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Career aspirations of flexpatriates. A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the career aspirations of Austrian flexpatriates and expatriates. Conceptually, the article applies a framework using career anchors and internal career orientations. Empirically, we build on a variant of content analysis of 40 semi-structured interviews with 40 Austrian internationally mobile employees working in Eastern and Western European countries. The results show the existence of both traditional and new career aspirations. Most important to our sample are aspirations revolving around Management and Hierarchy, Internationalism and Entrepreneurial Creativity; for flexpatriates we find specifics regarding Freedom, Getting High and a new aspiration referred to as Celebrity; for expatriates particularities concern Balance, Pure Challenge and Skills and Knowledge. Generalizability of our findings is limited due to the interpretative nature of the study, the sample structure, and cross-sectional design.

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Introduction

Since the 1960s the number of multinational companies and types of interaction across borders have increased (e.g., Peiperl & Jonsen, 2007). Multinational companies' international business strategies depend, among others, on an internationally mobile workforce (e.g., McNulty & De Cieri, 2011; Thomas, Lazarova, & Inkson, 2005). Hence it has become important to grasp the specifics of this workforce segment. Particularly, a better understanding of career perceptions among internationally mobile employees (IMEs) is critical since recent studies suggest a possible change in career values, motives and attitudes that could be responsible for low retention rates of international assignees (e.g., McNulty & De Cieri, 2011; Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002). Career aspirations are a core element of career perceptions because they govern individual career behavior (e.g., Derr & Laurent, 1989; Schein, 1996). It is vital to learn more about IMEs' subjective career values to set adequate initiatives to retain talent, skills and know-how, create efficient HR programs and positively contribute to an organization's strategy and overall performance (e.g., Stahl, Miller, Einfalt, & Tung, 2000).

Previous research in this area nearly primarily covers traditional expatriates, i.e. assignees who move abroad for one to five years, often with their families (e.g., Mayerhofer, Müller, & Schmidt, 2011; Mayrhofer, Sparrow, & Zimmermann, 2008; Welch, Welch, & Worm, 2007), and has a strong focus on the U.S. Alternative forms of international working (for an overview see Mayrhofer, Reichel, & Sparrow, 2012) such as flexpatriation, i.e. frequent and regular business trips abroad without relocating (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, & Herbert, 2004), have received much less attention (Mayerhofer et al., 2011; Welch et al., 2007). Likewise, much of the research focuses on the situation outside of Europe (Scullion & Brewster, 2001). Yet, these alternative forms offer an important option for multinational corporations, especially when they operate in Europe. They may be better suited "to a global environment of highly efficient transport systems, growing availability of skilled local staff, and internet-based communication" (Bonache, Brewster, & Suutari, 2007: 5). Particularly in Europe "Euro-commuting" and frequent flying have increased in popularity due to relatively short distances (Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007).

Our paper responds to this knowledge gap. It analyses the career aspirations of flexpatriates in the European context, using classical expatriates as a group of comparison. Although there are many different definitions for international assignments and traveling (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012) we decided to base our research group on the definition provided by Mayerhofer et al. (2004). The main criteria for differentiation among these two target groups for this paper is full relocation of one's center of

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life/vital interest and the commitment to frequent traveling. Both flexpatriate-types (frequent flyers and international commuters) fulfill these criteria in our case. The flexpatriate-sample travels on average 4.7 times a month for a duration of 3 days on average (see Table 2a for more details).

Conceptually, we draw upon two well-established concepts in career research, career anchors (Schein, 1977, 1996) and internal career orientations (Derr, 1986a). Based on 40 semi-structured interviews we apply content analysis (Mayring, 2003) and a variant of constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to inductively elaborate the core categories of career aspirations among Austrian flexpatriates.

Our paper offers three main contributions. First, our results yield more insight into the still under-researched field of flexpatriates by showing particularities in their career aspirations compared to expatriates. This also provides a better basis for action of both human resource management (HRM) and career counseling by responding to changes in international mobility patterns. Second, the paper integrates and extends the career anchor and internal career orientation frameworks. In doing so, we strengthen the theoretical foundation of research on international mobility. Third, our study deepens the understanding of international mobility in Europe. In this way, we contribute to the discussion about contextualizing HRM and career research and balancing results from North America with a more global view.

Conceptual background and literature review

Career anchors and internal career orientations

Career is seen as a "sequence of positions occupied by a person during the course of a lifetime" (Super, 1980: 282). Beyond this objective perspective career also includes subjective aspects and is understood as "the evolving sequence of work experience over time" (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989: 8). Closely linked to career is career success, described as "the positive psychological or work-related outcomes or achievements one has accumulated as a result of one's work experiences" (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995: 486). Both career and career success have objective components observed from outside, and internal components perceived from within (Hughes, 1937). Individuals' perceptions of career and career success may influence what they aspire to in their careers, i.e. their career anchors (Schein, 1977, 1996) and internal career orientations (Derr, 1986a; Derr & Laurent, 1989).

Career anchors are an occupational self-concept that "serves to guide, constrain, stabilize and integrate the person's career" (Schein, 1978: 127). They consist "of (1) self-perceived talents and abilities, (2) basic values, and, most important, (3) the evolved sense of motives and needs as they pertain to the career" (Schein, 1996: 80). Career anchors are shaped by career and life experiences and consist of a person's non-negotiable values and motives when making a decision. As self-concepts, career anchors are a stabilizing force that guides individuals throughout career and life trajectories (Schein, 1996). Results have shown that most individuals have multiple anchors, primary and secondary, that may change through their career and life stages (e.g., Feldman & Bolino, 1996). Schein (1996) finds that varying needs of individuals underlie different career anchors and that the dominant anchor may change with distinct life phases and decisions. Originally, Schein (1977) presents five anchors: Autonomy/Independence, Security/Stability, Technical–Functional Competence, General Managerial Competence, and Entrepreneurial Creativity. Later, he adds three additional anchors: Service or Dedication to a Cause, Pure Challenge, and Lifestyle (e.g., Schein, 1990). Suutari and Taka (2004) introduce an anchor for international mobility, Internationalism.

Building on the concept of career anchor, Derr (1986a) develops the concept of internal career orientations. The term traces back to DeLong (1982), "meaning the capacity to select certain features of an occupation for investment, according to one's own motives, interests, and competencies" (Kim, 2004: 597). It emphasizes "a person's own subjective idea about work life and his or her role within it" (Derr & Laurent, 1989: 455) and internal perceptions of career and career success with a focus primarily on individual expectations, career needs and aspirations, all of which have a major impact on career decisions and evaluations of one's own career or career success (Chompookum & Derr, 2004; Derr, 1986b; Derr & Laurent, 1989). Internal career orientations are the product of one's "motives, values, talents, and personal constraints" (Chompookum & Derr, 2004: 409). Hence it not only concerns what people desire or believe to be important, but also what they perceive they can do best. Derr (1986b) identifies five internal career orientations: Getting Free, Getting Secure, Getting Balanced, Getting Ahead, and Getting High.

Both concepts are widely used (Arthur et al., 1989; Gunz & Peiperl, 2007; Ituma & Simpson, 2007; for studies of career anchors in the international field see Cerdin & Pargneux, 2010 for expatriates, Suutari & Taka (2004) for global leaders; for internal career orientations of expatriates see Siljanen, 2007). Table 1 gives an overview about major characteristics and a possible integration.

The concepts of career anchors and internal career orientations partly overlap and complement each other. This offers the potential for integrating these concepts into core career aspirations (see Table 1, first column). The first four core career aspirations are combinations from both concepts. *Freedom* subsumes the career anchor Autonomy and Independence and the orientation Getting Free. It stands for autonomy, self-control and personal freedom, particularly from organizational constraints. It is important to have space and responsibility, one's own schedule and work pace under loose supervision. *Security* includes Security/Stability and Getting Secure. It subsumes the desire for long-term job security and attachment to one organization where it is possible to achieve a sense of identity, order and place in conformity with organizational values and norms. "Security seekers tend to dislike travel and relocation" (Schein, 1990 cited in Suutari & Taka, 2004: 836). *Balance* covers Lifestyle and Getting Balanced. It includes the desire for balancing the three forces of the career triangle, i.e. work, relationships, and self-development. People with this aspiration tend to look for organizations with strong pro-family values and programs. The aspiration *Management and Hierarchy* comprises General Managerial Competence and Getting Ahead. It underlines the need for hierarchical advancement and leadership positions to obtain more influence, status, and financial remuneration. Its most important skills are interpersonal and analytical competencies as well as emotional stability.

The other six core career aspirations are directly based on the two respective. *Getting High* refers to an "adrenaline-first strategy" focusing on excitement, action, adventure, and creativity. People try to avoid boredom and routine and view bureaucratic rules as constraints. *Pure Challenge* emphasizes competition and challenges. Winning is important, as is overcoming major obstacles and solving the insoluble. *Entrepreneurial Creativity* emphasizes creating something that is entirely one's own project. People with this aspiration are easily bored, they like to initiate new things rather than managing established ones and they move from project to project. *Service or Dedication to a Cause* focuses on improving the world. *Technical-functional Competence* refers to people who are motivated by the work content. They want to become deep experts in their field and thus seek advancement only in their own technical or functional area of competence. Finally, *Internationalism* focuses on people who seek working in international environments, who long for new