



# Why do self-initiated expatriates quit their jobs: The role of job embeddedness and shocks in explaining turnover intentions

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## ABSTRACT

Retaining self-initiated expatriates is a challenge for many organizations. Self-made expatriates tend to be mobile. They are willing to manage their own careers and to take up opportunities to live and work in countries of their own choice. Despite their importance as a source of human capital there are few studies on the work experiences of self-initiated expatriates and on the factors that affect their decisions to stay or leave their jobs. This article examined the effects of both job embeddedness and shocks on the turnover intention of self-initiated expatriates. Drawing on a sample of 204 self-initiated expatriates working in public healthcare organizations in the United Arab Emirates we found that both on-the-job embeddedness and shocks played a key role in predicting turnover intentions. The study also revealed that off-the-job embeddedness moderated the relationship between shock and turnover intentions such that self-initiated expatriates were more likely to consider leaving their organizations when they were firmly embedded in their community. We discuss the practical and theoretical implications of these findings.

## 1. Introduction

There are an increasing number of professionals who self-initiate their expatriation to take advantage of attractive opportunities offered internationally (Meyskens, Von Glinow, & Clarke, 2009; Cerdin & Brewster, 2014). It is estimated that there are over 50 million expatriates worldwide many of whom initiate their expatriation (Finaccord, 2014). The global movement of talented and skilled professionals plays an important part in the economic development and international competitiveness of many countries (Silvanto & Ryan, 2014). Self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) are a strategically valuable human resource for multinational corporations (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Tharenou, 2015). They often possess well-developed educational backgrounds, bring sought-after international work experience to their host organization and are highly motivated (Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Vaiman, Haslberger, & Vance, 2015). However, self-initiated expatriates are not always easy to retain and tend to exhibit high levels of organizational turnover and to regularly switch jobs (Biemann & Andresen, 2010; Bozionelos, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to understand the factors that shape the decisions of self-initiated expatriates to stay or leave their jobs. This is an important issue for many internationally-focused organizations because expatriate turnover can erode their economic performance,

deplete their social capital and lead to a tarnished corporate reputation (Naumann, 1992; Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, & Gupta, 1998). Not only does turnover represent a loss of the special talents and skills that self-initiated expatriates bring to their host organizations but it also results in a range of personal and financial costs to the individuals involved (Cassiday, 2005; Doherty & Dickmann, 2013; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; McNulty, 2013; Richardson & Zikic, 2007). Attracting and retaining self-made expatriates is a vital human resource management task that requires an understanding of both the factors that lead to turnover and the policies and practices that can be adopted to prevent the loss of this source of skilled labour.

Although research on self-initiated expatriates has provided important insights into the motivational factors for undertaking employment abroad (Thorn, 2009) and the challenges of cross-cultural adjustment (Froese, 2012; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009) there have been very few studies on the way in which the work experiences of self-initiated expatriates might affect organizational turnover. There has been research on the turnover intentions of company expatriates and on their repatriation (Kraimer, Shafer, Harrison, & Ren, 2012; Stahl, Chua, Caligiuri, Cerdin, & Taniguchi, 2009). However, organizational differences in the experiences of company and self-initiated expatriates would suggest that those who self-initiate may have greater difficulties in adjusting to their new jobs and to their host community than

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company expatriates (Biemann & Andresen, 2010). Self-initiated expatriates must draw almost exclusively on their own resources in order to live and work abroad (Andresen, Al Ariss, & Walther, 2013; Bozionelos, 2009; Vance, 2005). They face greater financial obstacles which add to uncertainty and the risk of failure (Andresen, Bergdolt, Margenfeld, & Dickmann, 2014). Self-initiated expatriates do not benefit from relocation allowances or company-related support in terms of housing or other forms of assistance that might enable them to better integrate into unfamiliar surroundings. They must adjust to a new job in a new organization and establish themselves in a different cultural environment within a foreign country (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). This can pose particular challenges to new arrivals who lack the sponsorship and help of organizations (Richardson & McKenna, 2002; Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

The aim of this paper is to help fill the gap in our understanding of self-initiated expatriate turnover by exploring organizational and community-related factors that either embed individuals in their jobs or alternatively cause them to reassess their employment in the context of their goals, plans and values. In a recent review of the extant literature Doherty, Richardson, and Thorn (2013) pointed to the need to examine why self-initiated expatriates move organizations and to consider in particular the role of embeddedness in keeping people in their jobs. We seek to add value to the research on self-initiated expatriates by drawing on recent developments in turnover theory to explain the motivational forces that shape choices about whether to stay or to leave their job (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001; Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Lo, Wong, Yam, & Whitfield, 2012). The research focuses on a study of health professionals in the United Arab Emirates. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness and turnover-related shocks in understanding why self-initiated expatriates remain or quit their jobs. Individuals who are embedded in both their job and in their community are expected to stay longer in their host location and display a greater preference for organizational stability (Biemann & Andresen, 2010; Cerdin & Pargneux, 2010; Doherty, Dickmann, & Mills, 2011; Vaiman et al., 2015).

In the following section we outline our theoretical framework and hypotheses drawing in particular on contemporary turnover theories relating to job embeddedness and shocks. We explain the relevance of these constructs to the possible turnover intentions of self-initiated expatriates. The paper then provides information on the research setting, the sample and the measures used in the study. Finally, we explore the empirical results and discuss the significance of the findings and how they add to a better understanding of the turnover of self-initiated expatriates.

## 2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Early models of turnover were grounded in March and Simon's (1958) theory that quitting derived from decisions about the perceived desirability and ease of movement. Most of this research focused on the role of attitudinal factors such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment in explaining employee exit behavior (Hom & Griffeth, 1991; Mobley, 1977; Price, 1977; Steers & Mowday, 1981). Although work attitudes were found to be related to turnover there was evidence that they only played a modest explanatory role (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). This led to a focus on turnover theories which placed a greater emphasis on wider organizational factors and non-work influences. Lee and Mitchell (1994) and Lee, Mitchell, Holtom, McDaniel, and Hill (1999) identified the importance of 'shocks' or 'jarring events' as reasons why people chose to leave their jobs. They found that shocks (such as being overlooked for promotion or receiving a negative and unexpected performance evaluation) could cause employees to reassess the quality of their attachment to the organization and lead them to quit.

Building upon this work Mitchell et al. (2001), Lee, Mitchell, Sablynski, Burton, and Holtom (2004) and Felps et al. (2009) developed

the concept of job embeddedness, which they described as a web of forces that helped to constrain people from leaving their jobs. Individuals could be viewed as building attachments both on-the-job to the organization in which they worked and off-the-job to the community in which they lived that made them less likely to leave their job. Because of the importance of contextual influences on expatriate mobility the concepts of embeddedness and shocks are highly relevant to understanding why individuals may decide to stay or leave their organization (Ren, Shaffer, Harrison, Fu, & Fodchuk, 2014). Studies by Tharenou and Caulfield (2010) and Kraimer et al. (2012) have provided rich evidence on the role of job embeddedness and shocks to decisions on repatriation. Moreover, a range of studies have demonstrated that job embeddedness can explain turnover over and above that accounted for by job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Crossley, Bennett, Jex, & Burnfield, 2007; Jiang, Liu, McKay, Lee, & Mitchell, 2012; Lee et al., 2004; Mallol, Holtom, & Lee, 2007). Consequently we have sought to test both embeddedness and shocks as factors affecting the turnover decisions of self-initiated expatriates.

According to the job embeddedness theory, employee turnover will be affected by two factors: on-the job embeddedness which 'refers to how enmeshed a person is in the organization where he or she works', and off-the job embeddedness which 'relates to how entrenched a person is in his or her community' (Crossley et al., 2007, p. 1031). Each of these forms of embeddedness is built on (a) the links that an employee has to other people or the community (b) the extent to which an employee fits into their organization or environment and (c) the sacrifice or perceived cost of material or psychological benefits that may be lost by leaving a job (Mitchell et al., 2001). Job embeddedness thus results from forces both within the organization and in the community.

Self-initiated expatriates can become embedded in their organization where there is a fit between their career goals and the professional development opportunities that are provided by the organization (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). It has been noted that self-initiated expatriates are solely responsible for setting their career goals (Al Ariss, Koall, Ozbilgin, & Suutari, 2012). Thus the greater the perceived compatibility between the goals and values of the individual and the larger corporate culture, and the requirements of the job the higher the likelihood that an individual will feel attached to the organization (Kraimer et al., 2012). Perceptions of successful career progression while working abroad have been found to be associated with positive emotions and pride (Andresen et al., 2014). Links between the employee and their co-workers also can affect the decision to stay (Holtom, Mitchell, Lee, & Eberly, 2008). Interpersonal relationships have been shown to be a particularly important source of satisfaction for self-initiated expatriates (Bozionelos, 2009). Finally, sacrifices or personal losses in terms of leaving interesting projects or giving up valuable perks or benefits can also make quitting more difficult. In this context, we expect that on-the-job embeddedness will be negatively related to turnover intention after controlling for job satisfaction, affective organizational commitment and job security:

**H1.** On-the-job embeddedness will be negatively related to self-initiated expatriates' turnover intentions after controlling for job satisfaction, affective commitment, and job security.

Off-the-job embeddedness is also seen as an important factor affecting turnover particularly in cases where employees are required to change locations (Holtom & O'Neil, 2004). Expatriates can face a range of cross-cultural adjustment problems (McDonnell & Scullion, 2013; Takeuchi, 2010). However, where employees develop social ties and links within their host country they are more likely to become embedded in their community and be able to draw on those resources to deal with the every-day stresses of daily life (Adelman, 1988). They can gain a better understanding of both the organization and the host country in which they live (Baruch, Dickmann, Altman, & Bournois, 2013). Familiarity and comfort with the different aspects of the new environment can reduce uncertainty and assist job retention

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