International Knowledge Professionals: Contemporary Career Concerns and Implications

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INTERNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE PROFESSIONALS. CONTEMPORARY CAREER CONCERNS & IMPLICATIONS

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COMPETITIVE PAPER

INTERNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE PROFESSIONALS. CONTEMPORARY CAREER CONCERNS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Abstract

This study supplements existing contemporary research on knowledge workers. It takes an interpretivist approach to represent and analyse a new breed and under-researched sub-category of international assignee termed 'bounded transnationals' by the author. In the context of this paper these can be simply described as internationally-located knowledge professionals. This sample has committed to living indefinitely in the host country as foreign residents where they are employed under local country contracts of employment. The paper explores how the sample perceives and makes sense of careers in the context of globalisation and change. Internationally-based knowledge professionals are sensitive to global labour market conditions. While some academics have advocated the notion of the boundaryless career with the agency freedom of being able to move inter-organisationally at ease, other factors which influence the ability to do so must be considered in the holistic career framework, not least the host country labour market conditions and personal circumstances (such as family settled in the area; home ownership locally).

This is a qualitative research undertaking where in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of locally hired international knowledge professionals based in France and Germany. Patterns in the narratives relating to career management considerations in living and working in a foreign country are interpreted inductively. This ethnographical study is rich in its contextual familiarity with the sample, with the author having been a member of the sample population before, during and immediately after the interview process. The narratives and stories are interpreted hermeneutically and shared in the findings of this paper. The objective is to present common career concerns among internationally-located knowledge professionals, not to generalise findings to a wider population. However the elements that emerge from the stories from this sample could be tested in wider populations in order to add further validity.

Elicitations from the sample's stories suggest that while internationally-based knowledge professionals enjoy the notion of the boundaryless career where they can easily move

between organisations and/or indeed geographies for employment, they are particularly vulnerable to both local and global market conditions. While the boundaryless career espouses the notion of human agency, critics have noted the vulnerability of individuals forced into following boundaryless career paths due to organisations' failure to provide permanent work contracts or durable employment opportunities. This tension between individual and organisation control results in commitment and loyalty issues, which could materialise into wide spread inter-organisational movement even from core employees in a period of economic boom. This paper then takes a critical approach of the boundaryless career in the context of a sample of bounded transnationals, and notes the implications of this for human resource management.

International Knowledge Workers. Contemporary Career Concerns & Implications

Introduction

While Peter Drucker coined the term 'knowledge worker' in 1959, there is still a lack of clarity as to what exactly this worker category includes: from those employed in service practices such as advertising or accountancy (Deetz, 1994) to those in Research & Development in the high tech industry sector (Kunda, 1992) to the ambiguity of the term (Alvesson, 2001) which could potentially include anyone dealing with knowledge on a daily basis. The discussion in this paper relates to internationally-based knowledge workers employed by multinational organisations in the Information Technology (IT) & Telecommunications industry sector. These employees are developing, testing and/or working with IT/Telecommunications products. They use their technology specific knowledge on a daily basis in their working lives and consider themselves to be at the specialist or expert level with regard to their technology knowledge in their respective organisations. This paper uses a sub-section of data collected from a wider study to highlight areas of concern relating to the careers of internationally-based knowledge workers employed by high tech multinational organisations outside their home country. Their career experiences and concerns are shared using direct quotations from narratives (Czarniawska, 2004; Riessman, 1993) that were collected as part of the wider project.

Career, Control & Commitment

Employee commitment is central to effective Human Resource Management (Storey, 2000: 12) and plays an important part in the career management and retention of human talent (Baruch, 2004: xv). It has been suggested that knowledge workers "form the ideal subordinates, the employer's dream in terms of work motivation and compliance" (Alvesson, 2000). However, in an increasingly competitive knowledge based global economy, employment security is no longer definite for any member of the workforce, including knowledge workers. Downsizing, outsourcing and cost-cutting exercises have become common-place for organisations competing on a global front, resulting in job insecurity for workforce members. This suggests that organisational careers ("careers conceived to unfold in a single employment setting", Arthur & Rousseau, 1996: 5) are increasingly controlled by the employing organisations; with "the progressive elimination of the control function of the worker, insofar as possible, and their transfer to a device which is controlled again insofar as possible, by management from out side the direct process." (Braverman, 1974: 212).

The psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995; Gratton & Hope-Hailey, 1999) between organisations and employees has been shifting from relational (where the organisation acts in a parental capacity, assuring job security to its employees) to transactional employment contracts (where the organisation pays its employees in return for their work, but does not guarantee job security). Given the changed environment in which workers are employed, company loyalty is in question, particularly for the "mobile worker" who is following a "boundaryless career" (Rosenbaum & Miller, 1996). "While the old company man moved up the company ladder, mobile workers move up any ladder onto which they can get a foot. They rise in their careers by hopping from firm to firm, with an eye toward ever-better positions, and the firms which employ them often benefit by gaining ambitious employees who bring new ideas, creativity, and the enthusiasm of new blood" (ibid: 350). It could be assumed that knowledge workers, specialists in their field and aware of their ability, have a propensity toward the mobile worker category or toward following a boundaryless career (see also Weick, 1996) in the right structural/employment setting. Research on international careers has found that expatriate assignees perceive their international experience to be valued by other organisations more than by their current employing organisation, with some writers supporting the notion of boundaryless careers for international assignees (Eby, 2001; Stahl et al., 2002).

In a period of job shortages where there is a lack of inter-organisation job opportunities, control is weighted more to the organisation, even for knowledge workers predisposed to boundaryless career paths. Power and control is unstable however, and requires the adherence of individuals (Foucault, 1990): "No matter how much power one appears to accumulate, it is always necessary to obtain it from the others who are doing the action" (Latour, 1986: 276). Thus resistance and change is possible via "the constant reconfiguration of power relations" (Deetz, 1998: 153), which in a period of labour shortages would switch control from the organisation to the individual/employee.

This paper puts the above discussion into context for internationally-located knowledge workers. The next section outlines the approach undertaken in this research undertaking. Then findings are put forth to support this discussion using extracts from the collected narratives. Finally implications, conclusions and further research suggestions are given.

The Approach

This is a hermeneutic study which looks at subjective perceptions regarding contemporary careers. The data used in this paper comes from a wider qualitative study (using in-depth interviews) with internationally-based workers. Due to the on-average lengthy narratives collected for the wider study on international careers, and the space restrictions here, for the purpose of this paper, the narratives of ten internationally-based knowledge workers in the IT & Telecomms industry sectors employed by a multinational organisation are taken. An outline of this sub-sample is given in Table 1. Four of the sample are based around Munich in Germany, with the remaining six based around Nice in the South of France. The country-specific context and employment situation cannot be ignored here, with each country experiencing difficult employment times.

Table I   The Sample

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Nationality	Location	Prev Moves (if any)	Profession, industry sector
Gina	female	36	British (English)	Munich, Germany	n/a	Technical Product Manager, Telecomms
Hilda	female	41	German	Nice, France	n/a	New Technology Manager, IT&Tourism
Andrew	male	38	Irish	Munich, Germany	England, The Netherlands	Technical Product Manager, IT
Billy	male	52	Welsh (British)	Nice, France	USA	Pre-sales technical consultant, IT
Brian	male	39	Irish	Munich, Germany	England	Technology Development Manager, IT
Donal	male	36	Irish	Nice, France	Munich, Germany	Technology Manager, IT
Francis	male	32	Irish	Nice, France	England	Internet Technology Developer, IT&Tourism
John	male	29	Belge	Nice, France	Ireland	Technology Consultant, IT
Pat	male	34	British (English)	Nice, France	n/a	Technology Consultant, IT
Peter	male	35	British (English)	Munich, Germany	n/a	Technology Manager, IT Services

Research limitations

While the use of small sample sizes in qualitative research has been defended (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; McCracken, 1988; Mason, 1996), it is acknowledged that the small sample size is a limitation. However the aim of this paper is not to generalise the findings and interpretations to the wider population, but to share some contemporary career concerns for internationally-based knowledge workers. Qualitative research methods provide data that is

rich, deep and holistic (Marshall & Rossman, 1989: 19), with the aim being to understand and interpret phenomena (Gummesson, 1991: 153), rather than to generalise occurrences.

Findings: Career, Control & Commitment

It was apparent from the interview transcripts that the current market employment conditions are a real concern for this research sample of IT/Telecomms knowledge workers following an international career, because it limits alternative employment prospects. The following quotes highlight this:

John (Belgian, 29, single): "[B]ecause in today's economic environment… it's just not that easy – you could easily find yourself without a job. [Y]ou don't have that luxury anymore …to just go 'OK, …I'll get a job anywhere'."

Hilda (German, 41, married, one child): "[N]owadays … it's not so easy to find a job, less easy to find a job at a certain age, when you are not 20 or 25".

Francis (Irish, 32, long term girlfriend): "I want to keep progressing. I've achieved an objective I set myself 3 years ago in terms of having a technical CV that was in order. And so I'd like the idea of gaining more responsibility, … a higher position in the hierarchy. And I think **the stagnant job market is probably what freezes things**."

Andrew (38, Irish, married, 3 children):"I think a lot of people right now are just happy to have a job…I've been lucky to avoid [redundancy], very lucky. I see an awful lot of extremely good people being let go right now. There is no job security in this industry".

Knowledge workers working in the international space face many challenges as emphasised above; challenges such as low motivation, unemployment, and job insecurity.

The level of employee commitment of the knowledge workers surveyed to their organisations varies substantially among respondents. Some respondents are happy to remain where they are, happy that they can live the life they choose while in that employment, even though they may not feel challenged or valued in their careers. They are of the opinion that: "Well it wouldn't be the end of the world if we were forced to move." (Pat, British, 34, engaged).

Others are vociferous about moving inter-organisationally depending on the job opportunity; for instance Francis (Irish, 32, long term girlfriend): "After 5 years I actually handed in my notice. Because I had attempted to change job internally, to move on to new challenges, new technical challenges was my main motivation and [the company] at the time wasn't willing to; internally I wasn't able to get what I wanted. So I got it outside the company... I'd got a lot of offers outside".

All of the internationally-based knowledge workers surveyed were aware of their external marketability. For example, Donal (Irish, 36, long term partner with 2 children) quit his job with a multinational organisation where he'd been employed for 9 years and was confident of re-employment, albeit realising he would probably have to commute internationally for his subsequent job. His international experience coupled with his technical knowledge made him a strong candidate among external organisations: "That's probably one of the reasons I ended up doing what I'm doing now, because of my experience. Because I had worked with European wide team and that was what I was taken on to do here." Peter (British, 35, married, 2 children) is of the same mind: "[In the job I had i] n the UK, I was blocked… I could have moved to another company and … that would have moved me on…" Similarly John (Belge, 29, single) tells that: "I had an opportunity with a couple of companies which would have been good for my career, still well established companies. Or even the company I've a job I took now has a lot of potential to … make my career really flourish even more… But it's more up to me. So I have more control. I have more control over how the company does."

However, given the current economic climate in Germany and France, external opportunities are not so easy to find, as Brian (Irish, 39, single) explains: "I would say [my current job is a] gap stop. I was general manager of a small company and when that basically went to the wall through the downturn, through complications, it was a question of finding a job, another job. So when this opportunity came along it was like 'I have to take it'. I mean it meant quite a huge reduction in salary, but it was either that or just get unemployment … and the longer you are on the shelf the harder it is to find a new job, so to get back into this life…"

The knowledge workers interviewed realise that this economic climate may not last forever. They remember the labour shortage period in the 1990s, where it was easy to move inter-organisations. As Francis (Irish, 32, long term girlfriend) recalls: "[F]or my exit interview,

[the top manager] basically understood that I was getting work I wanted outside the company …because the market was very good, they'd trouble finding people…"

Francis continues that should the situation change again, he would assess his current job situation and could move to a different organisation. "Career [i]s the objective. I was looking for something that got me into what I was wanting to do. I was looking for a next step. I was looking for a stepping stone. And that was the stepping stone that came up. And it was, my experience in the job market at that point was, you didn't [and still shouldn't] turn your nose up at an opportunity."

Gina (British, 36, single) agrees. Her last organisational move was because: "we were going through a re-organisation in the UK and there was a limit to how high I could go up. I'd reached the limit in the sense of the limit that I had achieved so the only thing you could do was move to another country or move to headquarters [or change company]."

The shift from relational to transactional organisational employment contracts is obvious, as the following quotes from John (Belge, 29, single) and Billy (Welsh, 52, divorced, 2 children) demonstrate:

John: "I didn't feel the company owed me anything or [that] I owed the company anything… I thought that was paid in full - I did good work for them and they paid me well, so that everything was 2 sided"

Billy: "It was very clear to me … up until … early 90s when the company was going very strongly that there was an initiative to go to training, to be trained, to move forward, … and there were opportunities opening all the time. Since the mid 90s it's been very difficult because the company's been shrunk, opportunities are less and less… It's a question of you wanting to go out and get it rather than the company forcing it down your neck. So it's very much left to the individual".

Implications

This paper focuses on international individuals' (employed in knowledge work) contemporary career concerns. While individualism in seeking to follow a career over which one has control has been proclaimed in the findings of this study whether it be within a single

organisational or inter-organisational (boundaryless career) context, the relevance of structural forces such as employment conditions influences the willingness and ability to move

The findings here show that a transactional psychological contract is evident between the interviewees and their employing multinational organisations. Loyalty to the organisation is for as long as it offers the best alternative, or potentially the only current alternative, as in the current negative economic climate present in the locations in question here. The complex nature of an individual's career within a social context is contingent on a number of elements, not least of which being the current market employment situation, which may tie an employee to an employer simply due to lack of alternative options and the need to have a regular income.

Given this current situation, the power in the employment relationship would appear to rest with the employing organisation, in this case the multinational. However, taking Foucault's perspective that power is only maintained as long as it is adhered to by social actors, it can be assumed that should structural market conditions improve to create a more booming employment period that such control would shift back to the employee, who then would not be as tied to the organisation for work (and financial security).

This would suggest that when labour shortages arise again, rendering individual knowledge workers more in control of where they work, that they will continue in the transactional mode and decide to work for whichever organisation makes the best offer – in terms of job content and reward, but also taking the wider picture such as location, benefit to stakeholders (e.g. family) into consideration.

Conclusions

The data shared in this paper suggests that internationally-based knowledge workers are particularly vulnerable to both local and global market conditions, where their employment could potentially be eradicated (in redundancies) and their alternative employment prospects be diminished (lack of other opportunity in the host country). While knowledge workers on the one hand affiliate themselves with the boundaryless career concept of being able to move inter-organisationally very easily, the market conditions of organisational cost cutting renders their employment organisationally-controlled, particularly for those with family stakeholders.

This tension between individual and organisation control results in commitment and loyalty issues, which could materialise in mass inter-organisational movement in a period of economic boom with labour shortages and high employment opportunities.

Suggestions for Further Research

This paper has shared the concerns of internationally-based knowledge workers in the context of continuous organisational change. The implications have been outlined in the previous section. It is acknowledged that the qualitative data portrayed in this paper is limited in its quantity and scope. However, the aim here has been to highlight the voices of internationally-based knowledge workers regarding their career concerns, experiences and plans. Further research would be welcomed in this area. A pan-European study should yield interesting comparative data regarding the respective countries economic situation and the implications as perceived by international knowledge workers (i.e. those knowledge workers on international assignment, either self initiated or organisational initiated assignments).

Additionally, quantitative data depicting career paths with intra-organisational (lateral or vertical within the same organisation) and inter-organisational (boundaryless career) moves would provide interesting statistics which could highlight the propensity of international knowledge workers to follow organisational or boundaryless careers.

The data presented here is part of a larger qualitative study of internationally-based workers' careers – "From the expatriate experience to the protean career". For this paper the narratives of ten internationally-based knowledge workers in the IT & Telecomms industry sectors in France and Germany were selected. The wider sample includes academic professionals, self employed consultants, technical and business specialists in the financial, pharmaceutical, education and business operations industry sectors.

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