

**BUILDING AND SUSTAINING GLOBAL CAREERS: EVIDENCE  
FROM INTERNATIONAL PROJECT WORK**

Abstract

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# **BUILDING AND SUSTAINING GLOBAL CAREERS: EVIDENCE FROM INTERNATIONAL PROJECT WORK**

## **INTRODUCTION**

International human resource management (IHRM) literature has suggested a link between career outcomes and undertaking international work. Generally speaking, the context is the traditional international assignment where assignees ‘hop in and out’ of the global arena in an ad hoc manner on short-term, task-related, international postings (Yan, Zhu & Hall, 2002; Stahl & Cerdin, 2004; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007; Lazaroova & Cerdin, 2007; Dickmann and colleagues, 2008; Reiche, Kraimer & Harzing, 2011).

Lately, an emerging body of work makes a distinction between international assignees and global careerists. Individuals prepared to accept one or several disconnected international assignments because ‘it will be good for your career in this company’ are different to those who pursue a deliberate strategy to build and sustain a global career. The underlying foundation for much this recent work is the concept of the ‘new career norm’, whose proponents suggest that ownership for career pathing is in the hands of the individual, and that career progression up the traditional hierarchy is effectively replaced by a series of moves between various employing organizations (see for example, Baruch 2006; Lamb & Sutherland 2010).

Operating globally is more than being mobile: global careerists are considered to be self-managing and internationally oriented (Carr, Inkson & Thorn, 2005). Of course, a ‘cadre’ of global operators has long been recognized as an essential element of multinational management (see, for example, Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1987). The term ‘cadre’ has since been reconceptualised as ‘global talent’ in discussions about developing

effective global leaders integral to sustaining global business (see for example Special Issue articles in *Journal of World Business*, 2010, 45:2). However, the emerging global careers literature does not explicitly confine the notion of a global career to an elite group of senior managers from the parent organization (see for example, *Journal of Management Development*, 2004, special issue 23:9). The concept extends to persons from various hierarchical levels and different functional areas (Thomas, Lazarova & Inkson, 2005).

In their review of the global career literature, Suutari & Taka (2004:833) comment: “Research still focuses on international assignments as a disturbing and transitory factor within career logic rather than on the nature of the ongoing global careers in international contexts”. We would add that authors who do consider the nature of global careers concentrate on categorization and description (for example, Larsen, 2004; Zeitz, Blau & Fertig, 2009). Further, as Banai & Harry (2004) point out, much of the ‘new career norm’ literature takes the perspective of the organization. Thus, several questions remain unanswered. How do individuals build and sustain a global career? Does this occur within the boundaries of the multinational, or outside in a seemingly boundaryless manner? How much does a particular organization *itself* matter when individuals build a global career?

This article offers some insight by reporting on the findings of two studies that took a ‘global career’ rather than an ‘international assignment’ view. The overall purpose was to extend current thinking about permanent global careers. We took a qualitative approach – the abductive - the iterative process of which encourages *theory refinement and extension* as the researcher responds to emergent themes that arise from the

fieldwork (Dubois and Gadde 2002, 559). Our chosen research setting is that of the international project. The unit of analysis is the international project worker: a representative of a group of employees who are comfortable working in a *borderless* environment, moving from project to project<sup>1</sup>. The first study comprised a group of consultants on contractual arrangements who regarded themselves ‘boundaryless’ and self-managing. We then conducted a further study involving employees with more ‘secure’ employment in a large global project organization. As we will detail, we found that the differences between the two groups were not as great as expected; that there is active management of global careers whether the individual is a contractual consultant or in a more ‘secure’ form of employment.

Our abductive approach influences the structure of the paper. We first present an overview of the relevant careers and employment literature that informed our iterative process. We then present the research setting of both studies and the key themes that emerged from both. Given the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of our study, we do not generalize our empirical findings to other organizations. However, by providing a different research setting to that of the more traditional headquarter-subsidiary, we can make theoretical generalizations to the extent that our findings contribute to the *refinement and extension* of the concept of a global career.

## **FEATURES OF A CAREER**

The term ‘career’ generally refers to the sequence or pattern of jobs (and the associated attitudes and behaviours) a person holds over his or her life span. There are several

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term ‘worker’ as not all of the participants were at a managerial level. However, the term manager may be used interchangeably due to the literature in which we embed our empirical work.

features that comprise the concept of a career. First, the **career domain** or field refers to “the social context within which individual members of the workforce make their moves... careers unfold within a field” (Mayrhofer et al 2004, p.873). Particularly in the Western world, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has evinced changes to the way work is structured. Onus has been placed back on individuals to self-manage their careers and to accept more employment insecurity (Lamb and Sutherland 2010). Such changes have affected the career domain in which our study participants undertake career moves.

Second, the relevant literature separates a career into two parts: the external and the internal (see for example, Schein, 1978). The **external** career is based on an objective, organizational view and refers to the social structure, such as career paths and occupational streams. Keegan and Turner (2003) describe the external project career as resembling a spiral staircase, an image that they consider captures the breadth of expertise and knowledge, across multiple sites and appointments, that is required in the multidisciplinary project environment, as opposed to the traditional corporate ladder where one progresses up a more functional, specialist silo.

The **internal** career is said to reflect an individual’s own subjective idea or map about work life over which the individual is seen to have some directional control. Key components of the concept of an internal career include career anchors and identity, psychological life stages and career resilience (Schein, 1978). *Career anchors* reflect an individual’s aspirations, motives and skills. Reinforced by experience and learning over time, these anchors coalesce into *career identity* that shapes how a person evaluates promotional opportunities and recognition, and makes sacrifices to further career ends (Noe, Noe and Bachhuber, 1990).

An associated conceptualization of careers takes a knowledge perspective. Bird (1994, p.326) views of careers as “repositories of knowledge”: “accumulations of information and knowledge embodied in skills, expertise and relationship networks acquired through an evolving sequence of work experience over time”. Building on this perspective, Arthur, DeFillippi and Jones (2001, p.1001) develop the concept of *career capital*, which they define as “the overall set of non-financial resources a person is able to bring to his or her work” based on a process “through which people invest and seek greater accumulation”. Arthur et al (2001) treat career capital as three interlinked components: *knowing-why* (values, motivation and identity); *knowing-how* (repertoire of skills and expertise); and *knowing-whom* (network of contacts). It is possible to conjoin these conceptualisations: the internal career concept contains elements of knowing-why; the external career has elements of knowing how. A related aspect is that of the *career network*. Bartol and Zhang (2007, 389) define a career network as relationships “with actors who can facilitate career progress by providing career advice”, through actions such as mentoring, advocacy and sponsorship. Career networks enable interaction and discourse, and become a necessary mechanism for information gathering and dissemination, and provide career information (Bird, 1994; Seibert, Kraimer and Linden, 2001).

There is not a clear definition of what constitutes a global career. For example, Larson (2004, p. 862) defines a global career as “the series of events, experiences and actions embedded in the global interaction between an individual and an organization – a relationship which is characterized by mutual dependency between the two parties”. A different approach is taken by Suutari and Taka (2004, p.833): a global career involves

“frequent international relocations over the course of their [individuals’] working lives”. Discussion in the global careers literature tends to place such definitions into the context of typologies. Perhaps the most popular has been the concept of the ‘*boundaryless* career’, proposed by Arthur and Rousseau (1996): one where the individual takes charge; the career identity is independent of the employer; and flexibility is valued. Such thinking affects the transactional and relational contracts as part of the employment relationship. The boundaryless career is considered to be more transactional than relational. Transactional contracts are primarily concerned with specific monetized obligations whereas the relational contract refers to perceived reciprocal expectations related to aspects such as company investment in development and promotional opportunities exchanged for employee loyalty and commitment. Pushing the individual towards the transactional side reinforces careerism behaviour (Galunic and Anderson, 2000; Welch 2003).

The concept of the boundaryless career has been extended to the international milieu. For example, Stahl, Miller & Tung (2002) looked at the traditional expatriate career. Their findings indicated that a high intrinsic value was placed on the career potential of international assignments, and that respondents were willing to change employers upon repatriation in order to advance their careers. Emphasis was placed on the internal rather than the external career. They conclude that the notion of boundaryless could be attached to some international assignees’ careers, and that it was not a concept culturally bound to US expatriates. Carr, Inkson and Thorn (2005) adapted Arthur and Rousseau’s (1996) categories by inserting the words ‘nation’ and ‘international’, and thus creating a definition of global boundaryless careers.

An associated term is that of the ‘*protean* career’. Named after a Greek god who could change shape at will, its features are similar to that of the boundaryless career: the individual takes charge, pursuing satisfying work, with a whole-of-life perspective. Indeed, there is some suggestion that the protean aspect refers to how the individual operates the internal career, within the context of a boundaryless external career (Suutari & Makela, 2007). These two descriptors are applicable to our sample of international project workers. We turn now to the empirical studies that consider *how global careers work in practice*.

## **RESEARCH SETTING**

There are two industry sectors: international development projects and commercial, business-to-business projects, and our studies involved both. International project business involves the formation of temporary organizations for the life of the project. The nature of project work is threefold: there is discontinuity in terms of client demand that affects work flow and thus employment with limited guarantees for new work; a high degree of uncertainty over project timelines as start and end dates are fluid; and technical complexity which may constrain hiring capabilities (Cova, Ghauri and Salle, 2002). These characteristics provide a challenging setting for long-term global career management. As we will now detail, its discontinuous and uncertain nature produced a specific employment relationship that, in turn, shaped the unfolding of project workers careers, and influenced how global careers are built and maintained. In this sense, the international project worker may be regarded as a rich case where much “can be learned from a few exemplars of the phenomenon in question” (Patton, 1990, p.54).



### Study 1: Career Type: Self-Employed

Our first study concerned international development projects (IDPs). These involve the supplier firm delivering a range of technical services to clients financed through aid or concessional loans administered by government or multilateral institutions such as the World Bank. The highly specialized technical qualifications and prior international experience demanded by funding agencies means that firms in this sector tend to rely more heavily on a high proportion of temporary employees. Contingent or non-traditional workers - whose employment is “not performed on a full-time schedule and an ongoing basis with a single employer” (Gallagher and McLean Parks 2001, 184) – can be expected to have differing perceptions about employment exchange outcomes. For those involved in IDP work, employment uncertainty is high so one would expect career capital to be important; and that networks, “whose boundaries are not coterminous with those of any organization” (Bird, 1994, p.430), would assume greater career importance than is generally the case.

We therefore conducted an interview study in late 2008 and into 2009 involving sixteen IDP consultants who were contacted using a snowballing technique. Initial approaches were made to consultants through contacts made from the initial investigation. It was revealing that these key individuals drew on their networks to suggest potential interviewees. The resultant sample of 16 interviewees came from a range of backgrounds with a wealth of experience. Five were female. Two were retired. Four had been independent contractors but now in managerial roles at different IDP supplier firms. At the time of interview, one had just joined the IDP division of a supplier

firm as a permanent employee. On average, interviewee careers spanned several decades that covered a wide range of IDP positions: from bid writer, team leader, technical adviser, project director through to official World Bank project evaluator. The common denominator for this group was the development project sector.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or by telephone, and digitally recorded with permission. A semi-structured interview guide was used to elicit information about their motivation for undertaking international project work; the relationship with supplier firms and the various parties involved at the project site; the project lifestyle; and redeployment post project completion. Open-ended questions allowed for unsolicited data collection about the nature of international project work and we were careful not to “lead the witness”. All interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy before being loaded into the popular Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) program, NVivo. Data verification involved interviews with two former independent consultants and the provision of a summary report to key informants for factual verification. Both researchers were involved in the coding process, providing analytical triangulation (Patton, 1990). Initial codes were drawn from the relevant career literature: career domain, career identity, internal career, network activity, and organizational attachment. Emergent, related codes were: reasons for undertaking international project work; professional reputation; networking; family factors; and work sequencing. Our coding is therefore theory-driven and data-driven (Gibbs, 2007).

Three main themes emerged from the data analysis: reasons for engaging in IDP work; the importance of relevant professional expertise and reputation; and networking. These were important for building and maintain a global career. However, family factors

and work scheduling also emerged as important to a person's ability to maintain global career momentum. Considering the findings, we asked ourselves if these themes were a feature of IDP project careers, or were they a career characteristic across the international project industry. The second study thus sought to extend our understanding of global careers by investigating another research setting in the same industry. Our intention was not to test a theoretical model or replicate the IDP study in the positivistic tradition. Rather, the findings of the IDP research informed an "articulated preconception" to be developed through a further process of constantly "going back and forth from one type of research activity to another and between empirical observations and theory", consistent with the systematic combining approach advocated by Dubois and Gadde (2002, p. 555).

#### Study 2: Career Type: Company employed

The research site was a global construction firm operating in the commercial project sector. Unlike the IDP sector, the rules generally are less stringent when it comes to personnel. Commercial firms prefer to staff projects with internal employees, and this may provide a less uncertain employment situation. In some cases, permanent staff may be supplemented with external hires should required skills not be available 'in-house'. Consequently, it is not uncommon to find individuals who have worked on projects for several commercial firms, as well as for firms in both the commercial and IDP sectors.

The global construction firm – Lyell Construction<sup>2</sup> - was chosen due to its often-referred-to status as the industry bench mark. This purposeful sampling of a critical case is consistent with qualitative methodology reasoning: if the research phenomenon is

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<sup>2</sup> Names disguised – also precise countries and projects have been withheld to respect confidentiality of all informants.

present in a critical case, it is most likely to occur elsewhere (Patton, 1990). At the time of study, Lyell had over 40,000 employees, and a long history of involvement in government and private project work in domestic and international settings. It comprised six divisions, referred to as Global Business Units (GBUs). Given the breadth of company operations, and research constraints of access, budget and time zones, we selected the GBU division headquartered in Australia that focused on mining and minerals projects.

The HR Director in Lyell provided a list of employees willing to participate in the study; as well as offering valuable insights into the organizational perspective, along with secondary data in the form of policies. Further company information was obtained from its website and newspaper articles. Forty-six employees agreed to participate. Informants ranged from senior project managers, site managers, engineering and construction specialists and functional staff (IT and finance); with varied backgrounds and nationalities, and project experience ranging from the first project through to a project-based career of 20 years. One former senior manager who had just moved to another construction firm was also interviewed. Length on the current project also differed from short-term (3-6 months), longer term (1 to 2 years) through the entirety of the project. The majority (85%) were classified as single or single-status (that is, unaccompanied by family), as is generally the case in the project industry. Fifteen were female. The bulk of our informants were on their third or fourth project.

As with the IDP group, the focus was the individual not the company but there was multi-level analysis across various workplace positions. It is important to reiterate that our intention was not to replicate, nor attempt to match like-with-like in terms of

demographics between interviewees from the IDP and commercial sectors. The number and diversity of the Lyell informants was important as the aim was to identify the presence (or conversely its absence) of the phenomenon in question rather than measure its frequency or statistical significance (van Maanen, 1979).

We followed the same data collection, transcription and analysis protocol. Semi-structured interviews were mainly conducted by telephone as the majority of Lyell participants were working on projects in remote geographical locations such as northern Scandinavia, the Middle East, Africa and South East Asia. A summary of findings was compiled into a company report as part of data verification. The multiple perspectives of our informants, access to company documentation, and reports in the business press and websites provided data triangulation. Consistent with an abductive, systematic combining approach, in the coding process, we also returned to the data from the IDP study to ascertain if new insights could be gained that would assist in refining the emerging theoretical conceptualization (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). To assist in data transparency, we use IDP and LC to indicate whether the informant came from the IDP group or from Lyell Construction: each participant is also numbered (e.g. IDP6; LC22)

## **FINDINGS**

The major themes that emerged in the IDP study were reflected in Lyell: reasons for undertaking international project work; the importance of professional reputation; and networking. Work scheduling and family concerns also were evident aspects when it came to maintaining a global project career. In Table 1 below, we detail how these emergent themes are informed by career capital constructs: internal career, external

career, and career network. Aspects of the internal career contributed to an individual's ability to attain international project work. However, in order to maintain a consistent work flow, it appeared that an individual needed to be able to cope with the special features of the external career; to build a supportive career network; and to manage family and personal lifestyle demands.

<b>Table 1 here</b>
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### Internal Career

The nature of international projects placed emphasis on a person's internal career. We found common *career anchors and identities*. The contractual nature of the employment relationship meant that loyalty was to the profession, rather than to an individual supplier firm, or agency. More emphasis was placed on the transaction side as compensation for employment uncertainty: participants used the term 'mercenary', though one participant argued that this led to contractors being "loyal to themselves, not necessarily to the profession, but to themselves" (IDP8). However, the relational side of the employment relationship was important to the extent that they needed to remain on good terms with project parties in order to obtain further work.

It could be expected that, given that Lyell participants were employed by a supplier firm, rather than self-employed, that there would be a difference of perception regarding the employment relationship. This was not the case. Again the nature of the international project industry reinforced a similar loosely-coupled employment relationship, as ongoing employment within Lyell was dependent on further project work being available at project completion: Lyell participants agreed that "you have to find

work”, “you have to eat”; that project workers generally “follow the work, not the company”; “are loyal to themselves”; and “tend to be industrial gypsies”.

The *knowing-why* (values, motivation, identity) component of their career capital was evident in the comments made about reasons for, and the value of, international project work. Comparing our data sets, we found a consistent picture across both sectors of individuals who were prepared to work in often harsh, extreme, even dangerous work environments; and were comfortable building work relationships with multiple entities – the supplier firm, the client, project and site managers, and counterparts from host government agencies. As data collection progressed, it became clear that the nature of project work was a primary attraction: its discontinuous and uncertain characteristics provided a flexible lifestyle accompanied by novel work challenges, and the satisfaction of being able to work to tight deadlines; and assisting those in developing countries. Participants confirmed that money was an important element and other factors such as job variety and international experience were offered as reasons for accepting project work. Others stressed that international project work provided more scope. These motives, combined with personal attributes such as mobility and flexibility, appeared to underpin the building of a global career in the international project industry.

Data from both studies indicates a preparedness to work longer hours to ensure project delivery on time and to budget and, while completion bonuses were important, preservation of professional reputations emerged as a key *anchor* upon which project workers built their career *identity*. It was particularly critical in gaining some continuity of employment albeit with different organizations (IDP5). Building a career in this industry rested on the person’s ability to develop the required reputation.

### External Career

A consistent finding across both groups was the need to find ways of overcoming or at least handling the challenges inherent in international project work in order to maintain a global career. The emphasis on professional reputation was linked with the *knowing-how* component of career capital. Skills and expertise contributed to a person's ability to find work, and ability to perform enhanced professional reputation: In turn, as indicated in Table 1, maintaining the mobility and momentum required to sustain a global career path involved coping with the nature of the external career, and our data suggests these aspects reinforced a *protean-like* existence.

Our data revealed the *spiral career path*, though perhaps more pronounced in the IDP group. For both groups, the project, rather than the employing firm, provided the career setting. As independent consultants, IDP participants' livelihoods depended on obtaining work and our IDP sample moved supplier firms and project team positions. For example, one informant (IDP3) had worked first as a permanent employee within a supplier firm, then as an independent consultant on a wide range of IDP projects in various team positions, and lately as an evaluator for what formerly had been a client - the World Bank.

For those more permanently employed in Lyell, movement to varying project positions, and across companies, created a similar spiral pattern. For example, one participant had been employed on seven different international project assignments, but only the last three had been with Lyell (LC8). Self-management was encouraged by Lyell procedures: permanent employees were expected to access Lyell's intranet, liaise with



regional managers and corporate HR, when a project was nearing completion, to find what other work was available. There was some internal promotional opportunities within Lyell in the sense that deployment to a new project could involve a promotion, as one informant explained: “at the end of three years [in a project] you’d want to think that you’re then going to be moving into a very different role ... so surely I must now be in a position to step up and do something else” (LC3).

Contributing to the above maintenance aspects was the discontinuous nature of project work. There could be long periods between projects or start dates would be delayed. IDP participants related how they would often have their names listed on several tender bids with different supplier firms in order to ensure some work.

### Career Networking

While *knowing why* and *knowing how* were instrumental in becoming employed on a particular international project, networking was an important method of ensuring some continuity of work. Regardless of project sector, obtaining further work was a common prime motivator to develop network ties between themselves and others in the international project industry. As study participants moved from project site to project site, they built up an association with others; a shared affiliation (Casper and Murray, 2005) that carried beyond one specific project. Contact was kept with individuals on other projects, and often the same individuals would move from project to project: ‘When I came to [this project], it was like I’d never left [former project]. We had the same ... crowd’ (LC31). The resultant network had a high degree of job-related utility. There was also a task-related aspect. Networks were seen to be important ways to short-circuit

formal communication and reporting lines allowing participants to obtain quick responses to work-related queries. There was also a strong social component of the career network. Participants commented: “It’s not about the project itself. It’s about the people you work with” (IDP8); “You sort of start catching up with people as you go around [working on various projects]” (LC34).

IDP participants related how they could trade on their *‘knowing-whom’* career capital to ensure work, thus countering the loosely-coupled employment situation. Newell et al (2004, p.S53) comment that “in projects where individuals do not feel secure’, individuals will naturally give priority to personal goal fulfilment and activate their social networks to that end”. Lyell participants provided examples where the formal procedures failed, and they had to utilize their networks to find further work, which may not necessarily be another Lyell project. The resultant relationships from active networking provided information, access to necessary resources particularly project team members, and were invaluable for career continuity and progression. In other words, participants built career networks based on knowing-whom (see Table 1). The self initiated job rotation provided career outcomes noted in the general careers literature: increased networks of contacts, task and skill variety, and personal development benefits (see for example, Campion, Cheraskin and Stevens, 1994). The career network in which our participants were embedded was a valued, even vital, shared resource on which their livelihoods depended. This held for the self-employed as well as those more permanently employed.

For both IDP and Lyell participants, the project, as a temporary organization, often became a community of itself, particularly those operating in remote locations.

Arthur et al (2001, p.113) see the project context as a ‘community of practice’ with the joint enterprise providing opportunities for a “shared repertoire of language, skills and experience” (know-how overlapping with know-why) that facilitates access to contacts (know-who) and a continuing source of information after the project is complete. Our data suggests that ‘community of practice’ aptly describes the career domain of international project work (see Table 1). Relationships lasted beyond the immediate project; strong ties developed over time; and developed into a community of support. Particularly for the more experienced of our participants, strong bonds with each other were seen to have lasted throughout their careers. Even those in more permanent employment arrangements indicated that a career network may be longer lasting and more pervasive than an organisational network.

Self-preservation was the driving force, yet network activity was underpinned by non-utilitarian behaviour (Cova, Ghauri and Salle, 2002) so that strong connections with critical actors in the international project network were maintained. The interconnectedness related by our participants explained how they remained “good mates” even though they often competed for the same work. However, new entrants did not have the same level of contacts unless a more experienced consultant was prepared to take on a mentoring role and share contacts. One new Lyell ‘entrant’ remarked: “If you are not part of it [the network] then you have a problem [getting work]” (LC25).

Another maintenance factor was the required level of professional reputation and expertise. Protecting reputations could reinforce self preservation behaviour, but as reputation was linked with project success, there was a strong motivation to ensure projects were completed on time and to budget – a goal shared by contracting firms and funding agencies alike. On the other hand, several senior IDP participants commented

that it formed a major barrier for younger colleagues to build a global career. “Their [funding agencies] requirements for the individuals have been so specific that it’s only the older more experienced people that can actually get on the jobs” (IDP11).

### Family factors

Family factors emerged as a major consideration in maintaining a global career. The intermittent nature of international project work meant varying lengths of presence with and absence from the family. In that sense, participants raised similar issues to those identified in the emerging short-term and alternative assignment arrangements literature (see for example, Starr & Currie, 2009). For example, “Coming home and finding, to a large degree, your family has orientated itself, it’s got all its routines in place, you’re only an intruder (IDP7)”.

Family factors often can add to the spiral external career. One explained that when his family were young, he took a permanent domestic position with a supplier firm for a few years, before returning to international project work (IDP4). As one commented: “being away from families and being away from countries, [team dynamics] were exacerbated by the fact that the schedule was probably just a little bit too arduous” (IDP14).

The type of project, its location, host government rules, and the specific task involved determined whether families could accompany our participants. As mentioned above, the majority were categorized as “unaccompanied” or “single”. Lyell participants who had accompanying families on the project site related similar issues to that in the expatriate management literature. Just as the project workers formed networks, so did

some of the women who accompanied their partners from project site to project site (the term “network of women” was used). The isolation of the project site could add to separation anxieties. One participant related how a co-worker left a project early due to family matters back home; another commented that, for those on their first international project, it often was “their first time away from their family and their friends and they find it really difficult” (LC11). A common comment was the reliance on often intermittent telecommunication connections to stay in touch with family and friends back in the home country. It appeared that how the family was coping – whether on site or back in the home country – was a determinant factor in continuing a global career path.

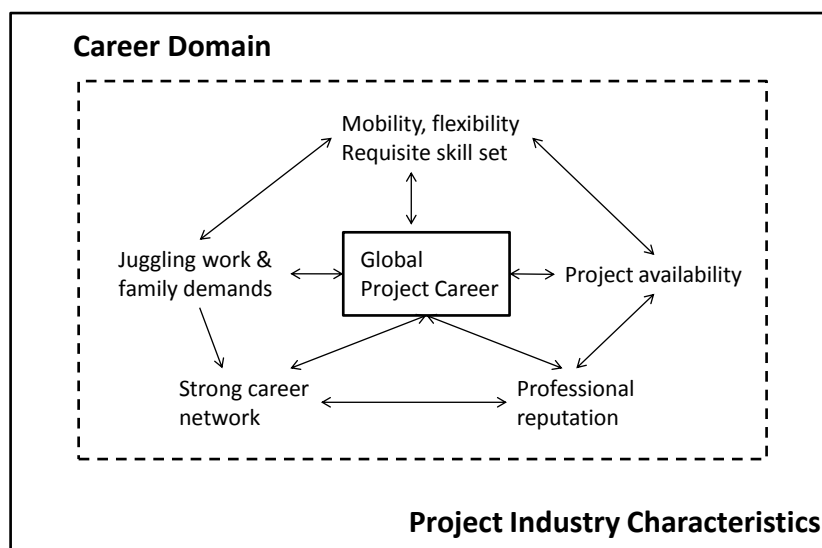
## **DISCUSSION**

It became evident in interviews that mapping out a global career required more than a desire for international experience to enhance one’s resume. One needed to be committed to the lifestyle involved in order to handle the challenges and barriers. Not all of our participants were interested in making international project work a continuous, long-term global career. A factor was a person’s career stage. As a younger Lyell participant explained: “[This is] something I want to do while young... get good experience, build my career... then settle down somewhere” (LC20). For others, the international orientation of Lyell was a factor: “It’s sort of expected with [Lyell] to do this type of thing or it’s supposed to enhance your career prospects (LC6)”. In that sense, there was commonality between these project workers and traditional expatriates who “hopped in and out” of the international arena. Thus, there is a difference between gaining international experience and building a global career.

Individuals in our study who chose a global career appeared to fit the general description of boundaryless global careerists: they moved across national boundaries; their career identity was profession not nationality; they discounted geographical constraints; actively sought international work often in spite of family commitments; and were sustained by an international network of information and contacts. Career capital was actively traded. This held for self-employed and permanent participants. Our data therefore suggests correspondence with the characteristics proffered by Arthur and Rousseau (1996) and adapted by Carr, Inkson and Thorn (2005).

However, our objective was not limited to confirming description. Rather, we were concerned with the question of *how does an individual build and sustain a global career*. Our data suggests that those wishing to follow a global career path in the international project industry became engaged what can be described as in a reinforcing, cyclical process. International project work required a degree of mobility and flexibility as well as the requisite skill set; continuing work depended on project availability and professional reputation arising from prior performance and expertise; and the capacity to sustain this lifestyle depended on the ability to develop a strong career network; to juggle work scheduling and family factors to maintain mobility; thus leading to further international project work; allowing career continuance. This reinforcing, inter-acting cyclical process is depicted in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: The Global Project Career**



Moreover, our evidence indicates the importance of context, as shown in Figure 1. The study of boundaryless careers by Bagdadli et al. (2003, p.789) confirmed the existence of context specific “competence boundaries” (industry knowledge) and “relational boundaries” (professional networks) that affected the “ideal type of boundaryless career where managers move freely in the job market”. Our study, set in the international project industry, confirms this. The spiral external career generally encouraged boundaryless as people moved from project to project, company to company. As a result, competence boundaries appeared fluid as expertise and skills were transferable from project to project. Job discretion was high, but bounded by the tight constraints imposed by a project contract (Snape and Redman, 2010). Relational boundaries were constantly re-configured. As Ibarra (1995, p.667) points out, “people play an active role in structuring their social networks to achieve their goals”, and our data showed how career networks were forged, developed and activated. Their careers

unfolded in a career domain shaped by industry characteristics: discontinuity, complexity and uncertainty.

The importance of the career domain is strengthened by our findings in relation to our second research question: *If careers are indeed boundaryless, does the organization still play a role?* An international project is a temporary organization. It therefore provided an ideal setting in which to examine this question. The loosely coupled employment relationship – whether self-employed or permanent - had the effect of pushing the organization to the sidelines, with loyalty shifting to the project and/or the project team. This appeared to produce a group environment forged by a common need to ensure project delivery success, upon which future work and hence reputations depended. The ensuing community of practice shaped the career domain, and career identity often was disengaged from organizational identity. As a result, commitment to the project substituted for organizational commitment. Participants expressed strong identity and high involvement with the project and indicated attachment to the team, thus evincing a high level of affective commitment (Allen and Meyer, 1990). Consequently, work behaviour was driven less by organizational citizenship behaviour (Restubog et al., 2008) than by what we could term ‘project citizenship behaviour’.

However, organisational support for the project and its team members was necessary in order to perform well, and the supplier firms and funding agencies relied on project employees to deliver the project on time and to budget. Mutual dependence on successful outcomes provided the linchpin, and there was reciprocity engendered by felt obligations in this specific social exchange situation. There was interview evidence of some feelings of loose attachment to ‘good suppliers’ or ‘good project managers’ that



influenced selection of future work. Discussions though with both IDP and Lyell participants would tend to return to the insecure nature of work flow and the need to self-manage one's career, reinforcing the importance of the work domain, rather than a specific organization.

## **CONCLUSION**

As we commented at the beginning of this paper, consideration of boundaryless careers is premised on the notion of a 'new career norm'. By examining a specific work context – the international project – we have been able to identify a work situation that contains the elements attributed to 'the new career norm': the individual is responsible for career-pathing; and the corporate ladder is replaced by a series of career moves beyond one employing organization. While we do not presume to make generalizations, given our methodological approach, our findings provide some insight into the organizational consequences of employment relationships where the transactional side is given more weight; the employer organization has less influence over career paths than has traditionally been the case; and loyalty switches to the self, group or profession rather than the employing organization. The individual's concern for career capital as a commodity may create tension with supplier firms and funding agencies that rely heavily on human capital in order to staff projects. The international project industry norm is 'loyalty to the project', which had a positive effect in terms of project delivery outcomes, but the ability to ensure the presence of suitably qualified employees at the right time was a counterpoint. Our results suggest that building loyalty when individuals are loosely-coupled and encouraged to self-manage their careers presents distinct managerial

challenges. For example, what are the implications for ‘talent management’, or knowledge transfer, if global careerists switch loyalty to themselves rather than the multinational?

The extreme case of the international project context, along with the unit of analysis (the individual project worker), enabled us to explore how global careers unfold. We found correspondence with existing descriptors of a global careerist. They are *borderless* in orientation, and *boundaryless* in their preparedness to move from company to company; to self-manage their careers. However, our theoretical contribution lies in the identification of several influencers that appear to affect an individual’s ability to build and maintain a truly global career. How universal these potential influencers are requires future research, particularly in the traditional expatriate context.

The strength of the abductive approach taken allowed us to investigate whether emerging themes from one study could be informed by investigation at another field site. By systematically combining the data from both sectors of the international project industry, we found that there was very little difference in how global careers unfolded across both sectors of this particular industry. In the process, we highlighted the role of the career domain – the social and work context in which an individual’s career unfolds. The nature of the international project industry is in itself an important influence on individual’s selection of a global career trajectory: it seemed to attract what participants themselves referred to as ‘industrial gypsies’: the industry encouraged mobility and flexibility. Of course, whether this holds true for other international industry settings is a question for future research. However, one could suggest that investigating global careers

without incorporating the nature of career domains limits the scope, and hence universality, of the concept of a global career.

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**Table 1: Issues related to Building and Maintaining a Global Career**

	Career Dimensions	Supporting Data Examples
Building	<b>Internal Career</b> (knowing why) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Awareness of chosen lifestyle (discontinuous, uncertain)</li> <li>Personal attributes (flexible; motivated)</li> <li>Professional identity</li> <li>Preparedness to self-manage career path</li> <li>Loosely coupled employment; loyal to self/profession</li> </ul>	<p>“An exotic and adventurous sort of activity and one where one could sort of still work within your career area” (IDP7).</p> <p>“It’s building trust and loyalty... I mean, you can’t demand loyalty” (IDP4)</p> <p>“Our recruitment is just for the duration [of a project]... It is just expected in this industry....uncertainty” (LC2).</p> <p>“[There are] more opportunities to grow and expand your career (LC16).</p> <p>“I’ve always sorted my own [career] problems” (LC41).</p>
Maintaining	<b>External Career</b> (knowing how) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spiral - ability to move between projects and organizations;</li> <li>Expertise and project experience;</li> <li>Managing work scheduling</li> </ul> <b>Career Network</b> (knowing whom) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Career advice</li> <li>Job-related utility</li> <li>Community of practice</li> </ul> <b>Family Factors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Presence and absence</li> <li>Isolation and keeping connected</li> </ul>	<p>“I’ve done a number of roles... on a broad range of projects” (IDP6)</p> <p>“People move companies for the opportunity to move up a step” (LC47)</p> <p>“Where you fit in [to a project] is dependent on ... how much experience you have” (IDP5)</p> <p>“You keep saying yes to more people than you could ever hope to do work for... so juggling of the work becomes a big issue” (IDP2).</p> <p>“In general, people know that they’re hired for a project, for a certain assignment, and nothing is guaranteed after [that]. We kind of work ourselves out of our jobs” (LC11).</p> <p>“[The company’s] strength is its network” (LC1)</p> <p>“A lot of it’s just networking, there’s no mumbo jumbo in it... it’s all about networking” (IDP7).</p> <p>“It’s pretty much who you know and that’s how you get your job” (LC9).</p> <p>“In construction work it’s a very transient type of people, and you do run into the same people all the time... or you know somebody” (LC31).</p> <p>“I keep relationships with all my former bosses [from project work]’ (IDP8).</p> <p>“It’s building more relationships... the experiences and what you learn from all the different people and all the different jobs” (LC16).</p> <p>“Juggling family and work was a bit of nightmare. I had young kids at the time and I could never say whether I was going to be home or not” (IDP2).</p> <p>“If life isn’t happy or the children are suffering it makes it very difficult for me to do my job” (LC6).</p> <p>The people on the project become more like your family than anything else (LC16)</p>