

Towards an Understanding of Social Networks among Organizational Self-Initiated

Expatriates: A Qualitative Case Study of a Professional Services Firm

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Abstract

Drawing on a qualitative case study of 51 organizational self-initiated expatriates (OSIE) in a professional services firm, this article investigates the role of networks during expatriation and, specifically, in the development of learning that is beneficial to both the individual expatriate and the global operations of the firm. First, we investigate the extent to which individual motivations to engage in OSIE impact on the development of networks. Second, we investigate individual's experiences of network development. Third, we investigate individual perceptions of the benefits of networks for both organizations and individual actors. The paper will report that professionals initiating their own expatriation develop continually expanding and composite networks such that mobility and networks evolve in a seemingly symbiotic relationship. In doing so, it contributes to our understanding of the role of agency in network development and extends our understanding of organizational self-initiated expatriation as a relatively under-researched phenomenon.

Keywords: networks; mobility; expatriation; professional services firm; qualitative

INTRODUCTION

The social network perspective has been widely used to investigate structural (Granovetter, 1973; Gulati, 2007; Proven and Kenis, 2007), strategic (Beckman, Haunschild, and Phillips, 2004; Westphal, Boivie, and Chung, 2006) and interpersonal relations (Ferrin, Dirk, and Shah, 2006; Reagans, Zuckerman, and McEvily, 2004) in the social sciences broadly and management and organizational studies in particular. More recently, scholars have continued to adopt this perspective to study an even broader range of themes including the international growth of new ventures (Dhanaraj, 2010); the role of political skills in utilizing network resources (Wei, Chiang and Wu, 2012) ; knowledge transfer and development (Fang, Jiang, Makino and Beamish, 2010; Reiche, 2012; Tallman and Chacar, 2011) ; idea emergence and life cycles (Kijkuit and Van Den Ende, 2007) and career change (Dobrev, 2012). While this clearly suggests a broad range of potential applications, opportunities for further theoretical development and empirical application remain (Jack, 2005; Kilduff and Brass, 2010). Therefore, this paper will extend application of the theory to a further group, in this case organizational self-initiated expatriates (OSIEs).

Despite its seemingly eclectic range of applications, Kilduff and Brass (2010 p. 319) suggest that social network theory is characterized by an emphasis on four core themes: first, on relations *between* actors; second, on the extent to which exchange in social relations are embedded within a network; third, on the patterns that exist beneath the complexity of social relations and fourth, on the connections within a network that help and hinder outcomes that are

important to individuals and organizations. Focusing first on the idea of relations between actors, for example, some scholars have sought to understand how actors develop relations that connect or separate them from each other (e.g. Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, and Tsai, 2004) and why they have developed the respective networks in a particular way (Bowler and Brass, 2006; Brass, 1984). This stream of research has also explored the impact of individual actor's attributes, for example personality, self-esteem, and how they may contribute to network development (Mehra, Kilduff, and Brass, 1998).

The second area of focus, the embeddedness of exchange in social relations within a network, has also been the subject of a significant amount of research (e.g. Barden and Mitchell, 2007; Granovetter, 1985; Krackhardt and Kilduff, 1999; Krackhardt and Porter 1986; Podolny and Page, 1998). Embedded ties, or what Granovetter (1973) called 'strong ties' are those which are characterized by a strong and closely connected network (Krackhardt and Kilduff, 1999). These 'strong ties' can be juxtaposed with 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973) which are based on loose connections between individuals who may have less frequent contact of a more superficial nature. The third area of concern, the patterns that exist beneath the complexity of social relations, explores how individual networks might develop into a structural pattern (Wellman and Berkowitz, 1988). It also signals how the structure of the ties in the respective network may impact on the range and character of potential outcomes (Barley, 1990; Jack, 2005). The fourth area of concern examines the impact of patterns of social interaction and relations on individual and organizational outcomes thus signalling how, with whom and why networks are developed and the concomitant implications for the individual, organization and society (Bowler and Brass, 2006; Brass, 1984; Granovetter, 1974; Putnam, 2000). It is this fourth area of research which

concerns this paper, the aim of which is two-fold. First, to enhance our understanding about how and why networks are developed and second, to explore the impact of network development on organizations and individuals. Both objectives will be achieved by drawing on a mixed-method study comprising documentary analysis and in-depth interviews with senior managers (VP HR and another senior HR manager) and a group of organizational self-initiated expatriates (OSIEs) currently working for ‘Mintech’¹ an international professional services firm in the mining industry.

Organizational expatriates (OEs) have been the focus of extensive and longstanding scholarly research, while research on self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) is also now a growing, although less well-established, field of interest (Andresen, Al Ariss and Walther, 2013; Doherty, Richardson and Thorn, 2013; Vaiman and Haslberger, 2013; Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010). By comparison, however, research on OSIEs remains very limited (Altman and Baruch, 2012; Richardson, McKenna, Dickie and De Gama, 2013). Although the boundaries between these three groups – and we would argue all internationally mobile professionals (Andresen, Bergdolt, Marganfeld and Dickmann, forthcoming; McKenna and Richardson, 2007) - are blurred, we offer a ‘working definition’ to signal the parameters of this particular paper. Following Doherty, Richardson and Thorn (2013), we suggest that OSIEs differ from organizational expatriates (OEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) in that OSIEs *initiate their own mobility within an organizational context under company sponsorship, support and/or knowledge*. For the purposes of this paper, we are concerned to investigate the potential link between individual motivations

¹ Pseudonym

to engage in OSIE, experiences of network formation during expatriation and, the perceived organizational and individual benefits of developing those networks.

The specific value of focusing on individual motivations for OSIE and the subsequent impact on network formation and outcomes, is that it engages with the ‘agentic turn’ (Kilduff and Brass, 2010 p. 336) in social network theory. This is somewhat different to Podolny’s and Page’s (1998) view of a network as a set of “enduring exchange relations” between a collection of actors, which underplays the role of individual agency. Our approach, therefore, explores whether individual action – in this case organizational self-initiated expatriation - impacts on network formation and outcomes. First, then, we explore whether individual motivations to engage in OSIE impact on the development of networks. Second, we explore individual experiences of the respective network development. In this regard we are seeking to understand whether engaging in OSIE impacts on willingness and propensity to form networks and the subsequent experiences of that network formation. Third, we explore the individual and organizational benefits of networks developed through individual agency. This will include, for example, exploring the potential organizational impact of OSIEs developing networks in the host country office as well as their impact on existing networks in the home country and on the wider global operations of the firm. Furthermore, we will also connect our findings to Burt’s (2004) conception of ‘structural holes’ and how the emerging social networks span structural holes to facilitate integration and closer connectivity in the global operations and activities of the firm. The specific contribution here, therefore, is to answer Kilduff’s and Brass’ (2010) call for social network research to attend to the impact of individual agency in network formation and outcomes.

EXPATRIATION AND NETWORKS

The study of expatriation has produced a great deal of work in management studies over many years. As noted above, this work has focused predominantly on the organizational expatriate (OE) who has been sent overseas by an employer. More recently, however, there has been a growing body of research focusing on the ‘self-initiated expatriate’ (SIE) (e.g., Al Ariss, 2010; Andresen, Al Ariss and Walther, 2013; Bozionelos, 2009; Doherty, Richardson and Thorn, 2013; Froese, 2011; McKenna and Richardson, 2007; Richardson, 2006; 2013; Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010; Vaiman and Haslberger, 2013). Alongside these fields of study a new stream of research is emerging which focuses on the organizational or corporate self-initiated expatriate (Altman and Baruch, 2012; Richardson et al, 2013). While we acknowledge that the boundaries between the three groups are blurred, the OSIE can be distinguished from the other two forms of expatriation in that OSIEs *initiate their own mobility within* an organizational context under company sponsorship, support and/or knowledge. They are, in effect, intra-company SIEs (Andresen, Bergdolt, Marganfeld and Dickmann, forthcoming). While there is widespread acknowledgement that OE often occurs in an ad hoc, voluntary fashion (Harris and Brewster, 1999), we know very little about how individual initiatives to expatriate evolve and their subsequent outcomes. Where individual agency is concerned, OSIEs are an interesting case in the sense that they are engaging in a high level of agency to be mobile and yet they remain within organizational boundaries. This can be contrasted with the OE who, we would argue, exhibits less agency (depending on their home country and corporation)² in the sense that they

² While it is the case that OEs may have the right to decline an overseas posting, this will depend on their country of origin. For a Japanese salaryman, refusing an overseas assignment would be not only career suicide but have a dramatic impact on their ability to be employed at all in Japan.

are sent/directed by their employer and, the SIE who also exhibits agency but across organizational boundaries.

Expatriate management scholars have shown much interest in how networks and ties impact on adjustment in the host country environment (e.g. Fahr, Bartol, Shapiro, and Shin, 2010; Liu and Shaffer, 2005; Osman-Ghani and Rockstuhl, 2008; Shen and Kram, 2011). There has also been some interest in the impact of networks on expatriate career competencies, opportunities and advancement (Barhem, Younies, and Smith, 2011; Cao, Hirschi, and Deller, 2012) as well as on the diffusion of international business norms (Nolan, 2011). Tacit knowledge exchange through network development (Crowne, 2009; Lovvorn and Chen, 2011; Makela, 2007) and the importance of networks for female expatriates (Hutchings, French, and Hatcher, 2008; Shortland, 2011) and expatriate spouses (Kupka and Cathro, 2007) have also been explored. Other avenues of research have examined the impact of micro-level networks on global coordination processes (Morley & Heraty, 2004; Wagner and Vormbusch, 2010) and organizational embeddedness and social ties among expatriates (Reiche, Kraimer and Harzing, 2011). Extending this body of literature even further, this paper will explore the importance of the development of networks in the experiences and actions of OSIEs. Specifically the connection between organizational networks and the individual desire to seek out an opportunity outside of their home country with their existing employer; how they maintain and develop networks during expatriation; the potential organizational and individual benefits of those networks as a consequence of OSIEs acting as a 'bridge' between Mintech offices. In this regard, the paper will address the following three research questions:

1. How are networks implicated in the desire of OSIEs to engage in expatriation?
2. How do OSIEs maintain and develop networks during expatriation?

3. What are OSIEs' perceptions of the organizational and individual benefits of the networks they have developed during expatriation?

METHODOLOGY

The Research Context

Mintech is a professional services firm based in Canada, offering a range of engineering, geological and other services to companies operating in the mining sector. It has around 180 offices world-wide and approximately 8000 staff. At the time the study was carried out in 2010-11 three hundred Mintech employees were on an expatriate assignment. There are three ways in which expatriation occurs at Mintech; conventional company driven assignments (OEs); OSIE through a Global Exchange Program (GEP); and OSIE outside of the GEP. In this regard, we observe that OSIE may take place both within the GEP and outside of the GEP. In both cases, however, the central point is that *expatriation is initiated by the individual him/herself* rather than by Mintech. Analysis of company documents and interviews with senior HR managers at Mintech indicated that the *formal* Global Exchange Program (GEP) was originally established in order to encourage employees to engage in international mobility; particularly more junior employees with limited organizational tenure. More specifically, the GEP provides individuals with opportunities to participate in international experience, usually for one to two years, to one of the firm's international offices, subject to a specific set of rules, participation criteria and organizational need. What is important to note, however, is that it is up to the individual him/herself to sign up to the program and is a form of OSIE.

In addition to those who self-initiate expatriation through the GEP our study also includes those Mintech employees who have initiated their expatriation in a more informal, non-institutionalized fashion – that is to say, still within Mintech and yet outside of the GEP. Thus, taken together, our paper explores the experiences of employees who have both engaged in OSIE and yet in slightly different ways.

Research design

Heeding Gephart's (2004) advice that qualitative research enables us to explore "the meanings in use by societal members to explain how they directly experience everyday life realities" (p, 455), this study adopted a multi-method qualitative research design. It is, therefore, firmly located in a postpositivist paradigm, whereby we seek to solicit "emic viewpoints to assist in determining the meanings and purposes that people ascribe to their actions" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). This approach requires discovery of the purposes and outcomes of behaviour through the collection of more "situational information" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 110) which might enable the development of new insights through a grounded theory approach.

As noted above, we used a multi-method approach to data collection comprising documentary analysis, interviews with two senior HR managers (VP HR and another senior HR Manager) and interviews with OSIEs at Mintech. Methodological pluralism was a particularly useful tool for this study, given our intention to understand individual experiences of developing social networks (Gephart, 2004; Suddaby, 2006). It also added both consistency and rigour to our research findings (Marshall and Rossman, 2011).

Focusing first on the documentary analysis, we started out by examining all company documentation relating to expatriation protocol. We also examined company reports and websites paying particular attention to its strategy for enhancing and encouraging opportunities for global mobility. We then interviewed the VP HR and another senior HR manager in order to gain an understanding of organizational policy (informal and formal) on expatriation and global mobility more broadly defined. After these interviews were completed, we conducted in-depth telephone or skype interviews each lasting between 45-90 minutes with 51 OSIEs within Mintech. Given the diverse geographical locations of the sample (i.e. spread across eleven different countries), telephone or skype interviews were the only feasible option. As a relatively new method of communication, skype was particularly useful for this study as it allowed us to have ‘face-to-face’ contact with interviewees.

Fourteen of the 51 interviewees had initiated their expatriation through the GEP, the remainder (37) had also initiated their own expatriation but outside the GEP – i.e. in a more informal and adhoc fashion. During these interviews we also went back again to company documents and websites to explore/clarify themes raised by interviewees which had not been covered by senior management or which we had not picked up on during the earlier analysis. After completing the 51 interviews, we conducted a focus group discussion with both senior HR managers together, which lasted for one and a half hours. This latter activity was particularly useful for exploring their reactions to our findings and connecting what the individual OSIEs had said with senior management initiatives and objectives. The interviews were conducted by both

members of the research team and, in order to ensure consistency in questioning and understanding of findings, we discussed the emerging themes between ourselves on a daily basis. These discussions facilitated a collaborative appreciation of how the study was evolving and was particularly useful for creating and then adding to our coding frame, as discussed below.

The main characteristics of our sample is as follows: 11 OSIEs were Canadian, ten British, six American, five Australian, four Italian, four were dual citizens (Australian and Canadian), three were New Zealanders, two South Africans and one each from Bolivia, Venezuela, Chile, Sweden and two that were unreported. At the time of the study they were or had been expatriates in 26 countries. Thirty-seven of the 51 interviewees were in the age range 26-40. The majority were married, 35% had children. All participants had a post-secondary education. Twenty were women.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and data collection and analysis of documents and interviews were conducted simultaneously in order to ensure consistency between the empirical data and the findings. As soon as was possible after a document had been read or an interview conducted, they were analyzed using Nvivo8. We used template analysis (King, 1998) where emergent themes were identified and coded into a 'hierarchical' model of 'trees'. Coding the emerging themes in this way allowed us to identify dominant and subsidiary themes in relation to our key themes of agency, ties and networks. For example, the dominant drivers for OSIE were career development, adventure/broader life

experience, building global networks, gaining international experience and professional learning. In relation to how networks were developed in the host country, OSIEs reported wanting to learn about the work undertaken in the host country and how important it was for the emerging knowledge to be shared with other organizational members. Finally, in relation to perceptions of the individual and organizational benefits of OSIE, the most dominant themes revolved around ‘building bridges’, or ‘acting as a bridge’ between global offices.

Once all the interviews had been completed and all the data analyzed, a second round of analysis was conducted, working through the codes splitting and splicing where relevant; and returning to ‘memos’ for further discussion and exploration. At this stage in the analysis our findings could be more clearly connected to gaps in the social network literature, particularly with respect to agency.

FINDINGS

The importance of networks in organizational self-initiated expatriation

Data analysis suggested that the dominant drivers to engage in OSIE were perceived opportunities for: career development, adventure/broader life experience, building global networks, gaining international experience and professional learning. It is notable, however, that there was a great deal of overlap between these drivers where, for example, the desire to gain international experience was widely understood as a way to facilitate professional learning and particularly to get access to a global professional network. Similarly, a desire for international

experience was also expected to support career development. A key finding here was that interviewees were very clearly aware of the multi-dimensionality of OSIE and its potential for individual and professional outcomes, as suggested by Jason, below:

For me, the career opportunity was exciting, but also the cultural and personal experiences were also very, very exciting. Africa is a place I'd always wanted to experience and you know, this is exactly the way I like to experience a place, actually you know, plunk in and live there. So certainly the cultural and personal experience was also very important to me (Jason, Canadian in Ghana).

Well over half of the interviewees indicated that they had deliberately sought an opportunity to expatriate to enhance their opportunities for career development and particularly for movement up the organizational hierarchy. Thus, for example, we observe below how Calvin associates gaining expatriate experience with opportunities to scale the organizational hierarchy more quickly rather than what he perceives as a much slower trajectory if he were to remain in the domestic environment:

...you could stay in Canada and continue to inch your way up, but it's also a good way to get that international experience and to kind of... do these sort of side, diagonal jumps upwards and that, at the end of the day, a move like this would be good for my career (Calvin, Canadian in Australia).

Echoing research on SIEs, a search for adventure was a further theme mentioned by over half of the interviewees directly and was alluded to by most others as a reason for expatriation.

And the personal reason, like I always had the desire to open up my horizons because I was born in a small village in the Alps. Well the horizons are a bit closed and so it was in me. This desire grew up when I went to Milan to study, so I started to see a city, then I realized that the world is bigger than Italy and basically that is one important reason (Lydia, Italian in Canada).

Over half of the interviewees identified international experience and learning as two very important drivers for seeking an expatriate opportunity as suggested by Linda, below:

Partially it was just I'd travelled overseas on smaller projects or shorter term projects and I enjoyed that experience and the same with my husband. He's actually travelled a lot and enjoyed it. And it was partially just for, you know, personal growth, to do something new and I thought it would be a valuable career experience as well and also just for our kids to not only grow up in Canada (Linda, Canadian in Bulgaria).

A key theme that emerged throughout our interviews was that for the majority of OSIEs ties and networks within Mintech facilitated their expatriation and yet they were also motivated to expatriate in order to augment those ties and networks within the firm even further. Symone

provides a good example of this line of thinking: she engaged in OSIE in order to enhance her career opportunities and to experience a sense of adventure by working with other Mintech employees in other parts of the world. Yet, it was a former co-worker and a chance encounter in a home country office that enabled her to expatriate:

In Mintech you can apply for an exchange project but I delayed my decision because we are a small office here in Italy, so it wasn't the right time. Then I met someone from Australia here in Italy in my own office during an international meeting and they said – 'Send me your Curriculum Vitae. We are all the time looking for engineers'. So that was destiny knocking at the door (Symone, Italian in Australia).

In addition to drawing on home country networks, analysis suggested that developing ties and connections in the office where they wanted to work was common practice among virtually all OSIEs who took part in this study. The majority described how they had 'reached out' to employees in the respective office in order to develop projects and roles in which they could be involved. In some cases they had no previous contact with the person to whom they were 'reaching out' whereas in others they already knew them or knew of them through another contact in the organization. For those who were establishing a new contact, they were bridging the 'structural gaps' in the organization and in doing so contributing to both their own professional development and, they believed, the performance of the organization as a whole. In some cases, for example, they were creating connections between offices which had not previously been connected, enhancing both their own careers and the global business, as suggested by Glen, below:

I'd spoken with the senior archaeologist and the environmental geologist, like your group manager, prior to coming out on a couple of occasions and there were lots of emails that went back and forth and we touched on the role that I would play. So I think I had a good idea going into it, and, obviously, before I went I did a fair amount of research on legislation and the archaeology of the area to be better prepared once I got here (Glen, Canadian in Australia).

The majority of interviewees also reported that they had worked hard to find and develop the 'right people' and 'connections' that could facilitate the move to the place they wanted to go. Kevin, for example, indicated that it was crucial to remain "self-motivated". He added,

.... stay on top of it yourself to make sure that things are happening for you, but once we got in touch with the right people and they knew things were happening and what dates, then people were really good about getting you the information you needed (Kevin, Canadian in Australia).

In addition to deliberately seeking out and creating connections to facilitate expatriation, we also heard widespread accounts of how a connection with another Mintech employee in another office had emerged serendipitously and how that connection had later encouraged them to consider expatriation, as suggested by Troy, below:

I was kind of lucky because I came across this guy from Montreal and he said, ‘Well, do you like to travel?’ Yeah – I do. So this opportunity arose and so from that time, I was thinking about that. (Troy, Italian in Canada).

In Troy’s case he eventually found an office in Canada that needed his expertise which he discovered through a Canadian who had moved to his own home office in Italy. From a personal and professional point of view with respect to the desire to enhance a career, have an adventure, gain international experience, and/or learn and develop professionally, our findings suggest that the development of ties and networks is very clearly a critical support mechanism and facilitator of mobility.

Data analysis also revealed constraints on where networks could be usefully developed, suggesting that an OSIE needs to build networks where their specific expertise is required. This finding suggests that mobility enhancing networks need to be developed agentically *and* strategically. The majority of the OSIEs in our study said that building ties and networks was essential in order to develop their existing skills and experience. Yet, they also emphasized that building ties and networks invariably required a great deal of initiative i.e. as opposed to waiting to be contacted by others, as suggested by Silvia, below:

So part of it is the kind of work the office does and I’d made inquiries from people here who I knew in other offices about the kind of work they did, which is why I applied for Canada originally. I had an idea of who’d come here and I knew that they did some kind

of work that would be suitable for me and stuff that was relevant. (Silvia, British in Canada).

This process of actively identifying potentially relevant contacts, making initial contact, or in some cases reinvigorating old contacts and scoping projects and roles, permeated the accounts of the vast majority of our participants, and highlighted how a desire to expatriate had demanded a strong sense of agency and network development.

Developing ties and networks during expatriation

Turning now to our second research question, we asked interviewees to tell us about their experience(s) of expatriation and specifically how they went about building and maintaining their networks. A dominant theme here was the extent to which networks developed in the host country would facilitate both individual and organizational learning. Thus, for example, all interviewees talked about how much they had learned through their networks in the host country. Yet, they also talked about how they believed that their colleagues in the host country had learned from them and how they expected to take a considerable amount of that learning back to their home country office. In this respect we observe how proactive networking facilitates organizational learning between individuals and between offices. Mary, for example, was involved in a wide variety of projects and, as she suggests, has a broad range of contacts with related opportunities for learning.

I tried to get involved in what I was looking for so I think I worked with most of the senior engineers that were there. I was in a wide variety of type of projects. I worked in

a project in Mexico and I went to do field work in the Dominican Republic. I was in the North Pole. I was in Vancouver doing work for Peru. I know who to call for specific things now... The network that I got to build there is for me the main, or the biggest tool, I got from this experience. (Mary, Bolivian in Canada).

Glen also identified the learning opportunities he gained through his experiences of working with indigenous people in Australia and how that knowledge will be important for him (and Mintech) when he returns to Canada:

I think in archeology, every time you go into the field, it sounds kind of cheesy, but you learn something new, right? And it's one of those things that being exposed to completely different cultures, different ways of doing things, different legislation, how the heritage is protected, how it's approached. I think that's the one main thing that I really gained out of that experience. (Glen, Canadian previously in Australia).

Data analysis also suggested that professional learning and development could not be dissociated from the people as well as the projects on which interviewees worked after expatriation. Critical to experiencing professional development were new ties and networks and, importantly, a 'different dynamic'. Analysis indicated that exposure to new environments and people stimulated a great deal of professional learning for all of the OSIEs who took part in this study.

A further important finding was that the perceived value of ties and networks extended beyond the short term to long term professional development, including repatriation and future long and short term expatriate opportunities. Troy, provides a useful exemplar of this theme.

Oh yeah. Yeah. It helped me because I actually know what I do whereas before leaving, I was basically self-taught, so sometimes you just scratch your head. Is it right or not? I mean, and basically I didn't know who to ask and now, having spent two years in Canada, I have kind of a network. I know a lot of people. (Troy, Italian with previous experience in Canada).

Professional learning occurred within a framework of new people and new projects. All interviewees noted how building an international network of ties was a positive outcome of expatriation that had enhanced their learning in their host contexts. Similarly, evaluations of the impact of OSIE on career and career development experience and opportunities were closely connected to emerging networks:

I think it's exciting. I think it's good long-term for your career. It expands your network. You know, it comes from being a [domestic] Mintech employee to an international employee, knowing people everywhere and I mean, the people here know people elsewhere and they're usually the very senior people. So it just really expands your network, I think (Natasha, American in Australia).

Developing networks was seen as particularly important for facilitating international collaborations, which were in turn seen as having a positive impact on individual careers because of their centrality to the firm's global business strategy. Gary, for example, a Canadian now in India with previous experience in Australia noted that, "*when I manage projects I pull out people from different places because I've met them and I understand where they're coming from*". The fact that he had developed this network facilitated further successful projects, which he felt would have a positive impact on opportunities for further projects and promotion. There were also widespread reports about the value of working with different types of *clients* during expatriation as well as with different colleagues within Mintech. In this respect we see how for professional services employees, network development occurs beyond organizational boundaries to include client networks.

Turning now to the nature of the networks created during OSIE, analysis suggested that they tended to reflect the characteristics of 'weak' ties (Granovetter, 1973) in the sense that they were based on short term acquaintances and were oftentimes described as 'loose' or 'surface level'. It is also notable that many of these networks would be maintained at a distance once employees returned to their home country or moved elsewhere. Yet, while developing these *weak* ties was seen as a positive aspect of their expatriate experience, several interviewees also indicated that expatriation had had a negative impact on the *strong* ties (Granovetter, 1973) they had in their home office. For these interviewees a primary concern was that losing those strong ties might impact on their ability to resettle into the home office when they repatriated. They were also concerned about how it might impact on opportunities to get involved in home office projects and that they might be 'shut out' of the home office. Sheldon, a New Zealander, now in

Australia who had also worked in America and the Yemen provides a good example of this kind of concern:

I lost track of all the development within the [home office] company. You lose contact with your clients, so when I went back, it was almost like arriving again for the first time. I had to redevelop those client contacts.

It is notable that all of the interviewees who were concerned about losing their ‘strong ties’ with their home office colleagues, also explicitly acknowledged the value of the ‘weaker ties’ they had developed during expatriation. In this respect, they saw expatriation as a ‘double-edged sword’, a complex and dynamic work experience both expanding and limiting their professional networks.

Filling structural holes through OSIE: Bridging

Turning now to the concept of ‘structural holes’ (Burt, 2004), the majority of interviewees believed that while Mintech saw itself as a ‘global company’ the ‘reality’ was that offices tended to operate more or less independently. Moreover, there was widespread agreement that while individual employees may have a strong allegiance to their own office, unless they engaged in some form of expatriation or global mobility, they would have only a minimal understanding of how things worked in other parts of the organization. Indeed, this was a key concern for the two senior HR managers who took part in the study, who also believed that the organization needed to find a way to operate as an ‘integrated whole’ rather than what they saw as “a fairly loose organization structure”. This concern related to a number of issues, but

most clearly to perceptions among senior management and employees that knowledge flow between offices was limited which restricted organizational learning and performance. Darin, for example, an Australian who had expatriated to Chile and then Canada, stated that *“the opportunity for networking is huge and that’s what Mintech needs more than anything if we’re going to be an international company”*.

It is clear from the findings presented thus far that OSIEs in this study created and/or drew on their professional networks within Mintech to facilitate expatriation. Indeed, the majority suggested that building professional networks within the company was essential for anyone wishing to engage in expatriation more generally – i.e. not just OSIE. Analysis also suggested widespread evidence that interviewees expanded their networks in the host country during expatriation, albeit, in some instances, at the ‘cost’ of their strong ties in their home country office. While these findings clearly signal the value of OSIE to use and expand existing networks, there was also widespread agreement that Mintech also stands to benefit. More specifically, and drawing on Burt’s (2004) idea of ‘structural holes’ and ‘bridges’, interviewees spoke of how, by engaging in OSIE, they could facilitate greater information flow between global offices, which they believed would ultimately be beneficial to Mintech and to their respective colleagues/peers/clients.

The nature of this ‘bridging’ took multiple, and oftentimes complex, forms. Yet, complexity notwithstanding, there was broad agreement that engaging in OSIE would have a positive impact on both individual and organizational performance. For example, in some cases the bridging activity simply involved being able to call up an office where they had previously

worked for information or to seek out further connections. Interestingly, for some interviewees, these connections were especially useful once they had either returned to their home country or had expatriated to another country. It is notable, however, that this finding offers a different perspective to reports in studies of repatriated OEs who have suggested that their contacts in the host countries are often of little value, or at least are undervalued by their peers, once they have returned to the home country (Cappellen and Janssens, 2010). We suggest that the focus of the work of Mintech, concentrated in mining, facilitates connectedness and the use-value of globalized skills which enhances knowledge sharing by OSIEs.

The majority of interviewees drew on specific examples to indicate how they had been able to use the knowledge and/or experience they had gained during expatriation in their home office, and/or how it had contributed to the creation of business opportunities. Several interviewees, for example, reported how they had drawn on their networks in the respective host country offices to facilitate entry to new markets and new projects in their home country and/or use expertise from one part of the world to help solve problems in another, as suggested by Jason, below:

The other advantage that I think I bring to this position is that our African operation is fairly young, in Mintech terms. I came here with a fairly good international network already and what I'm able to do is to bring the resources from a much broader network, that a lot of the African colleagues can't bring. So, I'd say one of the advantages that I have is that I have worked for Mintech for 20 years. I know a lot of people in the

Canadian operation and American operation and can say ‘okay, we have this problem here, here’s where we can get the resources to do this’ (Jason, Canadian in Ghana).

Analysis also suggested that the ‘bridging’ between subsidiaries was not limited to creating bridges between the home office and the office to which OSIEs had expatriated. Some interviewees, reported what might be understood as ‘regional’ bridging activity, particularly in Europe, Australia and South America. For example, Clive, a Brazilian based in Canada who had previously worked in Australia, Peru, Canada, Italy and Chile described how he had used his networks in each of the respective countries to transfer knowledge and expertise between global offices.

Data also revealed a fairly widespread sense that the OSIEs who took part in this study believed that their capacity to bridge between the global offices would energize both other employees as well as enhancing Mintech’s ‘brand image’ as a global organization. More specifically, they believed that it would move them some way towards addressing the existing perception of Mintech as comprising disparate and only loosely connected offices. Darin, an Australian who had expatriate experience in Canada and Chile, offers an example of this line of thinking:

So expatriation like this means so and so going to Denver for six months because he takes ideas there, he brings ideas back. He’s excited. Everybody’s excited. There’s a big connection and, you know, the communication just keeps going over Skype and text messages and stuff for years afterwards. (Darin)

What is particularly important here is how these OSIEs seem to view expatriation as the start of an on-going process characterized by increasing connectivity, mobility and communication, which benefits both the individual and the organization.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the development and use of ties and networks are important for OSIEs in a number of ways. First, they were instrumental in fulfilling their desire to expatriate regardless of whether the driver to do so was adventure, career development, learning or simply gaining international experience more generally. Whereas those interviewees who were taking part in the GEP had to rely less on such networks than their non-GEP counterparts to get their initial expatriate position, all OSIEs appreciated that having a robust network of contacts overseas was essential if they wanted to relocate to a specific country and if they wanted to expatriate again in the future. In many respects these ‘contacts’ operated like ‘gatekeepers’ who would ‘vouchsafe’ for the would-be expatriate, providing references or other informal information. Second, once in an expatriate position, OSIEs explicitly spoke of expanding and consolidating their ties and networks even further. Indeed, when asked to evaluate their experience, ‘opportunity to network and make connections overseas’ was by far the most dominant theme. Moreover, the majority identified these ties and networks as having a consistently positive impact on their career by enhancing their professional learning opportunities and specifically allowing them to make a greater contribution to Mintech’s global business performance. Third, interviewees reported that the ties and networks they developed made a substantial contribution to the integration, coordination and performance of the global business. The extent to which these perceptions are ‘factually correct’, of course, can only be

understood by examining organizational performance more closely. In the absence of such data, however, what is important here is that it is these perceptions which are driving OSIEs behaviour and interpretations of the value of expatriation. In this sense, OSIEs clearly see themselves as bridges, filling structural holes between social systems (global offices) with important knowledge and information for the benefit of Mintech.

Moving on from the empirical data presented thus far, we turn now to the theoretical contribution of this paper. Social network research has highlighted how the abilities, skills and motivations of some individuals enable them to take advantage of “advantageous network positions” (Kilduff and Brass, 2010 p. 335). It has also been suggested that this approach leans towards a form of structural determinism, i.e., the network exists for those who have the ability and motivation to exploit it (Kilduff and Brass, 2010). What has been somewhat neglected is the way in which individual motivations and subsequent actions, create ties and networks and build bridges between social systems that have individual and organizational outcomes. Indeed, Kilduff and Brass (2010 p. 336) argue that “future research might consider more closely the question of how much control actors have over the networks that constrain and enable their behaviours”. Our research shows that OSIEs as actors, engaging in self-initiated mobility within an organization, have a substantial influence on the nature, content, trajectory and success of network development.

The data we have presented here offers an insight into the ‘agentic turn’ in organizational social network research by exploring the experiences of a group of OSIEs whose opportunities for expatriation are directly impacted by their ability to create and capitalize on professional

networks. In particular we have shown how the motivations to expatriate led them to behave in an agentic fashion - seeking out, developing and effectively managing their own professional ties and networks. The paper has also shown how their experience of expatriation has been impacted by their respective professional networks and; the perceived organizational benefits of the networks they have developed during expatriation. In doing so, it indicates the centrality of agency in OSIE and specifically the need to develop and/or draw on relevant professional networks. This finding echoes other scholars who have argued that being in the 'right place' (Brass, 1984) isn't enough. Rather, individuals must be agentic rather than reactive, adopting specific behavioural strategies (Brass and Burkhardt, 1993) such as creating ties and networks to enable and facilitate movement within the global operations of the firm. The key to agency in building networks and ties by OSIEs is, therefore, *motivation*, a motivation to move to another country. Actioning the motivation to expatriate, therefore, leads to tie and network development and the concomitant realization of goals and objectives.

The paper has also shown that just as professional networks were instrumental for facilitating expatriation, they are also expanded even further during expatriation. In this respect the study demonstrates the centrality of professional networks as both a precursor to and an outcome of expatriation. We have seen how OSIEs maintained their agentic approach to developing networks, and were explicitly aware of how such ties and networks could enable career development, professional learning related to international experience, as well as a making an important contribution to overall organizational performance and global connectedness.

Fundamental to the achievement of the objectives of expatriation and the drivers for tie and network building was the realization by an individual actor that they were *motivated to move*, they were *capable and had relevant skills* and that they were *aware of the opportunities* to do so. Tie and network development evolved then, in an iterative relationship with motivation, capability and awareness. OSIEs had a very clear idea of why they were moving, what they could offer in terms of skills and, where they wanted to go. They were also explicitly aware that building ties and networks was crucial to their professional success and future career trajectories. The extent to which these factors are aligned leads, we suggest, to very positive career and learning outcomes for individuals and very probably organizations. Moreover, for such agency to occur a firm needs a culture and level of trust which supports independent initiative and can develop ways of capturing learning from mobility and the networks developed. These are challenges for global HRM professionals which, if successful in certain firms, will likely lead to significant business enhancement.

The paper has also reported widespread agreement about the potential organizational benefits of OSIEs acting as bridges across structural holes (Burt, 2004). This might include, for example, sharing problem-solving knowledge and business development opportunities for organizations wishing to expand and strengthen their global connections between offices. In line with other organizational social network research, we found that social interaction had utility for Mintech as a global business (Ahuja, 2000; Mehra, Kilduff and Brass, 2001). If we were to take the OSIE as a collective the evidence reported here suggests that their impact on the global operations of Mintech has been significant and requires further work and articulation.

In addition to the positive outcomes, however, we also found that when repatriating to their home office a minority found that their formerly strong ties had weakened. Indeed, our study has also reported that many interviewees were thinking about the implications of the consequences of their weakening ties with people at home even before they repatriated. This finding suggests that some returning OSIEs may be faced with the prospect of having to rebuild formerly strong ties/relationships with colleagues in their home office – a finding which clearly echoes themes in the literature on repatriating OEs who report having lost contact with home country colleagues. Focusing on OSIEs in particular, however, it seems that while some may be agentic in developing and expanding their connections in the host country, they exhibit less agency in maintaining their connections with colleagues in their home office. Yet, our study has also reported that, unlike reports on repatriating OEs – some of the OSIEs in this study indicated that their connections and experience in the host country were highly valued and enhanced their own performance as well as the performance of their home country offices.

The paper has also shown how a motivated individual within an organization, an organization that enables and supports self-initiated expatriation, can realize his/her goals to expatriate. What is required in order for this to occur, however, is the development of ties and networks. Our study has shown that opportunities to engage in OSIE are predicated on networks that enable an individual to enhance their own career, achieve professional learning and development, gain international experience and have an adventure. Such connections are not waiting to be discovered, however. Rather, they are actively pursued and cultivated by OSIEs as they seek to realize their mobility goals. In addition, the emerging connections between individuals create and enhance institutional connections between different parts of the wider

global organization. It seems, therefore, that these connections assist in global problem-solving and business development in ways that help the performance and expansion of Mintech globally. OSIEs fill structural holes in ways that benefit them personally and the organization more generally.

Further research might seek to understand the specific and measurable outcomes and implications of this impact, in terms both of individual careers and performance and organizational development and performance. Mintech, as an organization, has the problem of capturing the vast amount of individual and organizational learning that takes place during this type of expatriation. Our study is limited to one organization, operating in a specific industry (professional services) we are, therefore, unable to generalize from our research. Moreover, as an exploratory qualitative study we were attempting to highlight the importance of agency through the meanings OSIEs gave to their actions as they reported them. Further work might wish to articulate our exploratory findings into more structured propositions, particularly with respect to the relationship between organizational culture, HRM processes, OSIE and the development of ties and networks. In addition, further work might be undertaken on how organizations generally and global HRM in particular, can capture and utilize OSIE as a way of developing global business connectedness. Overall, we hope that this paper has contributed to the importance of agency in the processes involved in tie and network development and in the connection of social systems (global offices) through the filling of structural holes through individual action. We also hope that it has broadened further our understanding of mobility and ‘new’ forms of expatriate activity and provides insights for global HRM as they think about the importance and value of global mobility to individuals and organizations.

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