

Exploring Expat-preneur Similarities and Differences between Self-initiated and Company-Assigned Transitioned Expatriates

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Based upon the authors' collective international experience and observance of emerging trends, this paper explores two different types of expat-preneurs as a new growing international career phenomenon: self-initiated expatriate expat-preneurs and company-assigned expatriate transitioned expat-preneurs. While the former is comprised of entrepreneurs who initiate their own expatriation to a new host country, the latter refers to expatriates who, during or at the end of a traditional international expatriate assignment, have started their own transition away from multinational organizations and into an entrepreneurial career in the host country or region of residence. This paper first summarizes the backgrounds and development patterns of these two distinctive types of expat-preneurs. It discusses similarities and differences between the two groups and suggests research propositions in terms of their approach to identifying business opportunities, meeting contextual conditions, and other characteristics. Finally, the paper discusses important implications and potential future research directions.

Key Words: Expat-preneurs, Self-initiated Expat-preneurs, Company-assigned expatriate (CAE) Transitioned expat-preneurs, International career

INTRODUCTION

With the continuing trend of increased global economic integration, supported by technological innovations, ongoing advancements in telecommunications, and growing incentives favoring cross-border foreign direct investment, organizations across industrial sectors and of all sizes are increasingly expanding their operations into foreign markets. The 2015 Global Mobility Trends Survey (GMTS) report of 143 organizations with foreign operations (Brookfield, 2015), found that over half (56%) of company revenues came from outside the headquarters home country. Although there is mounting pressure to reduce international staffing costs due to traditional expatriate assignments, the same survey found that

nearly 90% of respondents expected the number of their traditional company assigned expatriates to increase or stay the same. As companies increase their pace in looking for new business opportunities abroad, and in emerging markets in particular, these findings indicate that there continues to be a perceived need for traditional expatriate assignments, and especially so among entrepreneurial firms from emerging economies (Brookfield, 2015).

There also is another, less-traditional group of expatriates increasingly serving as international professional to address growing business opportunity human capital demands in both emerging and growing markets. Coincident with continued growth in traditional company-assigned expatriate (CAE) staffing selection decisions for leading foreign operations is the increasing self-recognition of individuals as agents bearing a central responsibility in professional career management, which includes building global leadership competencies and highly valued global “career capital” (Cappellen & Janssens, 2010; Vance, 2005; Hall, 2002; Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Growing attention in the international management literature toward “self-initiated expatriates” (SIEs) particularly reflects this increased emphasis upon international career self-management (Doherty, Richardson & Thorn, 2013). In this paper we distinguish SIEs from migrants who leave their home country primarily motivated by economic and socio-political necessity (Haug, 2008), as well as those typically of a younger age motivated more by curiosity and adventure than by more pragmatic career development concerns (Inkson & Myers, 2003).

To a great extent, SIEs go abroad due to the perceived potential career capital that international work experience and the attendant professional connections that can accrue for supporting long-term personal and professional success (Vaiman & Haslberger, 2013). Quite entrepreneurial in nature, SIEs tend to be uninhibited by occupational and organizational constraints, and desire to have maximum control on their own career progression rather than to be at the mercy of organizational caprice and politics—in this case involving the timing and direction of valuable international work experience (Andresen, Al Ariss & Walther, 2012). Although many SIEs find employment in local host country organizations and local operations of multinational firms, there is evidence that an increasing number join new venture operations or start up their own enterprises (profit or nonprofit—in this paper we will generally include nonprofits in the more inclusive meaning of business) (McNulty & Vance, 2016).

In this paper we will focus on SIEs who become expatriate entrepreneurs or “expat-preneurs” in the new host country environment. We also will examine and compare with SIE expat-preneurs another growing group of expat-preneurs coming from traditional expatriate assignments—those CAEs who, during or at the end of a traditional expatriate assignment, assert their career control and transition into some form of local entrepreneurial professional activity (Vance, McNulty, Paik & D’Mello, 2016). We first will examine the backgrounds and development patterns of these particular entrepreneurial SIEs and CAE-transitioned entrepreneurs. We then will identify and discuss the similarities and differences, with suggested propositions for guiding future empirical research, between the two expat-preneur groups in terms of their approach to identifying business opportunities, meeting contextual conditions, and other characteristics. Finally, we will discuss areas for further systematic and empirical field research on the expat-preneur international career phenomenon.

Self-initiated Expat-preneurs

At an increasing rate, SIEs living abroad are becoming involved in new venture opportunities, whether anticipated before moving abroad or after moving abroad when they engage in entrepreneurial activity as a necessary source of employment support (Vance et al., 2016). These entrepreneurial SIEs actively seek employment opportunities with locally-based organizations or multinational corporations (MNCs) in new venture activities or in growing new business opportunities that address local consumer demand and business needs. To clarify, we only consider those SIEs who engage in some form of business or professional employment as distinct from SIEs typically of a younger age and primarily motivated to move abroad more by curiosity and perceived adventure than by pragmatic career capital development concerns (Inkson & Myers, 2003)

A primary objective for these SIEs is to secure employment in the local host country as a key strategy for gaining international work experience, which can greatly facilitate the development of international

competencies associated with building global leadership and career capital (Cappellen & Janssens, 2010; Vance, 2005; Hall, 2002; Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Although clear options for SIEs are to find work in the host country with established organizations vying for talent in the local labor market, such as large multinational and domestic firms and well as government and other public sector organizations, a recent exploratory study by Vance & McNulty (2014) of expatriates, defined broadly as individuals working outside of their home country for an extended duration, found that the majority were hired by local, smaller firms, and they often found themselves in entrepreneurial roles of new business development. Several also were involved in new ventures with local business partners. A significant percentage of the women in this study were self-employed as consultants or small business owners.

While some people may elect to move abroad and work for local host country organizations that are interested in their expertise to support company entrepreneurial plans for new business growth and development at home and abroad, others may determine to move abroad for a *preconceived* entrepreneurial purpose. The latter group of SIEs make their way abroad, either on their own or by means of an initial traditional expatriate assignment, to pursue a preconceived, specific new venture start-up plan in the host country. Still others may pursue this new expatriate entrepreneurial career during the international experience merely by happenstance or due to the emergence of unexpected personal or professional personal circumstances (Vance et al., 2016).

Vance and McNulty (2014) describe the case of a young woman who graduated from an American university in physical therapy and moved on her own volition, initially on a tourist visa, to Budapest on a personal quest to reconnect with her family's Hungarian roots. Early in her SIE experience she made a fortuitous networking connection with a local entrepreneur in Budapest who desired to open a private physical therapy clinic. She joined in this new venture and worked as the clinic's general manager for several years. The unplanned entrepreneurial nature of this woman's SIE experience is shared by many others who travel abroad and, wishing to remain in a particular host country for various reasons, begin to consider self-employment or other new venture opportunities to legally and financially support their international sojourn or permanent relocation in the host country.

The CAE-Transitioned Expatpreneurs

When one of the present authors sought assistance in finding local CAEs in Southeast Asia for field research survey distribution related to traditional expatriate international adjustment, he was informed by one LinkedIn-sourced American expatriate that all of the expatriates he knew locally were like him—they had finished their company assignment and remained in the host country, now employed in their own businesses. These professionals represent another significant subcategory of entrepreneurial SIEs: transitioned CAEs who have left their initial MNC employment and *transitioned* into an entrepreneurial career while abroad. These individuals now have self-initiated into this expatpreneur career category. After spending a significant amount of time as CAEs in a local host country market, they often recognized a local new venture opportunity and self-initiated their departure from their MNC, either during or at the close of their traditional expatriate assignment. Of course, it is possible that MNC professionals are already SIEs at heart before their traditional expatriate assignment, and use this CAE opportunity to get themselves planted in the desired international host country environment. Then at the appropriate time they jump the MNC ship as active expatpreneurs, starting or joining in a new business venture in the host country. This new form of entrepreneurs originating from a company expatriate assignment and transitioning into new venture entrepreneurial activity is likely much more extant than is commonly supposed, and is worthy of our careful investigation as we seek to gain a clearer understanding of human capital dynamics in our global marketplace (McNulty & Vance, 2016).

Similarities and Differences between SIE Expatpreneurs and CAE-transitioned Expatpreneurs

We will now highlight key differences between *SIE expatpreneurs* (SIE EPs) and CAE *transitioned expatpreneurs* (TEPs) in terms of their identification of business opportunities. SIE EPs are likely more accustomed to taking risks than TEPs, as the former initiated their expatriation completely on a voluntary basis while the latter accepted an opportunity from their company to work overseas. At the outset, SIE

EPs were motivated to take charge of their own entrepreneurship careers rather than wait for their organization either to arrange for an appropriate career opportunity through international work experience or to seek an employment opportunity with an established business during their overseas assignment. In the new foreign host country environment SIE EPs are more likely to pursue international entrepreneurship opportunities for themselves, as such, they are expected to have specific ideas or knowledge about new venture business opportunity. Based on informational economics, this specific or tacit knowledge will encourage SIE EPs to adopt a more constrained systematic search to find specialized and relevant business opportunities. Within this constrained systematic search earlier in their international experience than is the case for TEPs, SIE EPs find that information has a critical role in entrepreneurial opportunity discovery. Information is a valuable and intangible resource and is required to discover and exploit venture ideas (Stigler, 1961; Fiet, 1996; Shane, 2000). Therefore, the following proposition is posited:

Proposition 1. From an earlier point in their international experience compared to TEPs, SIE EPs tend to use constrained systematic search to discover business opportunities.

In contrast, TEPs tend to be less risk-taking because of their earlier international career path. While some individuals may use a company-sponsored international assignment as a vehicle to go abroad for eventually pursuing an entrepreneurial career, many TEPs do not come to the host country with an intention to seek out business opportunities from the very beginning. Rather, they initiate departure from the former company at an opportune time or complete their assignment and start their own business. These professionals are simply assigned to a job in a host country where their company's subsidiary is located, whether they actually sought the assignment or not. Under these circumstances, it is less likely for these expatriates to change themselves into entrepreneurs unless they find a very good business opportunity in the host country. They may have identified such an opportunity through a well-established personal network with local business people developed during their tenure with the former company. Consequently, they are considered more deliberate and cautious in looking for business opportunities than self-initiated EP individuals who tend to be more flexible and emergent, with more specific new venture business agendas in mind.

Therefore, this TEP category of *opportunity entrepreneurs* (Block & Wagner, 2008) is more likely to be alert to business opportunities that are overlooked by others. It is quite plausible that these TEPs decide to leave their company due to the incompatibility of organizational contexts that constrained their ability to make the best use of their knowledge, abilities and skills in order to exploit a recognized new venture opportunity, and they thus developed the acumen and instinct to seize a business opportunity in the host country and create their own organizational context conducive to making better use of their knowledge (Vance et al., 2016). Thus, we posit the following proposition:

Proposition 2. CAEs who transition to become international entrepreneurs tend to discover business opportunities through alertness.

Unlike SIE EPs who are not limited by organizational contexts, TEPs eventually recognize their own self-management responsibility and personal agency in abandoning their traditional expatriate and multinational career path and moving into an entrepreneurial career, whether this recognition develops before, during, or at the end of the traditional expatriate assignment. This flexible, self-managing career perspective is essential for allowing one to consider a new venture career opportunity in the host country outside of the MNC. In addition to the personal characteristic of choice promoting career self-management, the entrepreneurial support model (ESM) also considers the important potential influence of contextual factors on entrepreneurial career intentions. According to ESM, entrepreneurial intention is considered a function of educational, relational, and structural supports (Turker & Selcuk, 2009; Turker et al., 2005; Henderson & Robertson, 2000).

For TEPs, their educational background and professional experience provide a substantial foundation for first recognizing the opportunity and then assessing the feasibility of a new entrepreneurial venture outside of the MNC and within the host country environment. The local market conditions also provide evidence to evaluate the economic structural support and actual feasibility of this recognized opportunity. Finally, as described by Vance and McNulty (2014), personal relationships often support career

transitioning to remain in the host country for the longer-term, as also often is the case for SIE EPs. In addition, professional relationships with local business partners may also provide emotional and collegial support for TEPs toward new venture start-ups.

Similarly, Kostova (1999) asserts that the process of knowledge transfer within MNCs is contextually embedded and does not occur in a social vacuum. She identifies three different contextual types: social, organizational, and relational. Social and organizational contexts appear to be especially relevant in considering EPs as intermediaries who bring in valuable knowledge and resources to a host country. The social context, consisting of three institutional pillars (i.e., regulatory, normative, and cognitive; Scott, 1995) can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of knowledge transfer. The more compatible these institutional characteristics between host and home country are, the greater the benefit is received from knowledge transfer. On the other hand, significant host and home country discrepancy in the legal systems or cultural characteristics can hinder effective knowledge transfer across borders.

Building upon their past host country work experience and desire to remain in the host country, TEPs are assumed to have a solid understanding of the characteristics and demands of the social context of the host country. Their decision to remain in the host country gives evidence that they have successfully acclimated and adapted to the host country's culture. TEPs also are likely to have developed a crossvergence perspective that recognizes and appreciates the differing influence of cultural values and norms between host and home country. On the other hand, SIE EPs are likely more fully immersed in the local host country business environment. Without the support base presently enjoyed by future TEPs before their transition, SIE EPs are more driven by economic expediency and lack the luxury of careful deliberation in considering possible future new venture opportunities.

During TEPs' employment with their previous MNC, depending upon their degree of local immersion experience, they already have become familiar with the institutions of a host country and learned how to utilize their knowledge to begin a new venture that is compatible with the institutional profile of the host country. It also is possible that TEPs might have left their multinational firm career due to a lack of fit with organizational contexts that obstructed their flexibility and ability to use their expert knowledge to exploit a recognized opportunity. And thus they may have already developed the capability and drive to seize an enticing business opportunity in the host country and create their own new venture context that can be more conducive to their expert knowledge transfer. Therefore, we posit the following proposition:

Proposition 3. TEPs likely more deliberately consider meeting the contextual host country market conditions in starting a new business than do SIE EPs.

Given the significance of knowledge transfer to disseminate and share the core competence of MNCs, expatriates have been used as an instrument to effectively transfer knowledge (Widmier et al., 2008; Gaur et al., 2007; Riusala & Suutari, 2004). TEPs have acquired firm-specific knowledge, which is often tacit and uncodified, through experience and training within the unique organizational context of the parent firm (Tan & Mahoney, 2006). Unfortunately, there is a shortage of traditional CAEs needed to meet the increasing talent demand for international leadership assignments as a result of continued economic growth of emerging economies (Collings et al., 2007). This situation makes the availability of TEPs and accessibility to their knowledge all the more valuable in these economies. Due to the prevalence of traditional expatriate assignments emphasizing the transfer of expatriate knowledge and expertise to the local host country operation, these TEPs tend to possess a significant level of technical or functional knowledge that also is useful for business development.

At the same time, these TEPs tend to have significant organizational experience that can contribute to current state-of-the-art business practices and processes supporting organizational growth and operations success. Thus, compared to SIE EPs who are often traveling "soldiers of fortune" seeking new career development opportunities in a foreign country, TEPs likely represent a much more technically experienced and proven category of professional business talent available for new venture start-up. Based on the above discussion, we posit the following proposition:

Proposition 4. TEPs are more likely to represent a technically experienced and proven category of professional business talent than SIE EPs.

A preponderance of males has been noted in traditional expatriate assignments (Vance & Paik, 2001). They found evidence of an expatriate selection bias against female managers at MNC headquarters. Conversely, Vance and McNulty (2014) found that a significant percentage of the women were SIEs and self-employed as consultants or small business owners (34% women versus 25% men), suggesting that this particular entrepreneurial pursuit is viable for SIEs, and particularly for women who often have been noted as discriminated against in being selected as an expatriate for a traditional foreign assignment (Vance and Paik, 2001; Leonard, 2010). In contrast to the above supposition that TEPs may possess greater host country contextual awareness than SIE EPs, a common shortcoming of the traditional expatriate assignment is its lesser potential exposure to the local host country business environment than is experienced by SIEs who tend to scour the local market for local employment opportunities. Due to their shielded condition and often artificial “life in a bubble” provided by the MNC, CAEs are less likely to become fluent in the local language and build a local network providing local business opportunity knowledge and emotional support. In fact, women, who are much more frequently found in SIE ranks than in CAE ranks, have been noted for their extensive international professional networks and professional women’s clubs that provide valuable business knowledge and emotional support (Vance & McNulty, 2014).

On the other hand, it is well recognized that women possess more limited access to financial resources for getting a new businesses started than do men (Carter, Shaw, Lam, & Wilson, 2007). And despite their likely more extensive access to local networks for professional and emotional support, female networks are generally considered as being less wealthy, less valuable, and less diffused than male networks, because the former usually consists of already-known individuals, close friends, and other females (Lewis, 2006; McGuire, 2000; Renzulli, Aldrich, & Moody, 2000). When the male-dominated CAEs eventually make their transition to expat-preneur status, they may have access to greater financial resources that attract local business partners and promote more rapid growth than predominant women SIE EPs in their modestly-financed self-owned small businesses. Therefore, we posit the following proposition:

Proposition 5. While TEPs tend to be comprised of more males than females and have easier access to financial resources to help them embark on entrepreneurial careers, women are highly represented among SIE EPs, which have had much deeper local environment and network exposure and penetration than the newly-transitioned CAE entrepreneurs.

Discussion and Future Research

With its extreme lack of attention in the literature, expat-preneurs represent a potentially important international professional career phenomenon that until now has flown below the radar of international business studies. The study of expat-preneurs, both SIE EP and TEP varieties, provides a new category for investigation within the more developed but still nascent international human resources and career research on self-initiating expatriates. Although this paper makes a useful contribution in identifying and discussing important potential characteristics, differing forms, and issues surrounding expat-preneurs, more systematic and empirical research is needed to increase our understanding of this potentially important international career phenomenon.

Critical areas for future research related to expat-preneurs should include descriptive field studies to help us gain a clearer picture of common characteristics of expat-preneurs, beginning with how commonly they are found, in both SIE EP and TEP varieties, within developing and developed host countries. Such research also should examine whether SIE EPs differ from SIEs who have selected other business or nonprofit sectors. It is likely that the presence of expat-preneurs will be encouraged by a host country’s regulatory and economic conditions that support their entrepreneurial activities. What are the optimal conditions that would effectively attract SIE EPs? What conditions would support and facilitate CAEs in their decision to leave their MNC and remain in the host country, transitioning into EP status? Conversely, it is plausible that some developing country host environments may present great cultural distance, economic uncertainty, government turmoil and instability, and an extremely poor physical infrastructure that discourages the arrival of SIEs who desire to engage in entrepreneurial activities, as

well as the transition of CAEs from their more secure positions into expat-preneurs. In fact, even in highly developed countries an unstable economic as well as adverse socio-political environment may not always present an adequate opportunity enticement without overwhelming risk to encourage the expat-preneur transition. Thus, under less overall supportive conditions, it is likely that potential TEPs will opt to remain with the MNC through the end of the international assignment and then repatriate with their firm to their home countries. Providing a clearer understanding of the optimal conditions that are conducive to the host country attraction of SIE EPs and to CAE expat-preneur transition would therefore be an important objective for future research.

As discussed earlier, it is likely that TEPs, at least at present, are more frequently male and are in possession of a greater degree of technical skills and professional work experience than other SIEs, who were motivated to go abroad for the adventure and for gaining international experience as part of their early adult personal and career development (Inkson & Myers, 2003). As relatively recent traditional MNC-assigned expatriates, TEPs also are more likely to be older and have accompanying family members than their SIE EP counterparts (Vance, 2005). And since research has repeatedly found accompanying family members' difficulty with international adjustment to present a significant challenge to the completion and success of traditional expatriate assignments (Hechanova, Beehr & Christiansen, 2003), it would be interesting to see if and how TEPs with accompanying family members have successfully navigated through those adjustment challenges to remain in the host country for the longer term. Nevertheless, these and other EP characteristics and associated dynamics should be examined, tested, and verified through systematic field studies.

The present study until now has generally assumed a purely economic motive behind the SIE or the CAE-transitioned expat-preneur paths. However, it is possible that through the course of the international experience a SIE or a CAE may fall in love with the host country, or with one of its citizens, or for whatever other personal reason may desire to remain in the host country for the long term (Vance & McNulty, 2014). This expatriate may become an "accidental entrepreneur" (Lewin, 1998), and seek some form of new venture self-employment to provide financial support for remaining in the host country, especially if he or she is treated as an outsider and not able to break into the local business labor market to obtain suitable employment. One former CAE interviewed by one of the authors was residing in South Korea and had married a local host country national. At the end of his extended assignment there he was directed to return to MNC headquarters in the U.S., but his wife strongly desired to remain in Seoul. He then decided to leave his MNC and remain in Seoul and find local employment. However, he found that he had a minimal local professional network, and was considered an outsider, and even experienced great difficulty securing employment as a local hire with other MNCs. Eventually he decided to start his own consulting firm, which became quite successful, in which he served as a coach for Korean executives in English and organizational communications. Thus, to better understand the EP phenomenon, both professional and personal motives, especially for those making the transition from CAE to local expat-preneur, should be thoroughly studied. In addition, notwithstanding the experience of the above TEP in South Korea, SIE EP and TEP reasons for the choice of transitioning into an entrepreneurial career in particular should be examined since there is evidence that other job opportunities with existing local companies and/or MNCs present increasingly attractive and less risky employment alternatives in many hot international developing labor markets (Brookfield, 2013; Edwards, Jalette, & Tregaskis, 2012).

Research examining personal predispositions and environmental factors that influence the CAE's self-initiation and transition into an entrepreneurial career would be informative (Bauernschuster, Falck & Heblich, 2010; Brown et al., 2011; Caliendo, Fossen & Kritikos, 2009). For example, would certain personality characteristics, combined with the existing circumstances and conditions of the host country market environment, tend to predispose particular CAEs into making the expat-preneur career transition? And would female CAEs, due to MNC and/or local environment forces of discrimination, be more likely to move into a new venture career rather than to obtain employment with a local firm or an MNC in the host country?

Finally, research on the expat-preneur phenomenon also may help increase our understanding of possible valuable spillover economic benefits, particularly for emerging markets (Acs et al., 2009). While

entrepreneurs from less developed countries migrating to developed countries is rather well researched (Clydesdale, 2008; Rusinovic, 2008), less research exists regarding skilled, professional entrepreneurs from developed countries moving their residence to an emerging economy to exploit business opportunities in that country (Almor & Yehekel, 2013). The positive spillover effects to the local emerging economy of expatpreneurs as highly skilled professionals can be significant and multifaceted (Dearie & Geduldig, 2013). These spillover effects may be especially pronounced for emerging markets in encouraging more regulatory support and change in public policy that is more conducive to new venture start-ups. Expatpreneurs, through their significant knowledge sharing through networking and participation in formal and less formal professional exchanges, also may contribute to the enhancement of local professional practice and development of the local labor skill base, leading to overall increased economic vitality. Expatpreneurs have the ability to surmount the liability of foreignness by integrating themselves into the host country marketplace, aggressively developing partnerships and multiple forms of collaboration to build and strengthen professional networks that foster their entrepreneurial venture in the host country. Vance and McNulty (2014) have noted SIEs who move to a country due to a deep desire to reconnect with their family heritage, such as one woman recently interviewed by one of the authors who returned to Greece, where she had visited her grandparents as a child, and eventually started her own financial services business. This family heritage EP phenomenon may constitute a new form of “brain circulation,” building upon traditional concepts of brain gain and brain drain associated with increasing global talent cross-border mobility (Tung, 2008).

Finally, from an organizational perspective, research on the expatpreneur phenomenon may help alert MNCs to the importance of providing greater support for their CAEs in their international assignment, particularly in situations where CAEs elect to leave the organization (along with their accompanying valuable experience and tacit knowledge) more due to present work dissatisfaction rather than an express TEP interest. Yet even when CAEs are driven by the desire to leave their MNCs and start their own business as expatpreneurs in the host country, current research demonstrates that organizations gaining awareness of their employee career interests and being supportive toward their fulfillment can contribute to enhanced satisfaction and productivity as well as extend retention before their eventual departure (Kaye & Giulioni, 2012). And as large consulting firms often follow a staffing and career progression strategy where many of their internal professionals eventually leave to join client firms, further strengthening the consulting firm-client relationship for future engagements, MNCs that understand and support the long-term professional career interests of their CAEs in making a successful transition as local expatpreneurs can experience an enhanced reputation and positive image through their former CAEs within the local host country environment.

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