to have been deliberately curtailed. In addition, the Brexit process and discourse has certainly challenged some of the social and political consensus predominant in the EU, which often focusses on the more positive effects of highly skilled immigration.

BRIEF REFLECTIONS

This chapter has explored how even countries that are often regarded as relatively safe in terms of physical hostilities can present psychological, interactional and institutional threats in the eyes of expatriates. The shaping of the career space in terms of the conscious creation of a hostile environment, followed by the Brexit decision, has meant for some careerists that living and working in the UK has become relatively less attractive. The literature often looks at institutional barriers of the requirement for accepted qualifications and work permits when it discusses how foreign workers can pursue their career journeys in a host country. Our chapter, in particular Thomas's case, puts the spotlight on more subtle areas such as the psychological impressions of not belonging, interactional reflections that are perceived as less comfortable and alien by the expatriate, and institutional factors that may not be as 'fair' and 'welcoming' as the foreign careerists would want them to be. It showed that the expatriate's embeddedness in their host country could be eroded through the combined effects of hostile and unfriendly experiences. These experiences were a shock to where Thomas was planning to exercise his career but not to the actual field of work. The result was that Thomas returned to his home country with the simultaneous expatriation of his wife, who experienced the reverse situation that becoming a German citizen was administratively easy and highly welcoming. However, it also showed in the case of Sophie how a multicultural (working) environment can buffer or even prevent perceptions of the discussed hostilities.

The boundaryless career approach has often assumed the diminishing of career boundaries over time. However, this process is not uniform, and an in-depth exploration of national, regional and industry variations is needed – one of the goals of the 5C career research consortium. While Brexit has systematically erected boundaries for non-UK nationals to move to the country, the 'hostile environment' approach has had some consequences even for settled expatriates who have the right to remain and work in the UK. The effects of 'hostile environments' (in particular if the threats are not physical but are psychological, interactional or institutional) on the well-being of global careerists, their identification with the host environment, and their identity, career plans, coping approaches and actions are not well understood and this needs context-sensitive research.

BOX 15.1 STOP AND THINK

1. In terms of migration patterns, what effects will Brexit and a hostile environment policy have on expatriates who already live in the UK?
2. How will the attractiveness of the UK be affected in terms of new immigration and highly skilled expatriation?
3. How will the career patterns of British nationals – domestically and internationally – be affected by a changing composition of the workforce in the UK?
4. How will social policy cope with an approach that fosters a perception of ‘otherness’ between British nationals and expatriates as well as immigrants?
5. What will happen to the four categories of hostilities and associated attitudes and behaviours in the areas of physical, psychological, institutional and interactional hostilities?
6. Given that some countries are perceived as more or less hostile on the four dimensions of hostility, what are the interaction and substitution effects with the rise of virtual work? Also, what career effects can be recorded and analysed?

NOTE

1. Citizens Advice is an independent UK charity assisting people with legal, financial and other problems.

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