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**MOBILITY, CONNECTIVITY AND SOCIAL  
CAPITAL IN MULTINATIONAL ENTERPRISES**

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**ABSTRACT.**

Recent research has underscored the importance of social capital for achieving organizational outcomes in multinational enterprises. However, little is known about the concrete mechanisms through which individual actors inside multinational enterprises become boundary spanners. This article considers how different forms of cross-border mobility and connectivity inside multinationals can be generative of social capital through a discussion of the experiences of highly-skilled employees of three leading mobile telecommunications multinationals based in Finland, Sweden and the United States. We argue that current overemphasis on traditional forms of cross-border mobility inside multinationals, i.e. traditional forms of expatriation, obscures the significance of other types of international mobility and interaction in the creation and maintenance of transnational social capital. Our contention is that different kinds of movement inside the multinational organization contribute to the creation and maintenance of social capital through two mechanisms. However, they do so to different degrees. Finally, we contend that the accumulation and use of individual social capital in actors' capacities as employees often means the simultaneous realization of organizational goals, thereby contributing to the development of organizational social capital.

**Keywords:** Mobility, Connectivity, Social Capital, MNEs

## INTRODUCTION

The organizational advantage of Multinational Enterprises (henceforth MNEs) lies in their facilitation of flows of the factors of production through the inclusion of dispersed nodes of activity under one overarching network, and thereby the minimization of transaction costs and the maximization of efficient knowledge transfer over space (see, for example, Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1998; Ghoshal, 1987; Porter, 1986). The coordination of the circulation of information and the allocation of resources across the different country sites of the MNE remain, however, a huge logistical and managerial challenge, and these issues constitute central problems in the fields of international business and international human resource management. In this paper we argue that, regardless of the sophistication of the organizational structures and technological capabilities enjoyed by contemporary MNEs, communication and coordination across their global networks is directly and significantly facilitated through social relations among their employees and by the social capital engendered in such relations. While we believe that social capital is important for the successful performance of all organizations, for MNEs it is the weaving of social relations *across national borders* that is uniquely critical. We contend that, despite the adoption of advanced communication and information processing technologies, the circulation of embodied forms of knowledge and skills, that is, the corporeal movement of MNEs' employees across borders, remains the fundamental ingredient in generating and retaining the *transnational* social capital that can provide a competitive advantage to these enterprises. To date, the study of the cross-border movement of MNEs' employees has focused too narrowly on expatriation and the evaluation of performance in expatriation assignment has been largely confined to those of the immediate tasks associated with the position, rather than the longer-term outcomes in generating social capital. This paper, drawing upon the life and career histories of 72 MNE employees, proposes that *all* forms of cross-border movement of employees of MNEs can play critical roles in the generation of social capital across national borders.

## SOCIAL CAPITAL AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL ASSET

Only over the last decade have researchers begun to stress the role social relationships play in coordinating activities in Multinational Enterprises (MNEs). With the advent of network structures (Nohria & Ghoshal, 1997) or heterarchies (Hedlund, 2005) as the suggested ideal solutions

for structuring MNEs, and the resulting increase in interdependence among the MNE's operations, MNEs can create competitive advantage through their superior ability to coordinate their global network of operations. Several proponents of these new organizational structures highlight personal coordination mechanisms as the main means in which this coordination should take place (e.g. Bartlett et al., 1998; Harzing, 1999; Hedlund & Rolander, 1990; Martinez & Jarillo, 1989). Personal relationships between employees in different subsidiaries and/or countries are expected to improve the flow of information and create shared values allowing for the better cooperation and coordination of the MNE's global activities (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Hedlund et al., 1990; Kostova & Roth, 2003; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Tsai, 2000; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Other suggested positive effects of social ties among an organization's employees include a reduction in undesired employee turnover (Dess & Shaw, 2001), the creation of a shared vision with positive effects on knowledge transfer (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005), increasing a firm's combinative capability (Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 2006). While these effects are important, in this paper we focus on the importance of networks of social relationships for the coordination of the MNE's dispersed operations.

The role of such social relationships has been discussed within management research on social capital. In much of this literature social capital refers to the level to which an *individual's* network of relationships provides him/her with useful access to people and information (see, for example, Florin, Lubatkin, & Schulze, 2003). Social capital is thus frequently treated and investigated on an individual level, as something that individuals possess and which provides benefits to the individual, e.g. by improving his/her career (see, for example, Burt, 1997; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). While authors have highlighted a number of factors that are regarded as conducive to the creation of social capital, such as, for example, individuals' human capital (Lin & Huang, 2005) or citizenship behavior (Bolino, Turney, & Bloodgood, 2002) there remains a scarcity of research into the specific factors that would allow individuals to build transnational social capital, i.e. create and maintain social relationships across the MNEs network of operations. Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall (2006: 478) suggest that the creation of such relationships "poses challenging problems for international organizations since relationships are

weakened by less frequent interactions and lack of physical proximity."

More recently, however, management researchers have shifted their focus away from the individual and included in their conceptualization of social capital the benefits arising from networks of social relationships to *social units* (Nahapiet et al., 1998), *groups* (Adler et al., 2002) or *firms* (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2006). Leana and van Buren (1999: 540) similarly describe *organizational* social capital as "a resource reflecting the character of social relations within the organization" but they limit this description by the qualifier that such capital is "realized through members' levels of collective goal orientation and shared trust." Here we prefer to adopt a more inclusive usage of the term, deliberately opt out of attributing specific forms of individual motivation to the generation of social capital, and focus on mechanisms instead. As we focus on MNEs in which many of these relationships exist across national borders, we suggest the term transnational organizational social capital.

Given the recent trend towards network structures and the associated increased need for coordinating the globally dispersed parts of this network outlined above, transnational social capital gains in importance, and MNEs can derive benefits from: (1) putting individual employees into a position that allows them to access, and provides ample opportunities for establishing direct personal relationships with other employees of the MNE located in other parts of the MNE's network of operations, and (2) facilitating the continuous conversion of individual social capital to organizational capital by ensuring the tools and resources for the maintenance of social capital after its initial generation.

While the role of HR in the development and maintenance of organizational capital has been highlighted (Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 2003) there remains a gap of conceptual as well as empirical research on the use of specific HR practices for this purpose in MNEs. We suggest that international assignments and other forms of cross-border movements constitute the key means of putting employees in positions to build such relationships, and can thus play a significant role in generating and maintaining organizational social capital.

While expatriation has been suggested as one potential way of creating and maintaining social capital, we argue that *all*, that is, both traditional

and newly recognized forms of cross-border movement are potentially conducive to the creation of organizational social capital and thus have to be taken into consideration. Due to the high failure rates of expatriates and the high costs associated with expatriation, MNEs increasingly seek arrangements with reduced costs and lengths of travel. New forms of cross-border movement and international assignments of employees have recently become more integral features of the global careers of MNEs' employees, and have consequently received more scholarly attention (Cappellen & Janssens, 2005; Roberts, Kossek, & Ozeki, 1998). These include practices, such as, for example, short-term project assignments or extended business travel.

Concurrently, advances in information technology provide MNEs with novel possibilities for virtual cross-border interaction. To some extent, these may be seen as reducing the need for actual physical movement across space, as has been suggested, for example, by authors discussing virtual expatriation (Maznevski, Davison, & Jonsen, 2006; Welch, Worm, & Fenwick, 2003). We argue, however, that the increased capacities for constant communication across the different nodes in the global networks of MNEs complement, rather than replace the corporeal movement of employees. In fact, the infrastructure of constant communication *together* with increased forms of cross-border movement inside MNEs render the individual locations of these enterprises increasingly more authentic "global workplaces" (O'Riain, 2000). Furthermore, the employees exposed to cross-border flows of information from/about operations and require to take them into account in their daily work are no longer confined to a group of so-called "global managers" (Cappellen et al., 2005; Sutari, 2003).

All these emergent qualities of work inside MNEs increase both the significance of, and the opportunities to generate, organizational social capital across national borders for the coordination of activities globally. We identify two interrelated but nevertheless distinct mechanisms that inform this accumulation process, which we call *between-site* creation and *on-site* creation of social capital. This conceptual distinction allows for us to demonstrate that the physical cross-border movement of MNEs' employees have social capital generating potential not only for the individuals partaking in such movement, but for others in the various sites across which they move. We believe that this point has both theoretical and practical implications for MNEs.

### THE CONTEXT AND RESEARCH SETTING

Our discussion here is derived from empirical material about the life and career histories and trajectories of 72 high-skilled employees in three of the leading MNEs in the mobile telecommunications sector, with headquarters in Finland, Sweden, and the US respectively. The data was acquired over three years of intermittent fieldwork carried out between 2001 and 2004 in two MNE home country locations, Finland and Sweden, branch offices of all three MNEs in these countries sites, as well as in the branch offices of all three MNEs in a periphery location, Turkey. The interviews were carried out in line with the recommendations given in literature (for example, Yin, 2003). They were semi-structured, following a chronological life-history approach, and they originally explored both the life courses that lead to employment with MNEs, and the career trajectories that followed thereon. Interviews lasted between one and three hours, in numerous instances involved multiple meetings with the same participant, and allowed for the collection of highly detailed accounts of experiences on the job. One of the central themes investigated was the modes, rhythms, orbits and meanings of geographical mobility on the MNE job, as experienced by actual employees. Because the mobile telecommunications sector MNEs had streamlined their operations to high-value added activities, the interviewees were a uniformly high-skilled group, closely resembling the high-skilled workforces of their employing organizations in general. Because the mobile telecommunications business had expanded at a manic pace since the beginning of the 1990s, the expansion of the MNEs' permanent global networks had been exceptionally rapid and encompassing. Cross-border movement therefore constituted a fundamental element in the employment experience of the interviewees, most of whom had been recruited during the growth of the sector and the individual MNEs. The conceptual framework we offer in this paper follows from a review of the career trajectories of interviewees with attention paid to specific instances where they, as human resources, were matched with a specific organizational need, or where they sought to meet such needs by locating the appropriate human resources for them, across national borders within the MNE. In other words, a review of the specific instances where the interviewees were recruited for jobs across the global network of the

MNEs and/or how they themselves recruited others for such jobs themselves inductively revealed to us the significance of the relationship between different types of cross-border movement and the generation of organizational social capital. Next, we elaborate on our claims with empirical illustrations from the case of the mobile telecommunications multinationals and their employees. In the conclusion section, we follow up on this empirically-informed theory-building effort by suggesting a future research agenda that would help explore our claims more specifically.

### SPACES OF SOCIAL CAPITAL CREATION

#### Between site creation of social capital

A finding that spontaneously emerged from the career trajectory accounts of the interviewees in our study was that personal relations with colleagues permanently or originally employed in other national units inside the MNE widely proved critical in gaining information about the needs of the organization and opportunities for individuals. A key mechanism in the creation of organizational capital is the establishment and maintenance of personal relationships. Such personal relationships were initially established either by employees' own movement between multiple MNE sites, or by their exposure to others who were moving across borders at their current site of employment. We call these two mechanisms *between-site* and *on-site* generation of organizational social capital, respectively.

Certainly in the case of the mobile telecommunications sector, the individual high-skilled employees' careers or even workdays involved, and often in fact required, traversing national boundaries in a range of modes.<sup>1</sup> Only 7 of the interviewees had never traveled internationally for work during their tenure with their employers, and most of them counted over a dozen country locations where they had been to, often multiple times, for work reasons. Although there were only 2 interviewees who were on expatriate contracts at the time of research, reflecting the radical slashing of such appointments during the sector's troubles between the summer of 2000 and the spring of 2004, the majority of the group had held overseas positions of at least 6-months in the previous years.

From the perspective of the MNEs, employees circulate inside the global domains of the

<sup>1</sup> We do recognize that the sector possesses particularities, both in terms of the work the MNEs in the study engage in, and in terms of the trajectory of growth and expansion. In identifying the two central mechanisms of social capital generation, we therefore do not posit that they would work in the same way or to the same extent for all MNEs, but do contend that MNEs would benefit from considering how they relate to their organizational priorities.

organization as conduits of knowledge and means of coordination, and as such their actual *bodily* movement is only a matter of default. It is the movement of knowledge, information, skills, and expertise these individuals embody that is imperative for the MNE, not of themselves as persons. By being able to shift these resources where and when they are needed for the achievement of organizational goals, the MNE derives valuable flexibility from its mobile employees. However, because these critical resources are transported in the actual persons of the employees, their involvement in work activities across borders carries an inseparable human/social element. Interviewees widely and consistently talked about turning to the social networks that they had established through their cross-border movements whenever they found themselves in a position to locate the necessary expertise and skills for a particular organizational task or project at hand. Between-site creation of organizational social capital through employee mobility is thus associated not with locations but with employees, and results from the physical movement of employees across national borders during the performance of their jobs with the MNEs. When an employee with a network of social relations in the Nordic region took up an appointment in, for example, Latin America, his/her social capital "followed" her there. Upon the completion of the appointment there and returning to either the original or a different location inside the MNEs' global network, Sweden, an expanded network of social relations would now have been added to the employees' social capital reservoir. These social relations would include not only those acquired at sites of long-term appointments, but others encountered during other forms of movement, as well. On the one hand, the employee's social relations can be understood as individual social capital-he/she could subsequently turn to these relations as a resource in the attempt to achieve personal goals. However, just as significantly, the social relations engendered by the employee's movement between sites is also utilized to solve organizational problems and to meet organizational needs, as they facilitate, enrich and quicken information flows and therefore coordination tasks.

MNEs therefore stand to increase both individual and organizational social capital by increasing employees' geographical mobility, that is, by moving them around, within the organization. Although the transfer of employees across national borders has long been a key issue in

IHRM research, most research has so far focused on (long-term) overseas assignments. However, over the recent decade other forms of cross-border mobility, such as, for example, localized transfers, have gained in importance. The various reasons given for this development in research range from the high costs associated with overseas assignments and their potential failure to the difficulties of finding appropriate candidates willing to accept such assignments (Oddou, Mendenhall, & Ritchie, 2000; Welch & Worm, 2006). Given this development, we think that the common practice of focusing on the long-term expatriation of employees as a unique phenomenon that has little to do with other forms of movement inside MNEs should make way for a more integrative approach towards analyzing cross-border mobility within MNEs. Indeed, the career trajectories of the employees in our study continuously showed that different forms of movement are related, feed back on one another, and all have social capital generation implications. In what follows, we discuss these implications for the most important types of international movement within MNEs, providing illustrative examples from our empirical material where appropriate.

***Traditional long-term expatriation.*** Expatriates are employees whose specific knowledge, skills, and expertise levels are both highly specialized and closely pertinent to time-specific tasks they are to undertake in the appointment locations. Since Edström and Galbraith's (1977) seminal work on expatriation, there has been nearly universal agreement in the field of international human resource management that organizations engage in expatriation for staffing, management development, and organizational development. As an international perspective and a preoccupation with managing human resources in multiple national contexts within the same organization becomes the default, rather than the exception, the already sizeable literature on expatriation continues to grow (see, for example, Breiden, Mohr, & Mirza, 2006; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002; Mendenhall, 2001; Selmer, 2005; Takeuchi, Yun, & Russell, 2002).

While the direct coordination activities carried out by expatriate managers have been highlighted in extant research, only a small number of studies have looked at how networks created by expatriates help them with their activities (see, for example, Au & Fukuda, 2002). The majority of studies investigating the relational networks created by expatriate managers during their

overseas assignment, have been interested in how these networks help individuals with their career (e.g. Linehan, 2002; Linehan & Scullion, 2002), rather than looking at the use of such individual networks of relationships for the purpose of organizational coordination.

Expatriation had been a frequent experience for our interviewees, particularly for those based in the home countries of MNEs, with the majority of this group having held at least one such appointment in the past. During the peak year of such appointments, one of the MNEs in our study had over 3,600 of its global workforce of 85,000 on long-term overseas contracts. Expatriation appeared especially important in social capital generation because these appointments on the whole were likely to have entailed high-level and/or critically important positions and lasted over a year, allowing for expatriates to become familiar with the skills portfolios of, and building relationships with, large numbers of co-employees. Our interviews strongly suggest the possibility that, at the individual level, these appointments are predicated on a wide range of social networks and previously accumulated social capital in the first place. The typical association of expatriate appointments with either managerial or expert service duties and responsibilities further suggests this form of movement as particularly critical in the conversion of individual social capital to organizational social capital, as employees in these roles routinely use their social networks to address organizational challenges. Cross-border movement between-sites on expatriate appointments have high social capital generation capacity because they allow for close knowledge of employees in far ranging geographical locations and market conditions. On the other hand, the longer duration of these appointments also largely means that the actual number of sites traveled in this capacity is likely to be lower than those in other forms of movement.

Yet, given that most extant research has looked at the case of expatriates being sent from the company's home country on assignments in subsidiaries abroad, it has to be noted that these effects also accrue to managers who are transferred from subsidiaries to the headquarters, so-called "reverse expatriates" (Mendenhall & Stahl, 2000: 258) or inpatriates (Harvey, Novicevic, & Speier, 2000; Harvey, Speier, & Novicevic, 1999). During our interviews it became clear that working at the company's headquarters had a special appeal to our interviewees. One frequently mentioned advantage to being at the

headquarters was that it was seen as the best place to establish contacts and gather information about the various goings-on across the MNE's global network.

**Short-term assignments.** Short-term assignments involve employees relocating from one country to another for a period of 6 to 12 months. These assignments refer, for example, to an employee's participation in a specific project for which his skills and physical presence is required outside the employee's home country. Short-term assignments may be desirable for a variety of reasons, and interviewees in our study talked about the attraction of monetary benefits and professional experience as among the most important why they would be eager to hold them. In many instances, individuals' active pursuit coincided with organizational needs in actualizing a short-term assignment; as such these assignments, too, often entail both individual social capital investment and accumulation. However, they also contributed to transnational organizational social capital by helping employees establish personal contacts with other employees in different country locations. These assignments were particularly important in providing opportunities for cross-border movement and social capital generation of younger cohorts of employees who may not have had the skills and experience for more critical expatriation appointments. For many of the interviewees, short-term assignments preceded (and in fact related to) other forms of movement with longer duration. In one example, one interviewee, after having worked in the MNE's Venezuela office for several years, asked to be sent overseas but, because the office did not have the resources to sustain her absence for the long term, the site manager agreed only to an arrangement where she could go for six months. The employee's assignment to Argentina resulted in her conducting much of the training of new recruits there, as well as her getting to work with several other employees on various forms of appointments from the home country of the MNE. Eventually, it was one of these employees from the home country who contacted her for a specific vacancy in the home country, and this led the employee's subsequent localized transfer there. Short-term assignments are therefore particularly important in organizational social capital generation across national borders for younger cohorts of MNE employees, of employees whose personal and family arrangements do not allow for longer-term transplanting in other country locations, and especially for drawing new or rapidly growing new country sites into the global network of social capital generation.

Localized transfers. Given the high costs associated with sending employees on expatriate contracts, many firms would prefer to send employees abroad but have them work on local contracts. While anecdotal evidence as well as our empirical data shows that these “one-way international transfers” have increased in importance over the recent years, so far there has been little research into this type of employee movement. In the case of the MNEs in our study, localized transfers were particularly instrumental in attracting employees from branch offices to home countries. Especially during market contraction and subsequent cost reductions, expensive expatriation contracts were minimized, and in fact in many cases halted before completion of original contracts. In these instances, localized transfers allowed for the continuation of the flow of human resources to locations where they were needed. By allowing nationals of other countries to remain or arrive at given country locations, these cross-border moves allowed for the MNEs to continue to tap into the individual networks of employees in their own home countries. For example, an employee who had been recruited for summer training in Sweden by his ex-manager in India had later become an employee on a local contract there. Subsequently, as he moved to a sales-based job he was able to immediately fill the emergent need by contacting and recruiting, again on a localized transfer, another technical instructor he had trained and had worked with in India.

***International commutation.*** International commuting refers to employees living in one country and going to their place of work in a different country on a frequent basis, e.g. on a weekly basis. In contrast to Welch and Worm (2006), we include in this category short-term stays abroad for less than 6 months with breaks at the employee’s home country. One of the employees we interviewed had traveled to South Korea back to back so many times that the local management there thought they should take him on as an expatriate so that he could work with fewer interruptions. As the effects on social capital creation are similar to the effects of travel, we will discuss them in the next section.

***(Extended) business travel.*** While there are more travelers than expatriates inside the MNE at any given time, and “international travel remains the heart of international business” (Welch et al., 2006: 284), extant research in IHRM has not been particularly interested in the travel activities of MNE employees. In this category we include a

variety of forms of international travel ranging from short business trips to extended business travels up to 6 months. Among the few authors that have investigated international business travel are Oddou, Mendenhall and Ritchie (2000) or Welch and Worm (2006). While Oddou, Mendenhall and Ritchie (2000) suggest the use of travel as a tool for global leadership development and provide (their own) anecdotal evidence of instances in which travel has changed the skills of the traveler, Welch and Worm (2006) analyze the costs and benefits of travel for the employee as well as the company and present a number of suggestions as to how companies can support their traveling employees.

The fact that travel avoids many of the problems associated with long-term overseas assignments has been argued to be a main explanation behind the increase in business travel, besides the broadening of the range of jobs that have become international (Oddou et al., 2000) and the reduction of travel costs over the recent decade. Employees travel in a range of capacities, including as researchers, instructors/students, salespeople, technical experts, organizational representatives, or even as facilitators of movement themselves. They can furthermore travel as team-members, cutting across their roles in any one of these functional capacities.

In line with this, the MNE employees interviewed for this study all reported a great variety of reasons for travel. For example, travel from subsidiary to the headquarters often took place in order to report to or consult with the manager in charge of a particular project in a given subsidiary. Some of these visits, in the accounts of the interviewees, appear to have been important in keeping faces attached to names, and to help retain a stronger sense of the “reality” of the connection. This reflects the fact that despite advances in information and communication technology, face-to-face communication remains an important means of communication. Some other instances of the interviewees’ international trips were more specific in goals and intentions, including, for example, reporting back of the demands of the potential and present customers and an assessment of whether the MNE would be able to deliver accordingly. Project teams, especially in instances where team members were simultaneously involved in multiple different projects, met with at least some regularity. Their meetings allowed members to acquire more detailed information about each others’ progress on the project, as well as a personal familiarity

with others', including other business they were involved in outside of the project.

While Welch and Worm (2006) have discussed a number of benefits that international business travel can have for individual employees, the creation and social capital has not been one of these advantages. Yet, we think that international travel offers important possibilities for employees to extend an employee's professional network of contacts across various nodes of the MNE's global network. Importantly, business travel typically takes employees to a far wider range of locations inside the MNE than other forms of cross-border movement, and thereby allows them to, if more fleetingly, encounter a larger number of other employees in a greater variety of organizational roles. Our interviews showed that because there were usually people traveling in from multiple locations to a particular site, the connections made during travel were not limited to the ones with those employed at the local unit. For example, training sessions brought together employees from a wide geographical range in personal contact with one another. Travel in these instances was especially important because the connections established in these instances brought together employees who were not only from the home-host country location dyads within the MNEs. They allowed employees from branch offices to get to know others from similar positions, in addition to those from the headquarters, typically there in more supervisory roles. Such contacts were crucial in the interviewed employees' inclusion in future project teams, as well as expanding their pool of colleagues they could turn to in seeking specific expertise or advice on specific issues when they arose. Furthermore, connections first established during business sometimes lead to subsequent long-term overseas appointments. In one instance, an expatriate appointment followed from repeated visits to the same locations, with each visit taking up to six weeks and involving close interaction with those in decision-making positions at a local office. One of our interviewees had traveled to Singapore twice already when the office there suggested she comes there on a two-year contract.

Although the HR professionals in all of the MNEs in our study talked about the efforts by the companies to compile databases of the competencies of the human resources, interviewees' accounts about specific instances of locating human resources from other locations from inside the MNE did not include a single

example of the sole use of these databases. Rather, especially immediate and pressing organizational needs for specific skills and expertise were widely secured by employees' drawing upon the social capital they had acquired through various forms of cross-border movements that we have briefly discussed here.

It is clear that the different types of cross-border mobility outlined above do not all contribute to the same extent to the creation and maintenance of individual networks or relationships and thus organizational social capital in MNEs. The social capital generation potential of different types of cross-border movement can be assumed to differ in terms of (1) the number of places in which relationships are created/maintained, (2) the number of people with whom international mobile employees are put into a position to interact and build relationships with, and (3) the depth of created/maintained relationships they allow for.

The *number of countries/subsidiaries* associated with each of the different types of cross-border movement are not directly comparable unless they are related to a specific time horizon. Thus, the descriptions in respective columns are to be seen as comparative and with regard to a specific period of time. I.e. while over a given period of time, e.g. one year, the traditional expatriate assignment will see the employee predominantly working in the country he or she has been assigned to, whereas short-term assignments and business travel are likely to allow the employee to interact with individuals in various countries over the same period of time. As international commutation usually does not take place across more than two countries, the number of places involved in this type of cross-border mobility is low.

The *number of people* which the mobile employee encounters also differs across the different types of cross-border movement. Thus, business travel is likely to allow the mobile employee to encounter a large number of people at different parts of the organization, while the pool of people the employee interacts with during an overseas assignment is comparatively smaller. It has to be borne in mind, however, that other factors, such as, for example, the function in which an employee moves across borders will have an influence on the number of people s/he will interact and be able to establish relations with.

By *intensity and depth* we refer to the nature of the relationships that the employee can build in

different modes of cross-border mobility. We assumed that the longer the (direct) interaction with other employees of the MNE during the cross-border activity, the greater the intensity and depth of the established relationships. Given the length of the traditional overseas assignment, we suggest that the relationships resulting from such assignments are more intense/deeper than those resulting from short-term assignment or business travel.

Generally, it has to be taken into account that the different modes of cross-border mobility put employees in a position to create and maintain relationships of different nature, to different people, in different locations. Thus, they establish (some of) the structural prerequisites for the creation and maintenance of transnational organizational capital. Furthermore, we recognize that an employee engaged in one type of cross-border movement, for example a long-term overseas appointment, may concurrently partake in other forms of movement, such as business travel. The network creation capacities we identify in the table therefore refer to specific instances of movement and not to the entire social network creation of individual employees per se.

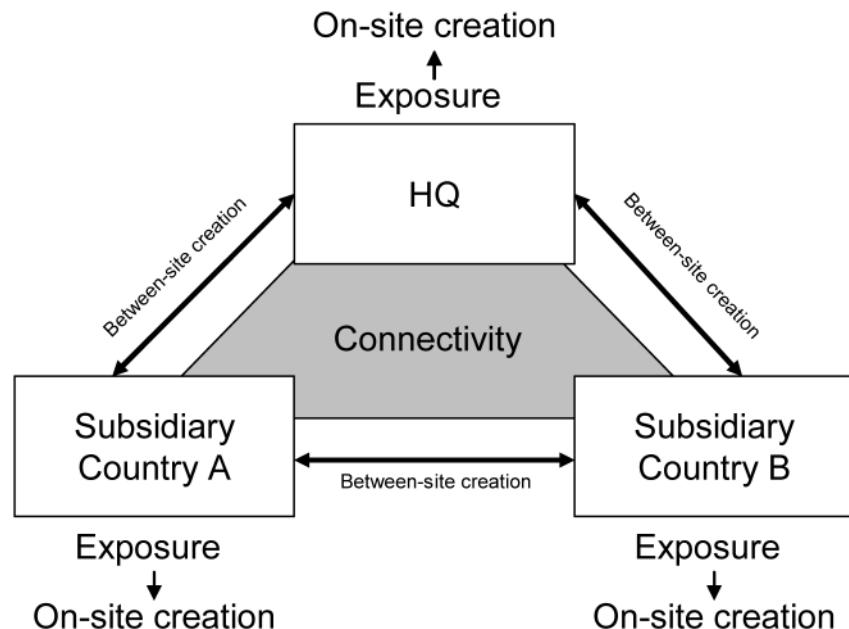
**On-site creation of social capital**

While firms have accepted the need for moving their employees (for a variety of reasons) and research has investigated the different types of cross-border movement, we think that this focus on internationally mobile people is no longer sufficient and the creation of social capital cannot be limited to this group of employees or to the moments when they are “on the move”. An

executive of GM, interviewed, by Oddou et al. (2000: 159), for example, suggested that “[...] Even for employees who may never go overseas, it is necessary to constantly sensitize everyone to the fact that they are in a global business.” These authors then pose the question that “Since not everyone can be sent overseas at once due to logistical, fiscal, and organizational constraints, how can companies develop global leadership competencies in their executives?” (Oddou et al., 2000: 160)

However, we suggest that a mere sensitization of MNE employees and an exclusive focus on the executives are not enough to allow the coordination within the complex organizational structures of MNEs. In addition, even in the case of serial-expatriates, periods of cross-border movements are not perfectly continuous and for both individual and organizational reasons, movement is not a constant condition for all but a small number of MNEs’ employees. We thus suggest that even those employees who are not internationally mobile have to be given the opportunity and be encouraged to develop and maintain (individual) social capital. In particular, we suggest that there are two modes through which MNEs can support this on-site creation and development of transnational organizational social capital: The on-site creation of social capital in the multinational corporate workplace can occur (1) via the *connectivity* among workplaces and employees inside the global domains of the MNE, i.e. through technologically mediated encounters or interactions; and (2) through the increasing *exposure* of non-mobile employees to mobile employees from other countries and/or

FIGURE 1. BETWEEN-SITE VS. ON-SITE CREATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIAL CAPITAL IN MNES



subsidiaries, i.e. through face-to-face encounters/interactions. In contradistinction to the between-site creation of organizational social capital discussed above, the on-site creation of organizational social capital in MNEs takes place within specific locations of the MNEs. This is also shown in figure 1.

***On-site creation of social capital through connectivity.*** Our discussion of the between-site creation of organizational social capital above has provided some evidence that challenged the claim that a technologically-powered virtual world renders embodied sociability obsolete and thus goes some way to correct the increasingly commonplace notions about the replacement of the corporeal by the virtual (see, for example, Castells, 1996). Yet, while the pace and extent of this replacement may have been overstated, we suggest that connectivity helps to create, and, most importantly, *maintain* social capital, both for individuals and for the organization.

*Connectivity* involves the presence of a material infrastructure across which communication, and hence the transfer of knowledge and information, is rendered possible. Connectivity is central to the creation and maintenance of a globally dispersed network of operations, as neither economic nor social relations can be coordinated across the vast geographical spread of their operations without an infrastructure of flows, especially for information. While connectivity is at its highest for employees working in (global) virtual teams (Maznevski et al., 2006), more and more jobs are influenced by the possibilities that connectivity offers. In fact, because of this infrastructure, work in *any* given node of the MNE's global domain is transnational in the sense that it is informed constantly, immediately, densely, and directly by factors outside of the boundaries of the national space in which that workplace is physically located. As a result, many, if not most, of the MNE's jobs for (high-skilled) employees involve the constant processing of various resources/information that are delivered to them from abroad. It is therefore not surprising that the (high-skilled) employees interviewed for this study were equipped with a wide-ranging array of information/ communication tools that allowed for connectivity inside the MNE.

The employees interviewed for this study had easy and constant access to advanced communication tools that allowed them to deal with colleagues in geographically remote locations, and to facilities for voice-conferencing and video-conferencing for

use in specially designated conference rooms. While social relationships are difficult to establish via occasional telephone calls, they are possible to maintain during the times when employees remain in distant locations. Interviewees frequently recounted how they kept in touch with other employees they had met in person in one of the several forms of modes outlined above via especially e-mails and the telephone. Even in the case of social contacts that had been established outside of the forms of movement experienced inside the MNE, most notably among those that had been acquired during higher education, the connectivity offered by the organization proved vital in the maintenance of social capital. In one example, a Swedish employee working as an expatriate in the Rio office of the MNE needed to put together a bid team on very short notice and got a former friend from university employed at the headquarters in Sweden to join the team during one phone call that reportedly lasted under ten minutes. In another instance, a Finnish HR specialist met a colleague that he referred to as his "professional mentor" during a brief visit to one of the US offices but they remained in contact across various combinations of a range of European and Asian appointments and was able to convince him to take up a position in Finland when he needed someone with his qualifications. 38 of the interviewees who agreed to complete an additional voluntary survey noted that on average they sent about 10 e-mails a day overseas locations inside the MNE and 13 domestically. One interviewee talked about how their global support system "ran around the clock", with colleagues coming on at different locations around the world in turn, covering the full 24-hour period, and "picking up where the other one left off."

"Virtualization" also needs to be discussed in relation to the development of social relationships and thus organizational social capital in MNEs. Following research on "virtual teams" (see, for example, Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001), IHRM research has recently picked up on the "virtual assignment", which refers to employees located in one country carrying out tasks in/for a operations of the MNE located in a different country (Welch et al., 2003). Through virtual assignments companies attempt to provide an employee's skills at a given location without physically moving him/her to that location (Roberts et al., 1998). The possibility of such virtual assignments is infinitely dependent on connectivity.

Nevertheless, we accept that while connectivity contributes to the creation of organizational social capital through the creation of social relationships and facilitating their maintenance, we suggest that greater effect resides within the mobile employees. This was also expressed by a number of interviews who suggested that social relations created through connectivity are not as durable as those created through personal non-virtual interaction, and a number of interviewees doubted that the ties between themselves and their overseas colleagues were tight or durable enough to be considered as "social relationships" at all. It was especially in this sense that connectivity was seen as supportive to maintaining, rather than generating social ties and hence organizational social capital.

***On-site creation of social capital through exposure to mobile employees.*** As has been outlined above, our distinction into between-site and on-site creation of organizational social capital is a conceptual, rather than a practical one. Both modes of creation of organizational social capital shape, follow from, and are therefore tightly intertwined with each other. There are clear overlaps between the modes of creation of organizational social capital, as mobile employees (between-site creation) work and interact with local employees (on-site creation), and individual employees take on both roles during and between their cross-border movements. The between-site generation of social capital in one employee's cross-border movements promotes the on-site creation of organizational social capital for local co-workers. By being exposed to and working with mobile employees, local/non-mobile employees may gain access to social networks and thus contribute to the creation of social capital. Our aforementioned examples of how different forms of cross-border moves have generated organizational social capital have already illustrated how such social capital involved contacts between the mobile employees and those they encountered at specific sites. Thus, mobility is also a key factor within the on-site creation of organizational social capital in that it draws an increasing proportion of an MNE's total workforce into the networks of social capital generation and maintenance.

This second effect of employee mobility was also highlighted during the interviews carried out for this study, in particular, with reference to employees of subsidiaries of the MNE that were temporarily assigned to the company's headquarters. Through moving employees in

through their global networks, for example, by (temporarily) bringing subsidiary managers into the headquarters, the MNEs in our study created opportunities for, and increased the intensity of, encounters among employees, fostering the development of social capital among employees. There are also other constellations which do not neatly fit into one of our categories. There is the case of mobile employees, contributing to the on-site creation of organizational social capital not only in the places they travel to, but also at the place where they work by sharing their contacts, experience, skills, etc. with their non-mobile colleagues. Within our case studies, the boards of the companies, for example, have all included directors who have crossed national boundaries for long-term assignments over the time of their careers. Yet, despite these overlaps, we suggest that the differentiation of the two modes is important in identifying how and to what extent MNEs can create and sustain transnational organizational social capital.

#### **CONCLUDING REMARKS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Based on the recognition that organizational social capital plays an increasingly important role in coordinating a MNE's network of operations, we argued that there are two main mechanisms through which this organizational social capital can be created and maintained in MNEs. Based on the distinction between between-site creation and on-site creation of organizational social capital, we have suggested that traditional and newly recognized forms of (physical) cross-border movements of employees create social capital through both mechanisms. Through employing the notion of social capital at the individual as well as organizational level, the paper has addressed the existing lack of studies that link individual level issues to organizational level HR issues highlighted by, for example, Baruch and Altman (Baruch & Altman, 2002).

Furthermore, by discussing the majority of relevant forms of employee movement across national borders and the potential of each for the creation and maintenance of organizational social capital, the paper contributes to overcoming the fragmentation that characterizes the current treatment of cross-border mobility in research, as well as in practice. The conceptual framework offered here allows for the possible comparison of the organizational benefits to be derived from different forms of cross-border movement inside MNEs by underscoring the fundamental similarities of their role in generating social

capital. For example, extant research indicates that in most MNEs corporate HR departments predominantly deal with expatriate managers and have little involvement in the other modes of employee mobility (Brewster, Harris, & Petrovic, 2001; Welch et al., 2006). Viewing traditional, new, as well as hitherto neglected forms of cross-border employee movement as a means to create and maintain organizational social capital, allows IHRM to develop a more coherent and integrative approach to these forms of employee movement across borders.

There are a number of limitations of, as well as interesting questions that arose during our study that we think open up interesting alleys for further research. First, we have focused on the social relationships that are created and exist among employees within the MNE, due to our emphasis on the positive role that transnational organizational social capital can play in the coordination of MNE's globally dispersed operations. Yet, it is likely that there are positive effects to be had from social relationships that exist between employees of the MNE and employees of buyers, suppliers, alliance partners, and other stakeholders. Future research may thus use a broader concept of transnational organizational social capital and investigate its outcomes not only for the coordination within MNEs, but for a greater variety of outcome variables.

Secondly, the paper raises interesting questions for HRM departments, e.g. with regard to the design of training programs and global awareness programs. In fact, the issues presented within this paper merely create the potential for the development of (individual and organizational) social capital; further research is necessary into further conditions that are conducive to the creation and the consequences of transnational organizational social capital, potentially including individual characteristics of employees and issues such as, for example, associability or trust (Leana et al., 1999).

A third issue that became clear during our interviews was that, during a business downturn, employee travel was among the first things to be cut in MNEs. For example, in the context of the mobile telecommunications sector, yearly meetings, either at global or regional headquarters level, for the main purpose of bringing people together so they got to know one another, were abolished during the market downturn at the time of research. The same

development occurred with regard to the number of overseas appointments. Thus, given the fact that the return on investments in the development of organizational social capital is not easily quantifiable, future research should provide more empirical evidence for the outcomes of organizational social capital to allow MNEs to take these into account when assessing the costs and benefits associated with different types of cross-border employee movement.

Finally, we think that the concept of transnational organizational social capital may be a useful extension to current attempts of measuring the transnationality of MNEs. Current suggestions for measuring MNEs' levels of transnationality remain crude and simplistic, and with regard to employment most approaches merely consider the proportion of a firm's workforce employed outside of the home country. More detailed, network analyses of team formation, project collaboration, information-sharing etc. could tell us more about the level of transnationality of MNEs as firms vary not just in how their workforce is spread out geographically but how capable they are of generating social capital among their workforce. We believe that the theoretical framework and we have offered in this paper provides some basic conceptual tools for further scholarly investigation of organizational social capital generation inside MNEs, which stand to, in turn inform the appropriate management decisions for individual organizations.

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