



From global careers to talent flow: Reinterpreting ‘brain drain’

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Abstract

Talent flow is a process whereby economically valuable individuals migrate between countries, and is arguably a more important global career influence than international flows of personnel within global organizations. In this article, we reject the term brain drain as too restrictive and focus on the psychology of migration, specifically the economic, political, cultural, family, and career forces motivating it. Boundaryless global careers are presented as individual phenomena combining into macro-level international effects. These talent flow concepts have HR policy implications at both national and organizational levels. In support of our arguments, we provide a case study of New Zealand, along with preliminary data from a large sample of New Zealand expatriates.

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1. Introduction

Until very recently, the study of global careers has focused on the assignment of expatriates by multinational companies (Thomas, 2002). In this article, we focus instead on the careers of a different, and we argue, a much bigger and ultimately more significant group. These are migrants who expatriate themselves voluntarily to new countries independently of any employer.

Migrant careers are a major influence on labor markets, and therefore, on global organizations. The

skilled migrant labor force is a significant potential resource for international organizations. Migrants have higher achievement motivation than non-migrants (Boneva et al., 1998). They contribute to valuable cultural diversity in different settings (Council of Europe, 2002). They are available in significant numbers as employees to global companies (Cousey, 1999). As they migrate, they direct their careers into, through, and out of international companies. Businesses operating internationally must often choose between local people, staff expatriated by the company, and immigrants. Understanding migrants is, therefore, of major importance in international management.

This article is about the motivation and self-management of international careers by voluntary migrants, particularly skilled migrants, and the effects of their careers on the workforces available in the labor forces of different countries. The literature linking

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micro-level individual careers to macro-level phenomena tends to focus on the effects of macro-level structures on individual action (Nystrom & McArthur, 1989). Our emphasis is the reverse. We seek to show how individual-level career behavior has societal-level effects on the supply and utilization of labor. Therefore, to assimilate and utilize the migrant labor pool, macro-entities, such as companies and societies, must develop policies and practices that acknowledge individual human agency.

We commence our paper with a brief overview of the literature on migration, focusing on the macro-level issues of brain drain (where skilled personnel leave their country) and brain waste (where immigrants' skills are underutilized in their new country). Next, drawing from the new careers literature, we describe the *boundaryless global career* as a behavioral, individual-level phenomenon with societal outcomes. We then utilize the literature on international migration to synthesize a taxonomy of motivators that direct careers across international boundaries. Then, we show how, in highly skilled workforces, the effects of these individual career choices, and actions, are manifested and reflected back into dynamic macro-level processes that we label *talent flow*, the migration of skilled people between countries. Talent flow is governed by human choice, and is constituted from boundaryless global careers.

We note that the dynamics of talent flow vary according to macro-level forces in different settings, particularly national settings, and that social forces become inputs to individual career (including migration) decisions, which in turn, either reinforce or change those forces in a continuing cycle. We provide a case study of one specific country, New Zealand, to show how myriad career actions and experiences by migrants create macro-level patterns of talent flow into and out of a country. Finally, we consider the ramifications of our theory for policy-makers and corporate groups.

2. Migration

2.1. Brain drain

Since the end of World War II and the mass migrations that it created, concern has continued about migration from the developing countries of the

Southern Hemisphere to the developed economies in the North (Guadilla, 1996; Management Review, 1969). Early debate about this so-called brain drain focused on its implications for Third World economic development (Baldwin, 1970). However, from the 1970s, the debate was joined by other worried sources. These included the former colonies of the Empire in the Western Pacific (Tan & Lipton, 1993); countries undergoing radical political changes, such as South Africa (Louw & Foster, 1986) and the former USSR (Baumgartner, 1993); and the rapidly changing economies of Southeast Asia (Chia & Hwang, 1986). This debate was driven by local fears that skilled emigrants would find permanent jobs overseas, and would decide to stay in the more developed economies, thus fuelling an escalating dynamic of 'success to the successful'. The rich economies would grow even richer in human capital, while the poor had their growth stunted by the outflow of the skilled people who were their most significant resource (Joyce & Hunt, 1982).

The clamor about brain drain continues to be heard (Carrington & Detragiache, 1999) with a focus on economic effects. For example, a key structural determinant of skilled migration to the United States is reported to be the socio-economic disparity of countries-of-origin (Cheng & Yang, 1998). Similarly, the United Nations recently concluded that India was experiencing a net loss on its investments in technical education, with a net annual outflow of US\$ 2 billion towards wealthier economies (United Nations, 2002). Perhaps the most acute brain drain, however, is being experienced in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in the health sectors there (Joint Learning Initiative, 2004). Thus "the brain drain . . . is an inescapable fact faced by smaller nations in the shadow of large, more economically powerful ones" (Matthews & Zander, 2000, p. 17). At the center of each of these reports is an assumption that brain drain is an almost inevitable part of the larger process of globalization.

2.2. Brain gain

Focusing on brain drain alone has limitations. It overlooks a second strand of thinking and research about migration—that concerned with *brain gain*. Societies losing skilled people through emigration often gain replacements, sometimes in larger numbers and with greater skills, through immigration (Spoon-

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