

SELF-INITIATED CAREER CHARACTERISTICS

OF DANISH EXPATRIATED ENGINEERS

Danish engineers, as a distinct group of people on foreign assignments, are investigated in this paper. Employment aspects like title, pay and benefits are followed over an eight year period, and career outcomes and attitudes like seniority abroad, expected career implications and repatriation considerations are similarly presented through descriptive statistics. Data point in direction of many engineers staying abroad for longer spells of time, holding upper management positions and developing global careerists behavior, and this out of personal, professional ambitions rather than demands from companies. Reflections on self-initiated careers are presented.

The fluctuations in world economy during the last two decades have presented us with several interesting challenges, when it comes to the movement of labor. First and foremost the increasing economic globalization (Edwards & Rees, 2006) has led to unseen growth figures for more than a decade, up to the crisis in the world economy in autumn 2008, and then afterwards the major recession, characterizing specific sectors as well as countries. We have, in other words, experienced a phase where globalization was making the world supposedly flatter (Friedman, 2005) and much more potentially mobile for managers and employees and with the arrival of the recession, a contraction of the different national economies, leading to major restriction and obstacles in this area within companies, i.e. the world is curved and mobility patterns are highly unpredictable (Smick, 2008). It is in many respects a time period of many – and perhaps profound – changes and this also goes for mobility patterns among employees and managers.

One of often discussed topics in the area of international mobility of labor is, what some have called the end of the classical (gold card) expatriate, and perhaps also of the expatriate in general. The claim has been presented during the last couple of decades, and in particular supported by the empirical mapping of new, and more flexible, employment models, where

the old, and supposedly inflexible model, is succeeded by a variety of modern approaches e.g. short-term assignments based on employees acting as frequent flyers, flexi workers etc. (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, & Herbert, 2004). The more flexible employment models vary not only in form and time, but also in contents, i.e. pay level, fringe benefits, extras etc. are reduced to a much lower level if not removed (some companies are in particular reducing benefits for employees working in another country within the EU). And this has – since the arrival of the economic crisis – been even more relevant for many companies. This is, indeed very much in contrast to the pre-2008 crisis large focus on the contents of the employment model, in order to convince the expat to take the assignment (Suutari & Brewster, 2001). We have, on the one hand, during the growth periods seen companies increasingly focus on benefit and support services as a key element in recruitment, selection, retention (Caligiuri, Joshi, & Lazarova, 1999), and on the other hand, many of the modern employment models have not included these extras, both because of the general trend toward fewer gold card expats and because of the economic recession. The question is therefore whether it is possible to see the end of the classical expat or perhaps a sort of a split up, a polarization, in the topic covered in the different employment models?

The continuation of the classical expatriate in some form is supported by the argument that there seems to be a need for a certain pool of internationally competent managers and executives, in order to manage the economic globalization process (recession or not). In addition Benson, Pérez-Nordtvedt, and Datta claimed in 2009 that the number of first time expats was increasing (Benson et al., 2009), and that this type of employees was still occupying a very important role in the running of the multinational companies (MNCs), both in relation to control (Edström & Galbraith, 1977; Martinez & Jarillo, 1989; Scullion, 1994) and in relation to management development (Black, Gregersen, Mendenhall, & Stroh, 1999; Carpenter, Sanders, & Gregersen. 2000; Evans, Pucik, & Barsoux, 2002; Spreitzer, McCall,

& Mahoney, 1997). In particular Evans and colleagues argue that the expatriates still are powerful vehicles for global coordination and that this type of employment is maintained and developed by much more open intra-company networks of career opportunities (Evans et al., 2002). This could mean that we in future will see that foreign assignments take several new forms – in larger companies being based on an infrastructure as mentioned or in small and medium-sized companies being based on external providers like e.g. the recruitment company Stepstone (being present in 11 countries) advertising for engineers working abroad, e.g. Siemens Denmark looking for an employee for their Munich branch or Vestas headquarters in Denmark searching for a person to a job in Malmö and one in Dortmund.

The claim of a certain (minimum) number of expats in MNCs is also based on the perspective that the global economy is being highly knowledge intensive, and this seems to challenge organizations and companies continuously – i.e. they have to rely on knowledge-based control forms, where the use of foreign assignments is one out of several different. In particular the transfer of technical and managerial skills, through the use of expatriates, has been one of the key elements in the research carried out (Morley & Heraty, 2004). In addition, with the frequently occurrence of international reorganizing, downsizing, outsourcing, and offshoring, the demand for skilled employees could be rather stable, and thereby not removing an employment model often characterizing managers and specialists like engineers.

Finally the pressure on the classical expat has come from a somehow new direction, and perhaps in a much more profound manner – the increasing number of people going abroad to live and work, doing it without any prior company attachment (see initially Inkson, Arthur, Pringle, & Barry, 1997; Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Vance, 2005) for empirical studies rooted in New Zealand, Finland, and the US. The question is whether the group of self-initiated behaviors (overseas experiences, foreign assignments, and career strategies) studied here,

could mean a breakup of older employment patterns and leaving the classical model. Will it be possible to detect more profound changes characterizing longer-term foreign stays, perhaps individuals moving toward immigration patterns?

It is, however empirically difficult to precisely determine the phenomena self-initiated, i.e. ‘not being sent abroad by employer but on own initiative,’ without asking directly and perhaps checking this with the company they are working for. And how do we interpret the behavior of a young engineer, first being sent out on an assignment and then looking for a next job out there – is this self-initiated career behavior? We will return to this in the concluding section. But here has been an increasing interest in differentiating the characteristics of self-initiated career from those of the more standardized expatriate contracts, and in particular the individual background, motivation, and compensation principle and development (Sparrow, 2009).

The Data

The study is founded on data from four surveys carried out by the Danish Society of Engineers (IDA) – a professional body and trade union for technical and scientific professionals. IDA has about 83,000 members and represents employees, managers, the self-employed, and pensioners within a variety of fields, including pay and employment conditions. The engineers (together with economists) in Denmark have a relatively long tradition for working abroad (e.g. one out of five of all the members of the one economists’ association had been working abroad, see Andersen and Scheuer [2004]). In this respect, we have a rather interesting population with many experiences in this domain, and they tend to be rather well organized in a limited number of organization. Union density is among university graduate associations; like economists and engineers estimated to be about 76% (Due, Madsen, & Pihl, 2010).

Every second year IDA conducts a survey among its members staying and living abroad (during the last decade in 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2011). The survey has been developed over time, and starting with a few questions in 2003 to a much broader frame today. Thereby only a limited number of data exist across all four surveys. The present chapter is therefore highly data driven and findings based on our access ability to data. The study is based on descriptive statistics, illustrating a development over time in fixed categories, but it also triggers a lot of qualitative questions concerning new developments in direction of more self-initiated career behavior, i.e. we are relying on standardized data on employment conditions and combining them with attitudinal data concerning the job.

It is however also, rather seldom one find these types of aggregate profession data. Even though engineers as mentioned above probably are one of the groups most sent out on foreign assignments, there is surprisingly little focus on professions. The five surveys provide three sets of data before the World financial crisis and two set after. Only Suutari and Brewster (2003) carried out a major study of Finnish engineers. In addition there are a few cross-sector studies, with a focus on professions (Anderson, 2001). This is rather limited compared to the numerous studies of expatriation and foreign assignment in MNC. In addition many of the smaller quantitative studies have been mapping relative recent developments, and this combined with the often myriad of factors, which are influencing the international assignments (Yan, Guorong, & Hall, 2002), have made many of the conclusions in this field relatively weak (Sparrow, 2009).

RESULTS

The selection of themes from the surveys carried out by IDA is based on pragmatism, i.e. themes that are often bargaining issues between IDA and the employers and at the same time reasons of some centrality in the scientific debate concerning expatriation. This is in

particular: type of employment and (direct and indirect) costs associated with the international assignments. How many and what kind of jobs do the engineers occupy, when living and working abroad, and are there developments in certain directions, e.g. toward more specialist types or other forms characterizing demands from local context to people going by their own initiative? Concerning the themes, data has been collected on:

- Formal job title
- Pay level
- Benefits

Besides direct contents measure, the surveys also included data on outcomes over time and attitudes toward foreign assignments; they are presented below:

- Seniority
- Type of employer
- Reasons for working abroad
- Career implications
- Considerations on repatriation

Formal Job Title

Formal job title is an important measure of the status of the expatriate, and it can show to which degree the distribution of expats on generalists and specialists – i.e. is it managerial (economic and behavioral) control and coordination or management development the company is pursuing through the assignments? A relatively large proportion of the Danish engineers living abroad are placed in upper management positions: One out of seven hold

executive positions and a similar size group is placed in other management positions, i.e. almost one third are managers. If one also includes project managers (15% in 2007 and 18% in 2009), the management group covers about half of the respondents. Only around one fifth are employees, with no management responsibility, and the figure is decreasing from 21% in 2007 to 16% in 2009. We interpret this as a reaction to the economic crisis hitting the world (and the Danish) economy autumn 2008, i.e. the number of employed engineers (in non-managerial jobs) has probably been reduced in the cost cutting exercise many Danish companies had to go through. Eighteen percent in 2007 and 16% in 2009 are considering themselves senior specialist. Here it could be argued that almost one fifth being specialists is a rather high number, especially when much of the literature explains how specialists tend to be employed on much shorter terms, travelling around fixing problems perhaps all over the corporation. But the high level of senior specialists could also, as it is shown in the later section on seniority, be caused by the fact that quite a large proportion of the engineers have been abroad several years, leading us to the following question: Do many of these managers and specialists initiate their own career in the host country or region, after the first or second assignment, and if the many top management jobs in the subsidiaries are still occupied by Danes, parent country nationals (PNCs), and only to a lesser extent of host country national or third country nationals, could this be an indicator of people being promoted or creating their own career out there?

Pay Level

Looking at pay level among the engineers, who are comparatively highly remunerated, we see a similar tendency, as in the case of formal job title. Pay before tax, including pension, was in 2007 for more than half of all the engineers above €6000 per month. In 2009 about every third was paid more than €8000 per month, and according to the statistical census of

IDA, 11% (71 expats) earned more than €12,000 per month in 2011. These figures have to be interpreted with care, because of the many factors influencing pay (composition of the remuneration package, local pay levels in the different countries, local level of taxation, the Danish traditions of rather egalitarian pay structures etc.). In addition one of the highly influential factors on pay level is the local level of taxation on pension (e.g. locally paid pension in Malaysia is tax free compared to the +40% tax in Denmark, providing a high incentive to place a large proportion of the pay as pension). Taking into consideration that world crisis has hit many sectors and professions, the pay level of the engineers seems to be continuing at the same level in 2009, and it is rising (partly because of the inflation but also relative, probably because of the increasing level of formal job titles). Pay is still good, and half of the respondents hold management positions; this gives the impression of a group of expatriates with a broader set of competences and skills, rather than narrow functional skills, often provided by lower-level specialists in short spells of time. Work abroad among engineers is not just shorter-term technical assignments but also are the occupation of general managerial positions.

Benefits

Pre-economic crisis arguments tend to emphasize a development toward more complex remuneration packages, designed to 'sell' the foreign assignments, to increasingly skeptical – domestic rooted – younger talents and managers (Andersen & Scheuer, 2004). This could first of all increase the number of elements in these packages, showing more 'exotic' services and second the amount and value attached to old and new benefits. Pulling in the opposite direction is the post-crisis rationalizations and the general development in the last decade away from the classical 'gold card expatriation' (Selmer, 2001).

The most often provided benefits to the Danish engineers abroad is pension and health insurance, and second is free IT (telephone, laptop and internet connection) and home trip (and transportation). It is, in other words, rather classical and modest benefits (similar to what many domestic employees receive today and taking into consideration that pension and health insurance is not relevant in many of the European countries). The services provided are what would normally be considered an element of a mid-level management package, even though many of the respondents are in top management positions. It is, of course, limited how many new initiatives can be identified in a study like this, but there seems to be neither an end of the gold card expat nor a change toward totally new services and no development toward phasing out benefits, e.g. moving toward local terms. The interesting question is whether this is illustrating that many engineers are still sent out and employed by a Danish company, or how a large a degree of self-initiated careerists receive the same benefits as the classical expatriates? We will return to this question when the reasons for going abroad are discussed.

Seniority

Departing from the classical employment themes and moving toward the more outcome-oriented aspects of the employment conditions, seniority has, for a long time, been one of the most indirectly discussed themes concerning a successful expatriation. How long of a time people stayed abroad was an indicator of the effectiveness of how well they adapted and, more recently, in addition to whether they tended to build up an international career. Looking at seniority, we perhaps find the most challenging data, in as much as the relative proportion of engineers living and working abroad for longer spells of time is quite high.

Insert Table 1 about here

Almost 200 of the participating respondents, who are living and working abroad have been doing this for more than 10 years, and this figure has been extremely stable during the whole period. More than one out of three of the respondents have been out 6–10 years, i.e. half of the engineers have been out at least for two ‘so called’ standard periods (normally contracts run for two or three years in Danish MNCs). A very high seniority, many holding management position, with high pay, is indeed pointing toward a group of engineers making career moves in a certain direction. Are these people showing an extremely high loyalty to their Danish employer, or are they shifting employer creating a career out there?

Type of Employer

The Danish engineers working and living abroad are mainly employed by a local company – 48% in 2007 and 36% in 2009. It would be rather straightforward to claim that this is the proof of self-initiated career behavior. But the large number is probably caused by several different reasons: First locally owned companies are hiring Danish engineers; no doubt, case studies show this. Second, Danish MNCs do open subsidiaries as a local company and being ‘locally’ employed can be out of legal, tax, and cost-saving reasons and not necessarily because of the expatriates being localized. Some engineers are still employed in the headquarters (in the Danish company), and this we choose to call the classical expat. However, today this is a minority – less than one fourth are employed this way.

However we do also see changes occurring in relation to ‘local employer’ – twelve percentage points down from 2007 to 2009. This could be caused by some of the respondents being self-employed (not measured in 2007). It could, however, signal a move toward a more localized group of people creating a permanent life abroad, furthermore taking into consideration that about 40% of the participating engineers had their spouses with them and that the spouses similarly were working mainly for a local employer. It is also a situation in

which the ties to the mother company become looser, thereby supporting the supposed emerging trends toward more independent global careerists (Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

Reasons for Working Abroad

The +500 engineers participating in the IDA surveys have been presented with a relatively large variety of options for replying why they were working abroad. Many of them could be categorized as rather traditional, see Table 2 below.

Insert Table 2 about here

The data points in the direction of primary emphasis on personal developmental reasons (first and third upper scores are personal ambition and career; professional development ranging from 40% to 57% during the whole period). Second, the engineers leave for social reasons (learn about other cultures and family reasons). ‘Demand from company’ is the lowest score for all years! It is only in 2% of the cases (still wish from company is somewhat higher – between 13 and 17% of the cases). But the engineers who work abroad do it for several – positive – reasons and not mainly because of pressure from their employer. The surveys by IDA are not composed into a panel data study, and interpretation has to be carried out with caution, i.e. people who have declined foreign assignments do not participate in the survey as well as engineers living and working in Denmark. Finally the figures are open for interpretation, and we do believe that engineers increasingly look for jobs abroad themselves, from home, perhaps in existing jobs, carrying out what Harris and Brewster (1999) called coffee machine selection, not necessarily within the company but also out of the company. Earlier studies by IDA show that about one third of all foreign assignments are arranged through web-based job portals and personal networks, somewhat anecdotal evidence but still

pointing in the same direction. Foreign assignments are increasingly an individual, developmental, and positive choice by knowledge workers like engineers.

Career Implications

Finally the engineers' perceptions on career matters were collected in the last two surveys (2007 and 2009), and their answers were similarly positive, i.e. the majority of them consider the foreign assignment as a career-enhancing thing, and one fourth indicate that it had no effect. In other words, the rather negative career implications argument seen in earlier expatriate literature is not mirrored in this set of data.

Insert Table 3 about here

There is, of course, a bias in this type of study, asking those who have taken the assignment (and not those who have not or have gone home before time) and asking about how they feel about it. Still it is only one out of every 10, who think the effect will be negative, and these answers include the many having been out there +10 years. One also has to take into consideration that career implications can be interpreted in at least two different frames of reference: domestic career or global career, i.e. the rather general question posed can be interpreted either in relation to chances of reaching higher position in the headquarters, in the parent country, or top-positions abroad. The latter option seems particularly relevant, taking into consideration that many of the engineers have been out there for +10 years. In the last survey carried out by IDA (in 2009), the respondents were asked abroad about how they viewed repatriation-relevant topics like (1) date of returning to job in Denmark; (2) certainty for job when repatriating, and (3) expecting to go back to Denmark. Many of the engineers are tied rather loosely to their organization, in that respect that two out of three have no date of return and four out of five have no certainty of a job when returning.

In this way repatriation considerations seem to be rather distant and not to a very large extent linked to the present employer. In addition taking into consideration that 27% expect not to go back and 35% don't know if they will, this leaves us with only little more than one third of the respondents expecting to go back to Denmark after ending the contract. A certain level of uncertainty is quite normal when we look at foreign assignments, the ending dates, and future jobs within the same company. However, to a much lesser extent than we can see here. Perhaps, this is our most important indicator of future self- initiated career behavior.

In the technical commercial domain, where engineers are by far are the most dominant type of personnel, there has, in the Danish case during the last couple of decades, developed a stepwise career model: The large majority of mainly younger engineers start as employees, moving to become project managers rather quickly and end up as unit or department managers, when performing well, before turning into directors, the most skillful of them. This could also be the case when it comes to international aspects, taking into consideration that the majority of Danish companies already have been, or are in the process of, outsourcing and offshoring functions.

SUMMARY

Summing up the development of the three aspects of the Danish engineers' employment conditions abroad, we see signs of managerial professionals (Peiperl & Johnsen, 2007). Many of them are placed in executive positions, they are well paid, and they receive standard expat benefits. In addition the majority of them are locally employed, they have been abroad for a long time, and they do this voluntarily out of professional developmental and, to some extent, for social reasons. The majority of the participating engineers undoubtedly feel pulled more by these career and social factors than pushed by their employers at that time, i.e. they have chosen to look for a job abroad, either through a web-based search, personal networks (IDA

has established networks of members abroad, sometimes on a Scandinavian basis) inside or outside their organizations, or they have developed their career out there.

Many of these people have probably, before the first survey was carried out by IDA, been sent overseas on a temporary basis to complete a more time-based task or accomplish an organizational goal, i.e. the classical definition of an expatriate on a foreign assignment. However, time based here frequently means longer spells of time, and it seems to be the case that many – after their first foreign assignment – stay out there and exploit the acquired global management skills. Since Denmark does not allow dual citizenship, they stay Danish and perhaps keep their membership of the engineers association – IDA.

This way, we do see elements of more self-initiated expatriation among the engineers, where they fulfill the required competences of today, exceeding the pure functional and technical skills and solving the immediate production problem. Of much more importance are international and intercultural skills as engineering projects increasingly represent cross-border co-operations as a result of the large majority of Danish companies having outsourced and offshored.

Working and living in a foreign country substantially change a managers' view on international work (Benson et al., 2009; Tung, 1987), and international experiences are multifaceted. They consist of many different jobs and job experiences, and they – not to forget – add up (Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun, & Lepak, 2005). Our claim is that many Danish engineers do go through these processes during their foreign assignments and that they acquire the necessary management knowledge and skills for the development and running of globally distributed work.

Much of the self-initiated career literature is assuming a high degree of voluntariness as a basis for individual choice, but it is (as we have implied above) indeed debatable to how large a degree it is based on a rational calculus, one's own initiative. Studying this profession for

some years now, we tend to believe that several of the participating engineers have been very uncertain about the first foreign assignment before accepting it, and then after having been out there for a period, accepted the second with greater joy or left for another job locally (seeking a promotion). Furthermore, some of them are perhaps making a virtue out of a necessity, meaning their first career choice has made it rather difficult for them to return.

Limitations

The study is based on aggregate descriptive statistics, and assumptions are made concerning the individual level logics behind and among the majority of respondents. Further qualitative studies are necessary in order to find how models work within companies abroad, and, in particular, how individuals move and for what reasons. In addition the IDA surveys used here do not clearly stipulate, what constitutes as expatriate assignment (like it is often similarly different what is included in other studies – some talk about more than one year, while others use two or three (Konopaske & Werner, 2005)).

The respondent's criteria for participating in the IDA surveys are 'Living and working abroad' and being members of IDA. This excludes Danish engineers living in the southern part of Sweden but working in Denmark (commuting daily) and Danish engineers living in northern Germany, crossing the southern Danish border. In other words local cross-border commuters – mainly people doing it for tax reasons – are not included in this study. Similarly, foreign engineers working for a Danish company, in Denmark, and perhaps being sent out on a foreign assignment, are only included if they are members of IDA. This is probably very few people, i.e. one third of the country nationals' mobility and career behavior is not included in the study.

The international IDA data presented here, on the one hand, has a bias toward more experienced managers. It is directed toward people who are already out there; several of them

are in continuously high positions (senior management with perhaps high potential) relying on their social-professional networks, which greatly influence the success or failure of the foreign assignment, as an important element in the continuous career development carried out (Benson et al., 2009). IDA organizes many younger engineers; it is, however, not to the same extent their attitudes toward foreign assignments and potential reasons for – in future – taking the first steps toward a self-initiated career, which has been mapped.

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TABLE 1**Danish Engineers, Being Members of IDA, Working and Living Abroad,****Number of Years Abroad, 2003–2011, (%)**

Time	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011
<1 year	7	13	14	14	12
1–2 years	17	13	18	16	14
3–5 years	24	21	18	20	23
6–10 years	16	20	17	15	16
10<	35	34	33	35	35
Total	100	100	100	100	100
N	894	664	598	563	668

Source: IDA, International Member Survey, 2003–2011.

TABLE 2

**Danish Engineers, Being Members of the Danish Engineering Association,
and Living Abroad, Reasons for Taking the Job, 2003–2011, (%)**

Reasons	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011
Personal ambitions and career	57	46	54	55	52
Learn about other cultures	–	47	48	41	34
Professional development	44	40	42	44	42
Family reasons	23	20	23	22	23
Higher pay and better living conditions	–	17	22	18	21
Lower tax	–	14	14	16	14
Wish from the company	17	14	13	14	8*
Others	20	12	13	9	27
Unemployed	9	12	11	9	12
Demand from company	2	2	1	2	*
N	766	684	554	548	666

**In 2011 the numbers for 'Wish from company' and 'Demand from company' is merged.*

Source: IDA, International Member Survey, 2003–2011.

TABLE 3

**Danish Engineers, Being Members of IDA, Working and Living Abroad, Perception of
Expatriation as a Career Influencing Factor, 2003–2011, (%)**

Opportunities after expatriation	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011
Better	48	51	54	51	51
Unchanged	19	20	19	27	26
Worse	11	10	11	8	12
No idea	21	19	16	14	11
N:	777	645	578	556	649

Source: IDA, International Member Survey, 2003–2011.