



Recognizing the important role of self-initiated expatriates in effective global talent management



Vlad Vaiman^{a,d,*}, Arno Haslberger^b, Charles M. Vance^c

^a School of Management, California Lutheran University, 60 West Olsen Rd., #3550, Thousand Oaks, CA 91360, USA

^b Middlesex University, Hendon Campus, The Burroughs, London NW4 4BT, UK

^c College of Business Administration, Loyola Marymount University, 1 LMU Drive, MS 8385, Los Angeles, CA 90045-2659, USA

^d School of Business, Reykjavik University, Menntavegur 1, Reykjavik 103, Iceland

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ABSTRACT

The effective management of talent on a global scale represents a critical challenge for today's organizations. Beyond considerations about traditional company-assigned expatriates, this paper provides a valuable examination of global talent management issues involving self-initiated expatriates, an important source of global talent increasingly available in host country labor markets that has only relatively recently come to the attention of researchers. The paper discusses how central elements of talent management (i.e., identifying, recruiting, and selecting talent from the external labor market; developing employees; managing talent flows; ensuring retention of talented employees) can apply to the effective utilization of self-initiated expatriates, with direct implications for guiding the future work of practitioners and researchers alike.

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1. Introduction

The ever-increasing focus on the effective management of people who represent special significance to their respective organization's success has been perhaps one of the most important developments in human resource management (HRM) over the past 15 years (Collings, 2014; Sparrow, Scullion, & Tarique, 2014). Adopting a moniker of Talent Management (TM), this focus has been at the center of attention of both HRM scholars and practitioners. Starting with the work by McKinsey consultants (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001), the field of TM has gained much respect and attention across corporate functions, industries, and national boundaries. This statement is well supported by a recent PWC Global CEO Survey, which reports that TM remains the number one priority for 78% of companies worldwide (PWC, 2012).

Despite the fact that TM as an academic field is nearing its adolescence, there is still active discussion in regard to the understanding of the concept, as well as its intellectual boundaries. Some scholars perceive TM from a primarily human capital perspective (Cappelli, 2008), while others view it as mainly an approach with talent as the source of organizational success (Mellahi & Collings, 2010). Still other scholars see it as the presence of key HRM policies and practices that are tightly linked to corporate strategy (Farndale, Scullion, & Sparrow, 2010; Kim & Scullion, 2011). Since there is no one "ultimate answer" to the conceptualization of TM, the field still remains rather fuzzy, as both academics and practitioners are trying to find consensus on precise definitions of talent and talent management (Collings, 2014; Collings & Scullion, 2009; Mellahi & Collings, 2010; Vaiman & Holden, 2013).

The multitude of approaches to TM has led to a variety of definitions of the concept itself, which, however, does not prevent us from distinguishing one theme common to all of them. This theme focuses on two important dimensions – the first includes key individuals with a high level of talent (measured by their knowledge, skills, and abilities) that are employed in key roles and add value to

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 805 493 3892.

E-mail addresses: vvaiman@callutheran.edu (V. Vaiman), arno_haslberger@yahoo.com (A. Haslberger), cvance@lmu.edu (C.M. Vance).

the organization, while the second dimension involves additional HRM policies, procedures, and techniques that are effectively used to manage such talented individuals (Tarique & Schuler, 2012; Vance & Vaiman, 2008). It is, therefore, possible to use some sort of a blend of Tarique and Schuler (2010, 2012) and Vance and Vaiman (2008) definitions of both talent and TM, which refers to talent as key people in critical job roles, as well as employees who possess or are pursuing specialized and in-demand knowledge and skills; and identifies TM as a set of organizational processes designed to attract, develop, mobilize, and retain key people.

More specifically, TM can be seen as a meaningful set of activities that usually revolve around the following (Sparrow, Hird, & Balain, 2011; Tarique & Schuler, 2012):

- A. Identifying, recruiting, and selecting talent from the external labor market.
- B. Identifying key internal talent (will not be considered for the purposes of this paper).
- C. Developing employees.
- D. Managing talent flows, including facilitating the movement of talented individuals across regions or countries.
- E. Ensuring retention of talented employees.

With the reality of ever increasing and inexorably advancing forces of globalization, our more accurate understanding of the concept of talent management lies within a global context. This broader perspective of global talent management (GTM) includes the above basic characteristics of TM, yet are at play within a transnational and global field of exponentially greater variables, complexities, and interdependencies (Bruning & Tung, 2013; Farndale, Avinash, Sparrow, & Scullion, 2014; Minbaeva & Collings, 2013). Within GTM, multinational organizations face the ongoing challenge of achieving a strategic balance between local adaptation and global coordination and integration of their business processes and associated talent management practices (Sidani & Al Ariss, 2014).

Much already has been written on the importance of talent management for various groups of employees, such as domestic employees and those staffing foreign operations. Recent work has examined company-assigned expatriates within GTM as involving high-potential talent development and global careers management (Al Ariss, 2014; Cerdin & Brewster, 2014). In this paper, however, we would like to turn our attention to a somewhat neglected but certainly important source of global talent – namely, self-initiated expatriates – and outline important issues pertaining to managing their talent in a global context. In particular, we will touch upon each of the aforementioned talent management activities and discuss their applicability to self-initiated expatriates. First, however, we will introduce the concept of self-initiated expatriation and delineate its boundaries.

2. Self-initiated expatriates (SIEs)

The phenomenon of self-initiated expatriation is not new; SIEs of some sort have been around for a long time. For example, since medieval times, craftsmen in France, German-speaking and other countries, were required to spend several years traveling and practicing their newly learned craft. This activity also involved crossing borders. A famous book describing a journeyman's travels is Goethe's "Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre". Journeymen's travels abroad were not necessarily voluntary and today's SIE's motives equally may or may not involve a sense of inevitability. What is new is the scholarly attention that SIEs have received recently resulting in reviews of the field (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Doherty, 2013), a special journal issue (Doherty, Richardson, & Thorn, 2013a, 2013b), and two edited volumes (Andresen, Al Ariss, & Walther, 2012a; Vaiman & Haslberger, 2013).

According to the United Nations Organization, 232 million people were international migrants in 2013. This figure is up from 154 million in 1990. Only about 7%, or 15.7 million, were refugees in 2013. Most international migrants, 125 million, live in Europe or North America (United Nations, 2013a, 2013b). About one-fifth of international migrants are highly skilled (IOM, 2013). In the OECD countries¹ there are just below two million temporary worker migrants. While this group includes workers who are not SIEs, the available data indicate that the number of SIEs is far from small or negligible, probably running into tens or even hundreds of thousands in the OECD countries alone (OECD, 2013).

Contemporary SIEs are a diverse group such as 'overseas experience (OE)' seekers (Inkson & Myers, 2003; Myers, 2011), young graduates (Tharenou, 2003), English teachers (Fu, Shaffer, & Harrison, 2005), academics (Isakovic & Whitman, 2013; Richardson, 2006; Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Richardson & McKenna, 2006), volunteer workers (Hudson & Inkson, 2006), nurses (Bozionelos, 2009), doctors (Nolan & Morley, 2014), and business professionals (Fitzgerald & Howe-Walsh, 2008; Jokinen, Brewster, & Suutari, 2008; Lee, 2005; Scurry, Rodriguez, & Bailouni, 2013; Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

As of yet, there is no standard definition of the term "self-initiated expatriate". Commentators stress the need for such a standard (Doherty, 2013; Doherty et al., 2013a). However, there is disagreement in attempts at definition, such as whether the intention to stay for a limited time should be included as a criterion (cf. Andresen, Bergdolt, & Margenfeld, 2012b; Andresen, Bergdolt, Margenfeld, & Dickmann, 2014; Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). There also is a tension between ever-finer distinctions of SIE sub-types (cf. Richardson, McKenna, Dickie, & de Gama, 2013) on the one hand, and a wider understanding of self-initiated international mobility that includes immigrants (Cerdin & Brewster, 2014), on the other. Self-initiated mobility is a still fuzzy segment on the entire range of international movement that goes from travelers to permanent migrants (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Doherty et al., 2013a, 2013b; Welch & Worm, 2006). Much of the earlier literature to date has focused on SIEs from 'Western', developed countries, although in recent years there have been studies including other nationalities as well (Al Ariss, 2010; Al Ariss & Özbilgin, 2010; Beitin, 2012; Cao, Hirschi, & Deller, 2013; Cerdin, Diné, & Brewster, 2014; Guo, Porschitz, & Alves, 2013).

¹ Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States.

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