



# The meaning of language skills for career mobility in the new career landscape<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The present paper establishes a relationship between language skills and career mobility. Due to increased internationalization, reduced job security, and a shift in career ownership to the individual, language skills represent a key career competence today. Using qualitative and quantitative data collected with a survey in Finland, we uncovered multiple career-related meanings for language skills. Language skills permeated the basic components of career competence – “knowing how,” “knowing why,” and “knowing whom” – and enabled respondents to cross boundaries. The respondents who possessed the best language skills also demonstrated the highest levels of both psychological and physical career mobility.

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## 1. Introduction

In advancing further into the new millennium, our understandings of many key constructs have changed. One such construct is the notion of a career that captures the relationship between people and their work – a relationship that develops over time within the context of organizations and other social institutions (Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012). As firms have become more international, opportunities for physical mobility (Ronen, 2005) and the significance of language skills in steering and shaping careers in 21st century organizations have increased (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012; Piekkari & Tietze, 2012).

The sheer volume of research on careers has increased since the late 1990s and new insights, theories, and concepts have been introduced (e.g. Inkson et al., 2012; Ng, Sorensen, Eby, & Feldman, 2007; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). One of the most prominent notions is the boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

Boundaryless careers are more flexible and multidirectional than traditional careers. They may consist of several career moves and span organizational, geographical, and cultural boundaries (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Dickmann & Baruch, 2011; Gunz, Evans, & Jalland, 2000). Compared with traditional careers, individuals – rather than organizations – are the primary career owners and are responsible for taking the lead in defining career “destinies.” The notion of boundaryless careers challenges the managerially oriented organizational perspective (Inkson et al., 2012) and questions whether careers should be seen as bounded by organizations. However, this notion has also been criticized for being ideologically charged (Alvesson, 2013) and lacking conceptual rigor (Inkson et al., 2012).

Physical mobility refers to career moves that are enacted between employers (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) while psychological mobility captures the individual's mental readiness and preparedness to undertake a career move if and when a suitable opportunity arises (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006; Forret, Sullivan, & Mainiero, 2010; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Previous research has identified several factors that explain career mobility, both physical and psychological, from an individual perspective (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996; Forrier, Sels, & Stynen, 2009; Ng et al., 2007). Sullivan and Arthur (2006) argue that career competences, gender, and cultural background predict the individual's ability to engage in physical and psychological mobility and to cross organizational, geographical, and cultural boundaries.

So far, however, language skills have received only limited attention as an explanation of career mobility (see, Piekkari, 2008,

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for an exception). Some work has been conducted on language skills among expatriates whose preparation for a foreign assignment (Brewster, 1988; Dickmann & Baruch, 2011) and adjustment to the host country are affected by their ability to speak the local language (Barham & Oates, 1991; Caligiuri, 2006; Coulson-Thomas, 1992; Selmer, 2006). But as firms continue to expand globally, customers and suppliers also globalize. International work responsibilities that require extensive business travel (Welch & Worm, 2006) and the use of multiple languages are not limited to expatriates, but have become a defining feature of workplaces today (Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio, 2011; Luring & Tange, 2010; Neeley, 2013). Overall, it has been emphasized that individuals need to be mentally prepared and able to undertake a career move when a suitable opportunity arises (Briscoe et al., 2006; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) because they have much less job security than before. Moreover, organizations keep pushing the responsibility for careers to the individuals themselves (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). In this uncertain career landscape, language skills as a career competence may provide the necessary “safety blanket” that enables career mobility.

The present paper establishes – both theoretically and empirically – a relationship between language skills and career mobility, and in so doing makes three contributions to existing research. Firstly, it conceptualizes language skills as a key career competence in today’s working life and provides a novel explanation of career mobility behavior at the individual level of analysis. Previous research has associated language skills with the “knowing how” component of career competence (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996). We broaden this view by showing that language skills also permeate the other two components of career competence – “knowing why” and “knowing whom” (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996). Secondly, we uncover the meaning of language skills for both psychological and physical career mobility. We found that the respondents with the best language skills demonstrated the highest levels of both psychological and physical mobility. In this way, we answer recent calls for a more holistic approach to career mobility by simultaneously studying various forms of mobility (Forret et al., 2010; Lazarova & Taylor, 2009; Verbruggen, 2012). Thirdly, we explore the meaning of language skills for career mobility among individuals who represent various organizational levels. This complements previous research, which has primarily concentrated on the managerial level, expatriates, and upward moves (Ng et al., 2007). We believe that our topic is both important and timely due to the increasing internationalization of careers and workplaces.

Next we will review previous research on career mobility and career competences. We will then justify the methodological choices made in this study, present the results and position them in the extant research. In concluding the paper, we will also acknowledge the limitations of our study and suggest possible avenues for future research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Career mobility

In this section, we discuss the boundaryless career and key forms of career mobility. The concept of the boundaryless career was first popularized in the mid-1990s by Arthur and Rousseau (1996, p. 3–6), who challenged the notion of traditional careers. Since the launch of the concept, boundaryless careers have been studied among different professions (e.g. Dany, Louvel, & Valette, 2011), across functions (e.g. Yamashita & Uenoyama, 2006), and in terms of career success (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005) and identity-related issues (Hoekstra, 2011). Despite a considerable amount of research, the findings have been difficult to compare

due to measurement ambiguity and a lack of construct clarity (Briscoe et al., 2006; Ng et al., 2007).

The notion of career mobility lies at the heart of the discussion of boundaryless careers. Ng et al. (2007) define career mobility as job change, organizational change, or occupational shift. Changing jobs may bring different responsibilities, a new title, or a different hierarchical level with the same employer, whereas organizational change refers to changing employers. By occupational shift, Ng et al. (2007) allude to a change that requires retraining, i.e. switching professions. In this regard, career mobility can be internal within the current organization or external where the employer changes (Lazarova & Taylor, 2009). Nicholson and West (1988) add to status (up, down, lateral) and function (the same or changed) to the various forms of career mobility.

The study of expatriates and their international careers represents international mobility, which has attracted particular attention in the field of international human resource management (Stahl & Cerdin, 2004; Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002). This established stream of research distinguishes between careers of assigned expatriates (Inkson, Arthur, Pringle, & Barry, 1997; Scullion & Brewster, 2001), self-initiated expatriates (Dorsch, Suutari, & Brewster, 2012; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010), and global careerists (Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007). Inkson et al. (1997; Inkson & Myers, 2003) argue that traditional expatriates, who have been sent overseas by an organization, typically engage in internal career mobility whereas self-initiated expatriates, who seek jobs abroad on their own initiative, have more boundaryless careers. In turn, the work paths of global careerists typically include multiple international positions and assignments (Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007). Like all career moves, international assignments in particular tend to be “mind-stretching” experiences that offer opportunities for professional and personal development; these opportunities influence the future career plans of individuals (Jokinen, 2010; Suutari & Brewster, 2003).

Our reading of the literature suggests that two key forms of career mobility stand out: the physical and the psychological. Sullivan and Arthur (2006) posit that a boundaryless career is not an “either or” proposition; instead, it “can be viewed and operationalized by the degree of mobility exhibited by the career actor along both the physical and psychological continua” (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006, p. 23). In this regard, an individual may score high on physical career mobility and low on psychological career mobility, or low on both because these dimensions are conceptually distinct. In previous research, physical mobility has gained considerably more attention than psychological (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009), although the importance of the psychological side in explaining career tendencies and actions has been recognized (Briscoe et al., 2006). Moreover, psychological mobility has been shown to be an important antecedent to physical career mobility (Verbruggen, 2012). However, few studies have simultaneously taken into account both physical and psychological career mobility.

The burgeoning research on boundaryless careers has also been criticized. Some argue that the concept is only a metaphor, which as such is misleading and ambiguous (Inkson, 2006; Sommerlund & Boutaiba, 2007). Others criticize the notion of the boundaryless career for being ideologically charged and argue that it is simply used to manipulate employees into accepting short-time employability (Alvesson, 2013) and to enhance the efforts of companies to reduce labor costs (Keenoy, 2009). Inkson (2006) maintains that strictly speaking, boundary-less careers do not exist. He suggests that a more accurate term would be “boundary-crossing career,” because organizational, geographical, and cultural boundaries remain in place even after individuals cross them. Inkson et al. (2012) maintain that a lack of terminological rigor has prevented this stream of research from moving forward.

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