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Operating in perpetual motion? Coping with the dark side of global boundary spanning

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Abstract

Research Summary: This paper explores how individuals experience and cope with the demands of global boundary spanning in multinational enterprises (MNEs). We foreground temporary colocation as a modality through which mobile global boundary spanners repeatedly traverse multiple boundaries, triggering intense demands with adverse consequences. Extending the micro-level perspective on boundary spanning, we show that active coping behaviors enable mobile global boundary spanners to generate strategic value for the MNE through network coordination, knowledge mobilization, and contextual adjustment. Our typology demonstrates how structural and spatial variability in global boundary spanning roles shapes the dynamic interplay between demands, adverse effects, and coping behaviors. Contributing to the dark side of global boundary spanning, we illustrate how global orchestrator roles challenge individuals to operate in a state of perpetual motion.

Managerial Summary: Managers in multinational enterprises (MNEs) are under increasing pressure to be more flexible, mobile, and strategic as they span organizational and geographical boundaries across a dispersed

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global network. Our study explores how mobile global boundary spanners who traverse and negotiate multiple boundaries cope with intense demands and unanticipated negative consequences. Our findings caution global firms against overburdening these strategically valuable boundary spanners, as doing so may constrain network relations, impair knowledge flows, and hamper local learning. We offer a typology that managers and organizations can use to assess the adverse effects of these demands and understand how MNEs can harness the integrative scope and adaptive breadth of these strategically flexible individuals.

KEYWORDS

boundary spanning, coping, global strategy, integration-adaptation, multinationals, temporary colocation

1 | INTRODUCTION

With the rise of divisive conditions across borders, global boundary spanning has become more critical than ever for sustaining strategic integration and driving local adaptation in contemporary multinational enterprises (MNEs) (Schotter et al., 2025). A micro-level perspective of global boundary spanning highlights how individuals create strategic value for MNEs by simultaneously deepening internal interdependence between dispersed units (Minbaeva & Santangelo, 2018; Santistevan, 2022) and enabling context-sensitive learning within and across locations (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014). Global boundary spanning roles are strategically consequential as they support the MNE's activities by forging connections across diverse networks, recombining dispersed knowledge, or reconciling tensions that emerge across spatial, temporal, and contextual faultlines (Schotter et al., 2017). Yet, global boundary spanning roles are typically expansive in scope and breadth, making it challenging for individuals to negotiate a "bundle of different types of boundaries" (Carlile, 2004: p. 566).

International business (IB) scholars have examined the boundary spanning roles, activities, and characteristics of a variety of individuals in MNEs (Au & Fukuda, 2002; Birkinshaw et al., 2017; Conroy & Collings, 2026; Lacoste et al., 2022). While this research advances understanding of how individuals facilitate cross-border coordination and adaptation (Mäkelä et al., 2019), global boundary spanning roles vary considerably in their mobility characteristics, ranging from individuals associated with a fixed boundary to those who navigate diverse frontiers (Castellani et al., 2022). Growing environmental instability has amplified the importance of the latter (Santistevan & Ekpenyong, 2026), as modern-day MNE structures increasingly require flexible, dynamic movement across distinct intersecting boundaries. While mobility is assumed to be important for boundary spanning in MNEs, it remains undertheorized. One line of work on expatriation conceptualizes their boundary spanning as spatially restricted to a home-host dyad (Johnson & Duxbury, 2010; Liu & Meyer, 2020), limiting our understanding of

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the variability in scope, breadth, and mobility required to span multiple boundaries. We therefore focus on a specific and increasingly important type of boundary spanner, which we conceptualize as *mobile global boundary spanners*, defined as individuals engaged in activities that seek to facilitate MNE integration and adaptation by traversing and negotiating multiple organizational and geographical boundaries.

Parallel research on geographic flexibility suggests that temporary colocation is a boundary spanning modality through which mobile global boundary spanners operate (Chai & Freeman, 2019; Choudhury, 2022). Temporary colocation is enacted through transitory geographic moves or frequent travel (Castellani et al., 2022), thereby facilitating a greater volume of coordinative exchanges across a wide range of boundaries (Bahar et al., 2023). This modality enables individuals to span greater distances by compressing spanning activities into short bursts or repeated episodes of cross-border engagement, rather than permanently relocating. However, habitually spanning diverse boundaries with compounded friction, difference, and ambiguity (Mäkelä et al., 2019) imposes significant demands and may have adverse consequences for individuals (Liu et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2019). These pressures are particularly acute when individuals traverse boundaries through temporary colocation, negotiating heightened levels of network diversity, knowledge complexity, and contextual multiplicity. Whether mobile global boundary spanners can manage these demands poses a fundamental problem for MNEs seeking to harness their strategic value.

Research on coping responses provides a useful lens for exploring how to address strains and pressures associated with complex roles (Srivastava & Tang, 2015). Scholars typically distinguish between active and passive coping behaviors (Carver et al., 1989). Active coping is problem-focused and aims to reassert control over a demanding situation in a way that allows it to be influenced or resolved (Hajro et al., 2019). In contrast, passive coping involves efforts to evade, ignore, or disengage from a stressful situation, often resulting in a loss of control and leaving the underlying issue unresolved (Tlaiss, 2024). While active coping can range from direct action to positive framing and support-seeking, passive coping may include hoping for better outcomes, denial, avoidance, or withdrawal (Herman & Tetrick, 2009). This distinction is critical as ineffective coping may limit the effectiveness of mobile global boundary spanners, thereby hindering coordination in the MNE (Schotter et al., 2017). Accordingly, we address the following research question: How does a mobile global boundary spanner experience and cope with the demands of navigating multiple boundaries through temporary colocation?

Using a qualitative, exploratory approach based on in-depth interviews with mobile global boundary spanners in MNEs, our study makes two theoretical contributions to the global strategy domain. First, we extend the micro-perspective of boundary spanning in MNEs (Mäkelä et al., 2019; Minbaeva & Santangelo, 2018; Pedersen et al., 2019) by positioning temporary colocation as a strategically valuable modality that enables mobile global boundary spanners to traverse a wide array of boundaries. Yet, this modality highlights the intense demands that individuals experience when negotiating multiple organizational and geographical boundaries through frequent, transitory moves. Specifically, we show that continuously grappling with relational, informational, and contextual demands triggers adverse effects, including physical exhaustion, psychological strain, and personal conflict. Our findings reveal that the structural and spatial variability inherent in the roles of mobile global boundary spanners shapes both the intensity of demands and the severity of consequences. Highlighting the ephemeral experience of habitually grappling with multiple boundaries spotlights a mobility-centered view of boundary spanning in MNEs (Castellani et al., 2022; Minbaeva et al., 2025), contrasting with the relatively stationary position of expatriates, whose spanning activities are devoted to a dyadic

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organizational (HQ-subsidiary) and geographical (home-host) boundary (Johnson & Duxbury, 2010; Liu & Meyer, 2020).

Our second contribution advances research on the dark side of global boundary spanning (Liu et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2019; Zhao & Anand, 2013) by integrating insights from coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Srivastava & Tang, 2015). Specifically, we identify the set of coping responses enacted to manage the demands of spanning multiple boundaries. Our findings illustrate that active coping behaviors are functional responses that shape or regulate demands, whereas passive coping behaviors are dysfunctional responses that avoid demands and their detrimental effects. Contributing to microfoundations research in global strategy (Santangelo et al., 2025), we show that while active coping behaviors alleviate the dark side of continually negotiating boundaries, they are also strategically consequential for the MNE.

Combining these contributions, we develop a typology of global boundary spanning roles. This typology refines prior research by illustrating how variation in the integrative scope and adaptive breadth of mobile boundary spanners' roles shapes the intensity of demands and adverse effects, as well as the coping behaviors employed. We caution MNEs that global orchestrator roles can constrain an individual's coping capacity, leaving them in a state of perpetual motion, indefinitely negotiating multiple boundaries. Our typology offers practical value for MNEs in balancing the demands on global boundary spanners with their strategic contributions to the firm.

2 | GLOBAL BOUNDARY SPANNING

Global boundary spanning involves simultaneously exploiting synergies within an MNE's distributed internal network while harmonizing diverse viewpoints across a fragmented ecosystem of externally embedded stakeholders (Westney et al., 2022). Research at the micro-level has examined the motivation, abilities, skills and behaviors of boundary spanning individuals (Pedersen et al., 2019), while other studies focus on how boundary spanning roles or activities are enacted in MNEs (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014). Definitions of who constitutes a boundary spanner vary widely (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). Mäkelä et al.'s (2019) seminal work distinguishes between "potential" boundary spanners who participate in inter-unit interactions and 'recognized' boundary spanners, who are experienced by relevant others as positively facilitating inter-group relations. It is commonly accepted that global boundary spanners generate strategic value for the MNE by fostering cross-boundary integration and adaptation (Schotter et al., 2017).

Building on prior research, we conceptualize how global boundary spanning roles are performed across a variety of organizational and geographical boundaries (Kostova & Roth, 2003; Mäkelä et al., 2019). First, boundary spanning occurs across *structural* lines or organizational boundaries, including inter-organizational exchanges with external actors (Huang et al., 2016) and intra-organizational exchanges inside the same MNE (Minbaeva & Santangelo, 2018). Intra-organizational exchanges involve lateral collaboration between subsidiary units or functions, or vertical interactions across hierarchical levels, such as headquarters (HQ)-subsidiary exchanges (Lacoste et al., 2022). Second, boundary spanning occurs across *spatial* divides or geographical boundaries, involving cross-border exchanges between actors in different contexts, whether internal to the MNE or with external stakeholders (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014). Geographical boundaries encompass contextual differences in cultural behaviors, ethical norms, institutional regulations, and safety conditions (Barmeyer et al., 2020), as well as temporal

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variation across time zones (Yang et al., 2022; Zobel et al., 2024). We suggest that global boundary spanning roles comprise micro-level dimensions that are both *structural*, concerning organizational boundaries, and *spatial*, concerning geographical boundaries.

Global boundary spanning roles create strategic value for the MNE through a range of activities, including forming relational ties (Lacoste et al., 2022), transmitting valuable knowledge (Minbaeva & Santangelo, 2018; Zhang et al., 2026), and resolving cultural conflicts (Kane & Levina, 2017; Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011). These activities can include an intermediary function in which individuals link disconnected actors, transfer information, and bridge divergent perceptions across boundaries (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Birkinshaw et al., 2017). Yet, these are inherently complex and demanding, as boundaries are characterized by difference, novelty, and dependence, which create friction and tension (Carlile, 2004). A recent critique of IB research on boundary spanning notes that it underestimates the complexity individuals confront when continuously operating across boundaries (Schotter et al., 2025).

2.1 | Temporary colocation—a boundary spanning modality

Mobility is central to boundary spanning in MNEs, as cross-border movement enables individuals to span a wide array of frontiers (Minbaeva et al., 2025). While research recognizes that boundary spanning involves movement across a boundary (Castellani et al., 2022), mobile global boundary spanners in MNEs as a distinct group remain undertheorized. Prior work has tended to emphasize boundary spanning roles associated with a dyadic organizational (HQ-subsidiary) or geographical (home-host) boundary, with limited attention to variation in their structural and spatial dimensions (Conroy & Collings, 2026). One strand of research in global mobility examines boundary spanning through expatriation, where individuals relocate to a host subsidiary for extended periods (1–5 years). In this context, boundary spanning is anchored within a relatively fixed setting, typically linking HQ or subsidiary actors to local stakeholders (Johnson & Duxbury, 2010; Yang et al., 2022). This prolonged colocation restricts the dynamism associated with spanning diverse MNE boundaries (Schotter et al., 2025). Similarly, flexpatriation, involving frequent international trips without relocation (Mayerhofer et al., 2004), has largely been conceptualized as a staffing solution, overlooking its boundary spanning potential (Pate & Scullion, 2018). As a result, the modalities through which mobile global boundary spanners operate remain underdeveloped.

Research on geographic flexibility highlights temporary colocation, through recurrent short-term geographic moves, as a distinct boundary spanning modality (Bahar et al., 2023; Choudhury, 2022). Temporary colocation involves transient moves between locations, with individuals spending brief periods in a given country (usually a few days to 3 weeks) or moving across multiple countries before returning home (Bathelt & Henn, 2014). It differs from flexpatriation in that it is defined not only by mobility patterns but also by the purposeful creation of physical co-presence and concentrated face-to-face engagement across boundaries (Chai & Freeman, 2019). Whereas flexpatriation emphasizes movement (Jooss et al., 2021), temporary colocation captures the interactional substance and social proximity that facilitates rich exchanges at the boundary. Repeated episodic co-presence under condensed time pressure can enable the creation of diverse relational networks and a wide range of potential knowledge combinations (Boeh & Beamish, 2012; Zobel et al., 2024). This supports greater diversity and multiplicity of collaborative exchanges beyond what is typically possible under

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prolonged colocation in a single setting (Chai & Freeman, 2019). We foreground temporary colocation as a modality through which mobile global boundary spanners traverse multiple boundaries.

Yet, temporary colocation can impose significant demands, reflecting the integrative and adaptive nature of global boundary spanning. These demands arise from expectations to collaborate across heightened levels of network diversity, knowledge complexity, and contextual multiplicity. Equally, individuals' experiences are likely intensified by mobility pressures, such as the cadence, frequency, and distance of travel (Jooss et al., 2022). Negotiating boundaries via temporary colocation may therefore create a convergence of integrative, adaptive, and mobility demands that generate "coordination costs and taxes managerial bandwidth" (Schotter et al., 2017: p. 410).

Research on boundary spanning, more broadly, highlights the negative consequences it can impose on individuals (Schotter, 2021). These effects often arise from role ambiguity, conflict, and overload inherent in managing boundary frictions (Marrone et al., 2007) and intensify when demands exceed an individual's available time, energy, or capacity (Rigopoulou et al., 2012). This body of work suggests that high levels of stress, exhaustion, or anxiety may result from psychological, physical, or personal effects (Jensen et al., 2013; Kraimer et al., 2022). Psychological effects can manifest as cognitive or emotional strain (Shantz et al., 2016), triggered by frustration with cultural differences, anxiety from complex work expectations, or stress from operating in unsafe environments (Fee et al., 2019; Stamper & Johlke, 2003). Continuously confronting diverse cultural norms and conflicting institutional structures can amplify emotional anxiety (Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011). Physical effects stem from corporeal exhaustion, driven by long working days, meeting unrealistic work schedules, coordinating teams across time zones (Jonassen et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2019), and pressures to continuously share large volumes of complex knowledge (Zhao & Anand, 2013). Personal conflicts arise when boundary spanning demands strain the balance between work and non-work commitments, such as family or social responsibilities, draining time and emotional energy (Song et al., 2023). Despite these insights, a comprehensive understanding of how mobile global boundary spanners experience compounded demands is lacking.

2.2 | Coping with global boundary spanning

Studies on coping responses conceptualize them as behaviors that individuals use to manage pressures associated with complex or challenging roles (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Effective coping can yield many positive outcomes for the MNE, whereas failure to cope may lead to poor performance, reduced job satisfaction, and diminished commitment (Srivastava & Tang, 2015). Although coping responses are diverse, they are commonly categorized as active or passive (Carver et al., 1989). Active coping behaviors aim to exert control over a situation, such as devoting more energy to change it or reframing it as a learning experience (Hajro et al., 2019). In contrast, passive coping focuses on avoidance, seeking to escape or accept the problem rather than addressing it. Active coping behaviors are problem-focused and can include direct action, positive framing, or support-seeking (Tsai et al., 2007). Direct action involves working harder and smarter through prioritization or task restructuring to eliminate work (Srivastava & Tang, 2015). Positive framing involves redefining a situation optimistically to facilitate problem resolution (Herman & Tetrick, 2009), while support-seeking entails enlisting assistance from one's network through advice or encouragement (Tlaiss, 2024).

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Passive coping behaviors emerge when individuals perceive an inability to change a difficult situation and are typically directed toward regulating emotions rather than resolving the underlying problem (Srivastava & Tang, 2015). Passive coping can involve avoidance, distraction, withdrawal, or resignation (Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005). For instance, individuals may respond to demanding situations by hoping for better outcomes, exiting the situation, voicing disagreement and self-blame, remaining loyal, or neglecting the situation (Ito & Brotheridge, 2003). While these responses avoid immediate problems, they can have longer-term detrimental effects on career satisfaction, turnover intentions, or collaboration in the firm (Tlaiss, 2024). Other studies highlight normalizing, in which repeated exposure to stressful situations reduces their perceived severity, thereby supporting adaptation (Ashforth, 2025). Yet, normalization can become dysfunctional when individuals fail to take subsequent steps to mitigate ongoing demands (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2002). Overall, the portfolio of coping responses can have both functional and dysfunctional effects on boundary spanning (Weiss & Zacher, 2025).

Our arguments highlight temporary colocation as a valuable boundary spanning modality that concomitantly creates significant challenges. Left unresolved, this dilemma can undermine the ability of mobile global boundary spanners to negotiate a "plethora of differently defined... and continually changing boundaries" (Schotter et al., 2017: 410).

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative research design was undertaken to answer our question and is well suited to understanding boundary spanning in global firms (Santistevan & Ekpenyong, 2026). Interviews formed the basis of our data collection, conducted with individuals in the Irish subsidiaries of four US medical technology MNEs. Over the last two decades, these subsidiaries have evolved from manufacturing-focused research and development (R&D) mandates into influential units within their respective MNEs. There was limited variation at the MNE level, with consistent global coverage and similar ages, sizes, products, and business models. All subsidiaries were at least 25 years in existence and had over 1000 employees. We used pseudonyms for the firms (CRESTCO, RANCO, STEERCO, TRONCO).

We focus on the individual as the unit of analysis exploring the link between individuals' coping behaviors and the demands of spanning multiple boundaries. Data were gathered through 45 in-depth face-to-face interviews overall. We conducted follow-up interviews with 10 individuals (online) who were willing to speak again. Interviewees were identified through theoretical sampling, targeting individuals who spanned multiple boundaries through temporary colocation. Consistent with our definition of a mobile global boundary spanner, interviewees held global responsibilities to facilitate integration and adaptation across multiple boundaries. To identify relevant individuals, we ensured that they were engaging in relevant boundary spanning activities, ranging from forming relational ties, transmitting knowledge, resolving cultural differences, and acting as an interface by linking, translating, or bridging.

A further sampling criterion was individuals' use of temporary colocation through short-term geographic moves to carry out their boundary spanning activities. Interviewees typically traveled between 1 day (minimum) and 3 weeks (maximum), with most spending a week away from home per month on average. The majority traveled at least 25% (four interviewees traveled less than 25%) of their working time (1 week per month) and some up to 75% (3 weeks per month). All had visited multiple international locations, with half having traveled to over a dozen countries, often repeatedly.

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Most organizational functions were represented, including Business Development, Human Resources (HR), Sales, Supply Chain, Quality and R&D. Interviewees had a mixture of internal and external responsibilities, ranging from direct control of subsidiaries, management of sales offices, managing relationships with distributors, to direct sales with customers and coordination of global projects. Interviewees were primarily Irish nationals, with an average age of 30–40 years, and we had an equal distribution of men and women. Interviewees' experience varied, but many (23/35) had at least 5 years of experience with their current firms, and all held at least a graduate degree. Our sample was linguistically homogeneous, with English as the main language spoken in MNEs. Interviews took place between July 2018 and April 2019 and lasted an average of 60 min. We returned to do follow-up interviews with individuals (×10) to gain deeper insights into their coping behaviors. Table 1 provides an overview of the interviewees.

We interviewed (4) individuals who could not be classified as mobile global boundary spanners and ultimately were not included in our final sample. This was due to their largely nonexistent integrative and adaptive functions. For example, much of their work was confined to the local subsidiary, and any travel was limited to mundane or manual tasks, often within a national context. By comparison, several individuals in our final typology were subsequently classified as occupying "anchor operator" global boundary spanning roles. While they had a more restricted scope and narrower breadth than others in our sample, they engaged in boundary spanning activities, albeit to a lesser extent.

Interview questions were designed to elicit insights into the nature of the boundary spanning exchanges individuals engaged in. Like others that examine "boundary episodes" (e.g., Johnson & Duxbury, 2010), we probed for examples of critical boundary exchanges, how these unfolded or impacted them and the firm, and perceptions of others at the boundary. We first asked contextual questions, such as where individuals traveled, how often and why they traveled, and whom they interacted with and why. We sought examples of how their boundary spanning activities facilitated integration and adaptation, rather than merely engaging in cross-border interactions. We probed for rich examples of how boundary spanning enabled integration within the MNE, such as increased coordination and alignment among functions, units, or divisions; mediation between intra- and inter-organizational boundaries; and adaptation through learning across contexts.

3.1 | Data analysis

We employed an abductive approach, iterating between data collection and analysis while consulting pre-existing theoretical constructs (Bamberger, 2018). Although our approach was iterative, we followed three steps to organize our data.

First, we generated a range of first-order codes, labeling broad ideas and themes evident in interviewees' statements. These themes were not directly informed by existing theory but guided by the various boundary spanning exchanges, demands, and coping behaviors of interviewees. At this stage, we extracted examples of boundary exchanges across organizational and geographical boundaries, and much of our focus was on the demands faced. Second, to generate patterns, we assembled first-order concepts into second-order categories. For example, our interpretation of the demands was guided by scholarship on boundary spanning activities, such as building network ties, sharing knowledge, and adjusting to cultures, anchoring these categories theoretically. Third, we developed higher-level aggregate dimensions of the demands interviewees experienced.

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TABLE 1 Interviewee profiles.

Position	Gender	Age	Experience (years)	Travel coverage	Travel frequency (annual)
RANCO					
Senior Recruitment Consultant	M	30–40	5	Global	25%
International Business Manager (×2)	F	20–30	3	Global	25%
Business Development Manager 3	F	30–40	1	Global	25%
Global Business Manager (×2)	M	20–30	3	Global	25%
Regional Sales Manager	F	20–30	5	Regional	25%
Global Manager	M	40–50	20	Global	25%
Business Development Executive2 (×2)	M	30–40	2	Global	25%
Business Development Analyst	M	20–30	3	Global	25%
Business Development Manager2	M	20–30	4	Regional	25%
Business Development Manager 1	F	20–30	2	Regional	25%
Business Development Executive1	F	30–40	1	Regional	25%
STEERCO					
Director Supply Planning (×2)	F	40–50	6	Global	25%
Program Manager	F	40–50	5	Regional	30%
Advanced Quality Manager (×2)	F	30–40	10	Global	10%
Senior Engineer	F	40–50	4	Global	25%
Project Manager	M	30–40	NA	Global	15%
Senior R&D Manager (×2)	M	40–50	8	Global	25%
R&D Manager	M	30–40	8	Global	15%
R&D Director	M	30–40	8	Global	20%
Senior R&D Director	M	40–50	8	Global	25%
CRESTCO					
Medical Advisor	F	40–50	2	Global	40%
European Sales Manager (×2)	M	40–50	7	Global	70%
HR Generalist 1	F	30–40	8	Global	50%
HR Generalist 2	F	30–40	12	Global	50%
HR Manager EMEA	M	40–50	10	Regional	40%
Global Manager (×2)	M	40–50	6	Global	50%
HR Manager	F	40–50	5	Global	40%
Sales and Marketing Manager (×2)	M	50–60	23	Global	70%
Corporate Travel Supervisor	F	30–40	6	Regional	50%
Director Global Regulatory Affairs	F	40–50	11	Global	75%
TRONCO					
Global Benefits Manager	F	30–40	4	Global	10%
VP Total Rewards Operations (×2)	M	40–50	8	Global	25%
VP Global Rewards	M	50–60	20	Global	40%
Regional Benefits Director	F	30–40	10	Global	30%
VP Global HR Operations	M	50–60	8	Global	75%

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We took several steps throughout this process to generate rich theoretical insights. First, to discern a deeper structure in coding the demands, we identified the micro-level dimensions (structural and spatial) of a mobile global boundary spanner's role. We classify the structural dimension as the degree of integrative scope and the spatial dimension as the extent of adaptive breadth. We observed that the *integrative scope* of a role varies (from restricted to extensive) across organizational boundaries, specifically, intra-organizational (internal functions and units) and inter-organizational boundaries (external stakeholders). While some individuals had a restricted integrative scope, spanning intra- or inter-organizational boundaries, others had an extensive scope, spanning multiple intra-organizational boundaries (through visits to subsidiaries, meetings with HQ managers, factory tours, and informal socializing) and inter-organizational boundaries across markets (customer visits, trade shows, and distributor conferences). Equally, the *adaptive breadth* of a role varies (from narrow to wide) across geographical boundaries and is influenced by the degree of complexity encountered within and across contexts. Some interviewees had a narrow adaptive breadth, encountering little complexity in proximate locations, while others had a wide adaptive breadth, confronting complex cultural, institutional and temporal differences. Moreover, variability in these dimensions impacted the intensity of demands. We also capture how mobility pressures amplify demands via *mobility cadence*, defined as the pattern of travel in terms of frequency and distance. This ranged from a dynamic mobility cadence, that is, frequent long-distance travel, to a reduced cadence through infrequent short-haul flights over limited distances.

Second, as our analysis progressed, we narrowed our focus to untangling the adverse impact of demands on individuals while exploring their coping responses. To conceptualize this, we consulted studies on coping mechanisms (Srivastava & Tang, 2015). This scrutiny of our data led to the identification of adverse effects as an aggregate dimension, triggered by the demands. Finally, we identified a set of coping behaviors that individuals enacted. Table 2 presents our coding structure.

4 | FINDINGS

Our findings are presented in three parts. First, we detail the intense demands that individuals experience in spanning multiple boundaries. Second, we elucidate how continually navigating these demands triggers a series of adverse effects. We observe that the intensity of these demands and the severity of effects vary with the integrative scope (structural) and adaptive breadth (spatial) of a role. Third, we detail the various coping behaviors and their influence on the strategic value of mobile global boundary spanners.

4.1 | Global boundary spanning demands

4.1.1 | Relational demands

Relational demands arise from continuously spanning diverse networks across multiple boundaries. We identified a minority of individuals with low to moderate relational demands, attributable to their narrow adaptive breadth and restricted integrative scope. A reduced mobility cadence meant infrequent traversing of geographic boundaries in close contextual proximity and of an intra-organizational boundary through collaboration with familiar subsidiaries.

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TABLE 2 Coding structure (coping with the demands and adverse effects of global boundary spanning).

First-order codes	Second-order categories	Aggregate dimensions
• Statements related to demands of continuously building relations across organizational and geographical boundaries, for example, connecting with HQ; deepening trust across a diverse subsidiary network; forging relations with external stakeholders	Relational	Global boundary spanning demands
• Statements related to demands of routinely transferring knowledge across organizational and geographical boundaries, for example, sourcing, sharing and translating knowledge across a network of subsidiaries; collecting and storing large volumes of internal and external knowledge	Informational	
• Statements related to demands of constantly confronting cultural differences; and institutional regulations across organizational and geographical boundaries	Contextual	
• Statements related to the adverse impact from intensified and elongated workdays; communicating across time zones; long-haul flights and sleep deprivation, for example, intense workload, health problems, lack of sleep	Physical exhaustion	Adverse effects
• Statements related to the adverse impact from repeated exposure to cultural differences or unsafe contexts, for example, build-up of frustration, fear and anxiety over time	Psychological strain	
• Statements related to the adverse impact from conflict with family and friends, for example, guilt, conflict, missed time and events with family and friends	Personal conflict	
• Statements related to behaviors of actively coping with intense demands through direct action or working smarter to manage time more efficiently; reinforcing positive frames; leveraging different channels of support • Statements related to coping behaviors enabling the strategic contributions of individuals to the MNE, for example, network coordination, knowledge mobilization and contextual adjustment • Statements related to behaviors of passively coping with intense demands through normalizing as appropriate without question; avoiding, distracting, ignoring, or removing oneself from the problem through escapism.	Active coping Passive coping	Coping responses

Examples are evident at CRESTCO (HR Manager) and STEERCO (Project Manager, R&D Manager), where individuals travel several times a year to subsidiaries in the EU.

Many interviewees in STEERCO had a more dynamic mobility cadence to their HQ in the US. These individuals had a concentrated integrative scope, but the intra-organizational boundary exchanges they engaged in occurred across a hierarchical (vertical) faultline. STEERCO's Director of Supply Planning features prominently across our findings in a demanding role. She was proactive about traveling to California, averaging 1 week per month, and faced intense demands to continuously build relationships with HQ. Competition for HQ investment meant individuals had to be physically present or "*in the room*" as politicking was prevalent.

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STEERCO's Senior R&D Director, who has spent the past 8 years connecting across the HQ-boundary, added, "*your overall influence and relevance is related to being there, and if you are not there regularly on the ground, people will not think about bringing you into certain conversations*." An interesting case is STEERCO's Senior Engineer, who was known as a '*network ninja'* by colleagues, given she spends so much time negotiating the HQ boundary, stating, "*when I am there, I feel a part of there...I stopped feeling like a visitor a while ago*."

Relational demands were more intense for those with an extensive integrative scope spanning multiple intra-organizational boundaries. This typically involved a wide adaptive breadth coordinating a diverse network of subsidiaries. This was the case for many in TRONCO, with a dynamic cadence that repeatedly traversed far-flung locations. Their Regional Benefits Director, whom we refer to in various ways through our findings, has 10 years of experience regularly spanning East Asia, commented on the relational demands she experienced, "*They want to make sure that someone understands and listens to them. I can do that; the problem is I cannot scale that for every person who has the issue*."

Intense relational demands were also evident among those spanning multiple inter-organizational boundaries, under pressure to forge new ties with various stakeholders. Many in RANCO and CRESTCO repeatedly traversed uncharted territory, continually connecting with physicians, distributors and customers. Another individual who features regularly across our findings and is one of the most experienced Global Managers in our sample has been at RANCO for 20 years and commented on the diversity of his network: "*I manage close to 50 different markets. Within that, you have got Africa...Then we have the Eastern European markets...-Philippines...it is quite a lot*." This was also a significant challenge for CRESTCO's Sales and Marketing Manager, who had 23 years of experience and was one of the most mobile boundary spanners in our study. He spent over 250 nights (70% of working time) in hotels annually, detailing the demands of facilitating relations with customers across Latin America and EMEA: "*I have all-day appointments, and it is always the same...80% is more building relations, building trust, building confidence*." Overall, relational demands intensified with greater network diversity.

4.1.2 | Informational demands

Informational demands arise from routinely sharing knowledge across multiple boundaries. Our analysis finds that some individuals faced moderate informational demands given their narrow adaptive breadth and restricted integrative scope. This involved engaging in routinized tasks across intra-organizational boundaries within one's region over a short period. Examples were evident in CRESTCO, typically in HR-related roles or Engineers in STEERCO.

Informational demands were more intense for those with a wide adaptive breadth who routinely mobilized knowledge across intra-organizational boundaries. This was the case for many collaborative projects in TRONCO, STEERCO, and CRESTCO. Individuals with a narrower adaptive breadth, negotiating between two locations (US–Ireland), but with extensive integrative scope across functions, experienced intense informational demands. STEERCO's Manager Advanced Quality, noted, "*I am over projects manufactured and designed out of the* [Irish] *site and used with products made in other facilities, and need to have a good understanding of what happens in other locations*."

Another notable case was CRESTCO's Global Manager, who had an extensive integrative scope spanning multiple intra-organizational boundaries (functions, subsidiaries, divisions) and

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a wide adaptive breadth (US, EU, APAC). Focused on sharing innovations globally, he noted, "*I am constantly needing updates and constantly being plugged in for getting access to this clinical knowledge*." Across inter-organizational boundaries, informational demands were intense for individuals with a wide adaptive breadth, who were under pressure to constantly decode externally embedded knowledge. This involved sourcing specialized knowledge of technical products from experts to transfer across intra-organizational boundaries.

Many others experienced informational demands in repetitively collecting and storing large volumes of explicit knowledge across inter-organizational boundaries. This was the case for individuals in RANCO and CRESTCO, who had a wide adaptive breadth and a dynamic cadence, regularly negotiating multiple geographical boundaries. RANCO's IB Manager, who spans 30+ mostly developing countries across three continents, noted "*a lot of third world countries, and it is difficult to find good information online about any particular distributor*." He and many of his colleagues cited the demands of collecting and storing large volumes of information by completing trip reports, which were often written during "*free time*." Overall, informational demands intensified with higher volumes of knowledge complexity.

4.1.3 | Contextual demands

Contextual demands arise from the relentless confrontation of cultural and institutional differences across multiple boundaries. Individuals with a narrow adaptive breadth and reduced cadence experienced less intense contextual demands. This was the case for some in STEERCO and CRESTCO, whose integrative scope focused on intra-organizational exchanges, even though they regularly traversed them. Minor cultural differences, such as different working styles and distinctions in phraseology, were cited, but nothing too demanding.

Many with extensive integrative scope and a dynamic cadence across a global subsidiary network experienced intense demands, grappling mainly with cultural incongruities. This was typical for experienced VPs in TRONCO who regularly faced a multiplicity of challenges across Central Europe, contended with varied local practices across China, or a distinct social etiquette in culturally "*tough*" locations like Japan. These were more demanding experiences for many women, especially in TRONCO. Their Global Benefits Manager, who has over 4 years of experience spanning a global subsidiary network, noted, "*Puerto Rico...culturally they like to commit to something in the room and then like a month later they either, with the best of intentions, they need something else*." RANCO's Senior Recruitment Consultant added, "*there are certain markets I do not go to...I could not have meetings with men*."

Contextual demands were most intense for those with a wide adaptive breadth, engaging with stakeholders across inter-organizational boundaries. This was prevalent in RANCO among those in Business Development, who regularly traversed culturally complex markets. Many commented on the demands from conflicting issues related to religion and social values. One individual, who joined RANCO a year before, now spanning 22 countries, noted, "*in Bangladesh, if you are quiet and calm, you will not be listened to...you nearly have to have more of an assertive approach...more so than if I was in other markets...this is always a challenge when bringing customers and distributors together*" (Business Development Manager3). Equally, many women in RANCO and TRONCO reflected on the demands of navigating high-masculinity contexts, in which they found it challenging to reconcile customers' direct approaches with their own cultural views.

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Spanning multiple inter-organizational and geographical boundaries also created contextual demands from contradictory institutional differences. Individuals commented on the demands of deciphering regulatory changes, grappling with corruption, or pushing back against local norms that diverged from the MNE's standardized practices. This was intense in institutionally distant contexts; for example, TRONCO's VP Global Rewards discussed his engagement with their Vietnamese subsidiary to ensure compliance with human rights trafficking standards, "*we had to work with that team to make them realize although it is not against the law in Vietnam, the United Nations, International Labor Organization, they see that as a potential form of human trafficking; therefore, we see that as a potential form of human trafficking*." These demands intensified amid a broader array of contextual multiplicities. Table 3 presents empirical evidence for each of these demands.

4.2 | Adverse effects from global boundary spanning demands

4.2.1 | Physical exhaustion

Individuals who experienced intense demands commented on the adverse effects of severe physical exhaustion. For instance, individuals experienced irregular work patterns or extended days due to the constant pressure to stay connected amid heightened relational diversity. Many remarked on the lack of sleep due to jet lag, prolonged health problems, poor eating habits and a lack of regular exercise. Some with a dynamic cadence noted that, in the process of spanning a diverse subsidiary network, the relational demands of maintaining constant contact with others, often in their home countries, exhausted them physically. This was the case for most individuals, regardless of time zone differences across geographical boundaries. As some individuals noted, "[I am] *doing mental days of 20 hours work*" (HR Generalist 1 CRESTCO), "*the challenge is trying to stay on top of your workload.... It is not a case of you going away for a week, and you do not have to do your usual job for a week*" (Global Business Manager RANCO).

This had knock-on effects on the intensity of the demands. It also affected individuals' ability to deepen relationships, mobilize knowledge, and adapt across contexts, as they tried to avoid important social gatherings in the evenings due to exhaustion. CRESTCO's Sales and Marketing Manager, who had the most dynamic mobility cadence in our sample, commented, "*you feel you are exhausted when you come here, and you sit on the chair, and you fall asleep in 5 minutes*." This physical exhaustion was the case for many, regardless of their adaptive breadth. Despite this, a wider adaptive breadth across diverse contexts and time zones led to more severe physical exhaustion. Many individuals in RANCO felt this, for example, a Business Development Analyst noted,

> Bangladesh is 5 hours ahead so whenever you are there you are finishing work around 7 pm, back to the hotel, it is still around 2 pm here, so you still have everyone working, sending emails and it is still my responsibility to follow up...if you have a very stressful week, which I did as it was so packed full of customer visits, it means whenever I came back to the hotel I had to work to maybe 11, 12 pm.

Equally, upon returning from intense trips, many commented on physical exhaustion due to insufficient time off, as company policy required them to be in the office the next day at 8 am, despite returning home at midnight. Several interviewees at STEERCO with a dynamic mobility

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TABLE 3 Demands of spanning multiple boundaries.

Global boundary spanning demands	Empirical evidence (across organizational and geographical boundaries)
Relational Demands in continuously connecting and linking a diverse network of internal and external actors	You find out what is going on, it is kind of those water cooler conversations the informal chats. You kind of pick up all this stuff about what is going on in all different areas that you can kind of use later in some shape or form (Senior R&D Director STEERCO) Making sure that we are bringing different viewpoints together and that we are on a regular basis, bringing people together...When we do not have face time, people tend to kind of separate out and kind of do their own thing (VP Global Operations TRONCO) We have 58 sales reps scattered across Europe...7 or 8 product specialists. We have 6 regional managers...to meet either our customers or to meet our staff...it means I have to get out of Ireland to do so (European Sales Manager CRESTCO) The value of just like meeting in person is ridiculous...there's just all sorts of conversations happen organically from it. That you wouldn't get from a webex (Regional Benefits Director TRONCO)
Informational Demands in routinely transferring knowledge within the MNE and across external stakeholders	Working across that entire business system and have to bring back that information and share it out so we can learn from it (Director Global Regulatory Affairs CRESTCO) We are almost the middleman between the designer and the production. The analogy I usually use is like an architect and engineer when you are building a house. The guys in California are the architects, and they come up with all the ideas and the guys here are actually the guys doing the work, laying the blocks, cutting the timber, whatever (R&D Manager STEERCO) I have 55 people in India working alongside me, you cannot understand what is going, like at no point, I will ever understand everything (Global Manager RANCO) You specifically do a report up and you would have that report... every customer you've spoken to and what follow-up action...you need to take we'd share all that information (Project Manager STEERCO)
Contextual Demands in constantly confronting cultural and institutional differences across boundaries	There are very cultural rules you need to be aware of...like what time you book a table for dinner. In Scandinavia, anything after 6 pm is late. In Spain or Italy, anything before 9 pm is early... Someone is not going to be happy (HR Manager CRESTCO) Look at Indonesia...do we understand how some distributors can service the Sunni Muslim community and not the Shia Muslim community...[we] will not be allowed to go to parts of the country because it is not their ethnicity (Global Business Manager RANCO) Russia more from a regulatory and so, there is a couple of regulatory countries that are more challenging. Latin America, Brazil and Argentina can sometimes be challenging (VP of Global HR Operations TRONCO) You have a works council in Germany, it requires negotiation...back and forth (HR Generalist1 CRESTCO)

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cadence to California commented on its effects. The '*network ninja'* (Senior Engineer STEERCO) who captured the sentiments of her colleagues, noted, "*physically, I am just coming up to the limit of what I can do...my body is just struggling to adjust all the time*."

STEERCO's Director of Supply Planning, who we noted experienced intense relational and informational demands spanning a global subsidiary network, revealed the physical exhaustion this created, "*I got sick there about a year ago, I fainted...the ambulance was called, and I was carried off...I was just kind of tired and stuff like that, and the jet lag...I went for check-ups in the private clinics*."

4.2.2 | Psychological strain

Continuously negotiating intense demands also created adverse effects in the form of psychological strain. This was acute for individuals who experienced intense contextual demands due to an accumulation of frustrations from continuous culture clashes and more severe anxiety from repeatedly confronting corrupt or unsafe conditions. This strain arose from spanning multiple geographical boundaries and interfacing with external stakeholders rather than from building internal relationships or sharing information.

Individuals in TRONCO discussed their frustrations with recurring cultural and ethical clashes when coordinating subsidiaries. This was acute in South America, where their VP Total Rewards Operations asserted, "*I would get so frustrated. To the point of wanting to pull my hair out, I would think God, they make me mad...they would agree to one thing in a meeting, and then they would do just the complete opposite*." The Regional Benefits Director discussed a related frustration she experienced while trying to facilitate cross-subsidiary relations in Asia. She commented on the extra strain of being careful not to lose face, "*you have to be seen to be happy to be there...do not show my frustration, it is extremely tiring*." This strain also arose from spanning unsafe contexts. Some in TRONCO added that when visiting their subsidiary in Tijuana, they had to organize private security transport across the US border due to terrorist concerns. When staying in Tijuana, there was a requirement to remain on a specific floor of a designated hotel, noting, "*after hearing that, you are like, get me over to San Diego*" (Global Benefits Manager TRONCO).

Psychological strain was acute in Marketing and Business Development roles. There were many examples where individuals in RANCO felt psychological strain from experiencing terrorist threats, particularly in unsafe contexts. Their Global Manager commented, "*we were in the Ivory Coast...Like our distributor turns up with a guy with a gun, standing up on the seat out of the sunroof*." The Global Business Manager, who regularly engaged with governmental actors, described an incident where he and an inexperienced colleague were "*held captive one time in Tanzania*" at gunpoint and the impact this had on his colleague, "*the guy that I was with actually...it was his first trip, he nearly fainted*." In many of these examples, individuals described the fear and anxiety they felt for their safety and their unwillingness to return to these markets.

In other cases, there was a lasting psychological impact from experiencing natural disasters with devastating consequences. RANCO's Global Manager, with a dynamic cadence to developing markets, described a situation in India that "*stuck with him*,"

> A cyclone flattened the place...I had just walked down into a kind of cavernous walkway, and on either side, it was just all these women, bundles, it was about 15 of them...and they were just holding their babies who were dead...a nursery had been flattened, and I found that profoundly moving.

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4.2.3 | Personal conflict

Grappling with intense demands created adverse effects through personal conflict. This involved experiencing conflicting pressures between stressful work schedules and personal lives, such as clashes with family or social circles. Individuals reflected on the sustainability of their roles, given that many experienced severe exhaustion or strain, which created a ripple effect in their personal lives. It was common for individuals to travel on weekends, interfering with personal time, and many missed at least two weekends a month, and family or social events with friends. This personal conflict was also felt among those who did not have spouses or children. One individual who was single with no children, but valued socializing with friends, noted, "*if I travel to my markets, I will fly out Friday nights. I will miss that whole weekend*" (Business Development Analyst RANCO). TRONCO's Regional Benefits Director, who also did not have a spouse or children, reflected on her personal conflict, "*you come back, and you are expected to get back into work. It interferes with a lot of stuff*."

It was also common for partners to stress or worry about individuals who had health concerns arising from intense work schedules, which often led to conflict. CRESTCO's Sales and Marketing Manager attributed his two divorces to his work. Even when individuals were home at weekends, they often felt too tired to engage meaningfully with families. Others, like CRESTCO's European Sales Manager, commented on the guilt from constantly being away,

> My wife is tackling kids at home, and she is dealing with that as well as her own job, which is quite stressful. So, that does weigh heavily on me. There is a bit of traveler's guilt...you are trying to compensate for being away, you are trying to be the father you should be, and you are trying not to be cranky, or I am not on my game at the weekend.

Table 4 presents empirical evidence for each of these adverse effects.

4.3 | Coping responses

4.3.1 | Active coping

Individuals engaged in active coping responses to shape demands and regulate their adverse effects. Active coping unfolds through three main behaviors: direct action, positive framing, and support-seeking.

4.3.2 | Direct action

Individuals often took direct action or worked smarter to organize their time more efficiently. This coping behavior helped with managing the intensity of demands during a given trip by prioritizing key meetings and necessary social events, regulating the volume of information, or limiting the number of contextual variations they were exposed to. Firms were not strict about when travel occurred, so individuals had autonomy to structure the timing. Although the average individual traveled at least once a month, many tried to condense their trip to a week, especially over longer distances. Careful planning meant more time to focus on strategic issues and

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TABLE 4 Adverse effects from global boundary spanning demands.

Adverse effects	Negative impact	Empirical evidence
Physical exhaustion	Adverse impact from intensified and elongated workdays, communicating across time zones, long-haul flights and sleep deprivation—Intense workload, health problems, lack of sleep over time	You are always kind of on alert. Which is why the sleeping it does not help...you kind of push yourself very hard as well...I do not get enough exercise or anything, I am very conscious of it (Director Supply Planning STEERCO) My body clock was just all over the place, I do not sleep on the plane. So, each trip that I take, I am awake about 32/33 h (Senior Engineer, STEERCO) The further east you go, you will work longer evenings in that by the time you are finished, people back home are sending emails, and they are starting their day (Senior Recruitment Consultant RANCO) Last year, from all the traveling, I got a chest infection that I could not shift and the minute you are on a plane again, you get it again so that knocked me out (HR Generalist 1 CRESTCO) It would be intense...there is a lot of work when you are out in the markets that you always have to catch up on whenever you are back (Business Development Analyst RANCO)
Psychological strain	Adverse impact from repeated exposure to cultural differences or unsafe contexts—Build-up of frustration, fear, anxiety over time	Their version of ethics in Latin America is so very different from my version, sometimes I feel like, wait, what are you doing (VP Total Rewards Operations TRONCO) The first time I went to Israel, the first thing they said to me was we do not know why you are here; we do not want you here, we are suspicious of why you are here but that is just their culture, and they all talk over each other which is really frustrating (Global Benefits Director TRONCO) These situations generate significant amounts of frustration on a very regular basis (Global Manager RANCO) There was an earthquake in Christchurch and there was an ash cloud coming over from Chile... changed my flight to get on the only flight that was leaving...halfway through the flight, the plane just dropped out of the sky. Everyone was being sick...I was like...I am going to die (Business Development Executive2 RANCO) We were sort of held captive one time in Tanzania...We went into a hospital and...we just stayed about in the lab, security burst in, took us away...so they basically detained us for several hours (Global Business Manager RANCO)

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TABLE 4 (Continued)

Adverse effects	Negative impact	Empirical evidence
Personal conflict	Adverse impact from conflict with family and friends—Guilt, conflict, missed time and events with family and friends	He [husband] worries about me, you know health, not getting any younger (Director Supply Planning STEERCO) Parents, they worry whenever I travel, you are going to these foreign countries, you have to be safe.... I would fly out on Friday; I would waste that whole weekend...you miss out on the social aspects of life which people get annoyed with (Business Development Analyst RANCO) It often depends on the person at home, and it generally is not the person going away that has the issues (Senior Recruitment Consultant RANCO) I have been married and divorced two times. It is not their fault. It is bad to say about this person, but you cannot resist when you have a husband that is never there (Sales and Marketing Manager CRESTCO)

effort was not wasted on redundant trips or interactions. This often meant scheduling up to a year in advance, with some stating, "*I always try to book the tickets long, long time in advance, which gives me more time to prepare*" (Manager Advanced Quality STEERCO). This approach to "*working smarter with my time*" also involved prioritization of a specific set of countries, stakeholders, or teams during a given trip to reduce relational and contextual demands.

We observed that direct action enabled individuals to create strategic value for the MNE. While direct action supports knowledge mobilization and contextual adjustment, we provide an illustrative example of how it enhances network coordination inside the firm. Specifically, coping behaviors such as careful planning and prioritization enable individuals to build upward influence targeted at key HQ decision-makers and deepen lateral collaboration across subsidiary networks. For example, in her role coordinating across subsidiaries, STEERCO's Director of Supply Planning emphasized how she coped with influencing HQ from a distance through instrumental, advanced planning of meetings with key decision makers, "*I'm making the most of every single day...I would be picking out stakeholders I want to go after and that I've got meetings set with them...the centers of power are not here*." Importantly, she elaborated on the subsequent coordination advantages that arise from this,

> There will be loads of follow-up meetings, maybe a couple of workshops, projects... I organized this workshop with about 20 people from different functions across the division and manufacturing. I presented this flowchart to the second in command to the CEO...Everyone was happy, we got a number of quick wins, solved a few problems...broadened the scope, brought more people in.

Careful planning aggregates individual coping behavior into firm-level outcomes, where HQ influence triggers intra-firm coordination that might not otherwise occur. Coping through

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prioritization of key markets similarly enables network coordination horizontally across culturally distant subsidiaries. This was evident in TRONCO, where the Global Benefits Manager faced significant demands but concentrated her relational investment in high-context markets to build trust, "*We agreed at the start out of all my countries, which were my priority ones, and then which ones I want to start on now, so I picked Japan, China, and Singapore...it has helped with building trust between those markets*." These coping behaviors also enabled strategic alignment across divisions, where CRESTCO's Global Manager noted, "*I meet with the Vice Presidents...you have 6 different specialties, and there are different leadership teams. There are key people that I need to be in contact with...we have a lot of work to do to put the strategy in place and aligning visions*."

In sum, direct action coping behaviors generate the influence and trust required for greater network coordination, enabling strategic alignment across the MNE.

Positive framing. This coping behavior involved defining global boundary spanning demands as exciting or focusing on the opportunities they present. These opportunities typically included meeting new people, acquiring new skills, or experiencing new cultures. This behavior also involved making comparisons to "local" colleagues who do not get the same opportunities. Interestingly, despite the intense demands and severe effects that STEERCO's Director of Supply Planning experienced, she enacted positive framing to cope, noting, "*that would be part of the excitement...you enjoy the different cultures and relationships...you could take a* [local] *role, but then you are going to be limited ...if you do not get a buzz out of what you are doing*." CRESTCO's European Sales Manager coped by romanticizing demands, adding, "*the reality is, I am staying in 5-star hotels having steak dinners every night*" versus "*being stuck at a desk*." Individuals in RANCO with a wide adaptive breadth sought to shape their intense contextual demands through positive framing about cultural learning, stating "*my favorite thing is the cultural differences. China is still my top country, I love it*" (Business Development Executive1 RANCO).

Positive framing enabled individuals to create strategic value for the MNE by enhancing network coordination, knowledge mobilization and contextual adjustment across multiple boundaries. We focus our examples on how positive framing facilitates knowledge mobilization. For instance, reframing demands as opportunities motivates individuals to continually source locally embedded knowledge from distant actors, both within and beyond the firm and transfer it across the MNE. CRESTCO's Medical Advisor, despite acknowledging he could reduce his travel, reframed intense informational demands as an opportunity, stating, "*I travel quite a lot just because I want to learn more...it is all about the 3Es for me—experience, exposure, and education*." This reframing sustained his engagement in a strategically critical translation role, bridging external actors (doctors, surgeons, and physicians) and internal functions (engineering and sales) across geographic boundaries (the US and the EU). He commented,

> Translation is very important...half my hat is engineering, and half my hat is clinician...when the engineers talk to the physician, one is talking about oranges, and one is talking about apples. And they are both wrong...I take the clinical knowledge, and I know which knowledge to transfer to the engineer...they need the words from my mouth, I teach them...it helps them adapt but also to create new, better products.

Without this positive framing, externally embedded knowledge about complex medical procedures would remain dormant in local silos, inaccessible to actors across the MNE who can

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create value from it. Positive framing, therefore, enables knowledge mobilization that facilitates cross-boundary interdependence between internal and external actors, thereby prompting innovation responsive to market needs.

4.3.3 | Support-seeking

This active coping response unfolded through different behaviors. First, although formal training was largely absent, some support was actively sought, mainly through travel departments, line managers, or team members. This support was primarily offered to individuals with broad adaptive capacity, enabling them to navigate unfamiliar contexts through internal travel departments, reducing contextual demands. They advised on basic cultural information, visa booking, updates on disruptive events, and last-minute cancellations. Support-seeking also occurred through informal channels, with line managers as the main point of contact for problems, as well as from team members at home or others in similar roles. This informal support often included delegating to colleagues to regulate physical exhaustion from relational demands, "*if I do not delegate, then I will die*" (HR Manager EMEA CRESTCO). There was a strong, informal, supportive culture of learning in all firms, especially regarding complex issues in higher-risk markets.

Second, active coping behaviors included relying on spouses or family for support. It was common for spouses to sacrifice their time and careers to care for children. CRESTCO's Sales and Marketing Manager, reflecting on his personal conflict from previous divorces, commented that his spouse's support reduces psychological strain, "*When I met my wife, she was working, but we quickly decided that she would stop*." STEERCO's Director of Supply Planning commented on the support from parents when her spouse is busy, "*my mom and dad nearly work for* [STEERCO] *because they look after my two girls, I could not do my job unless I had this whole support structure*."

Support-seeking also enables individuals to create strategic value for the MNE through network coordination, knowledge mobilization and contextual adjustment. For illustrative purposes, we offer examples of how support-seeking enhances contextual adjustment across multiple boundaries. Leveraging informal support channels, particularly from managers, team members, and external actors, generated collective learning about cultural nuances, regulatory complexity, and evolving market conditions—learnings that formal systems alone did not capture. CRESTCO's Director of Global Affairs discussed the collective learning that she and colleagues leverage when adjusting to evolving regulatory conditions in distant markets they have limited experience with, such as Japan, Oman, or Saudi Arabia.

> New regulations in the region are really a big one that we would share...if I know that a member of staff is going to Japan, I will sit down with them and go through some stuff...or when I went to Saudi Arabia, I had a colleague who went before...It is good to have that insight.

Collective learning reduces the risks of entering unfamiliar markets and sustains contextual adjustment. This is consequential for the firms in our study that sought to standardize up to 70% of their global operations. As such, where the standardization strategy reached its limits, collective learning through informal support plugged the gap, sustaining the MNE's capacity to adjust, particularly in markets that resist standardization. This was evident in TRONCO, where individuals were coping with conflict in culturally complex contexts while disseminating best practices across subsidiaries.

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The strategic value of support-seeking is further illustrated by individuals seeking external support after learning from past failures of "going it alone." RANCO's Global Manager reflected on his cultural ignorance in Korea and how this has reshaped subsequent market entry in Japan,

> Cultural sensitivity, we have been ignorant, and I have made so many mistakes back in the day in Korea that I learned from...We are now trying to break Japan, and I have gone through Jethro, which is a trade organization in London, for the first time.

These examples show how individual coping behaviors translate into firm-level adaptation in culturally complex markets. Taken together, coping through support-seeking generates contextual adjustment that is strategically consequential for the MNE, particularly in distant, unfamiliar markets with evolving conditions that resist standardization.

Although the above examples link specific coping behaviors to particular strategic contributions, these pairings are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Instead, our analysis suggests that each active coping behavior (direct action, positive framing, support-seeking) facilitates all three contributions (network coordination, knowledge mobilization, contextual adjustment) in different ways.

Moreover, we observed enabling conditions that support how active coping behaviors enhance strategic contributions. Enabling conditions were evident across all firms and included role autonomy to organize their own cross-border engagements, collaborative forums for knowledge exchange, and a supportive culture for collective learning. Each of these enabling conditions applies across all coping behaviors and strategic contributions. For instance, role autonomy supports direct action to carefully prioritize relational investment and knowledge exchange with key stakeholders, enabling trust and alignment across the MNE. Equally, collaborative forums for knowledge exchange—such as strategy events, team meetings, cross-functional projects, site visits, trade shows or conferences—enable the flow of rich knowledge and the creation of novel ties across diverse contexts. A culture for collective learning facilitates support-seeking where delegation sustains coordination across diverse priority markets, or leveraging colleagues' experience enables adjustment to evolving or high-risk contexts. Enabling conditions were typically informal and functioned in the absence of defined travel policies, advanced knowledge systems, or systematic training and support. Table 5 presents examples of the links between active coping behaviors, strategic contributions and enabling conditions.

4.4 | Passive coping

Individuals also engaged in passive coping responses to avoid intense demands and ignore or escape adverse effects. Passive coping manifests in two main behaviors.

4.4.1 | Normalizing

Individuals engaged in passive coping by trying to normalize demands and adverse effects. This meant accepting demands as appropriate without question or challenge. Some normalizing behaviors were directed toward the underlying mobility pressures of their boundary spanning. This involved rendering a strenuous mobility cadence ordinary by adopting a "*travel mindset*."

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TABLE 5 Coping behaviors and their strategic contributions to the MNE.

Active coping behaviors	Network coordination	Knowledge mobilization	Contextual adjustment
Direct action	Targeted HQ influence through careful, advanced planning of stakeholder meetings	Prioritized market visits deepen trust and knowledge exchange across subsidiaries	Condensed trips concentrate learning across high-distance contexts
Positive framing	Reframing demands as opportunities motivates forging new network ties beyond the MNE	Excitement about learning drives access to and decoding of complex embedded knowledge	Cultural curiosity sustains engagement with unfamiliar or evolving contexts
Support-seeking	Delegation sustains lateral coordination across priority markets	Informal channels surface tacit knowledge that formal systems fail to capture	Collective learning enables adjustment in high-risk or complex markets
Enabling conditions	Applicable across all coping behaviors and strategic contributions • Role autonomy to organize cross-border engagement • Collaborative forums for knowledge exchange • Supportive culture for collective learning		

Others normalized contractual discrepancies. For example, although individuals were contracted to travel 20%–25% of their time, they often did so more frequently on their own accord, even amid adverse effects.

We observe that normalizing behaviors may temper demands in the short-term, but only if complemented by active coping behaviors to counter escalating effects. Relying solely on normalization appeared to desensitize individuals to demands. This led to a refusal to recognize adverse effects and an inability to counter them. For example, in attempting to avoid personal conflict, some women normalized the assumption that "*many of the women who regularly travel do not have children*" (Senior Recruitment Consultant RANCO).

Conversely, normalizing was often reinforced with other passive behaviors, such as refusing to challenge inadequate support. This created a false sense of reality, stretching to dysfunctional behaviors like self-blame, with profound effects. STEERCO's Director of Supply Planning's response to fainting at the airport was self-blame, stating "*that is probably my problem. I would not blame the organization for that*." Many others ignored physical exhaustion, claiming the firm was not at fault.

Normalizing also manifested in the invocation of firm loyalty. Some stated that "*it is not the money because if I move company, I can reach 20% more...my honor is the most important...it gained my total commitment in the company*" (Sales and Marketing Manager CRESTCO). This loyalty often extended to ignorance or silence, with some not challenging entitled benefits by claiming back time from traveling weekends.

4.4.2 | Escapism

Escapism was another passive coping response exhibited through various behaviors. Avoidance was a form of escapism in which individuals ignored underlying demands and hoped for better

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outcomes. Individuals who coped with traveler's guilt by romanticizing demands took a short-term view of "*hoping to reduce the amount of travel*" (European Sales Manager CRESTCO), and acknowledging it was unsustainable, they did not have a plan to tackle it.

Escapism also involved distraction from demands by harboring the possibility of relocating within the firm through longer-term assignments. This was evident among those experiencing relational and informational demands that spanned internal boundaries (STEERCO, TRONCO, CRESTCO). Yet, this distraction only tempered adverse effects in the short term. Others refused to move when offered permanent relocations. While choosing not to relocate, they kept this option as a distraction, noting "*that possibility will always be there if I want to use it*" (Senior R&D Manager STEERCO).

Escapism was also exhibited through intentions or plans to leave their firm. STEERCO's Senior Engineer (*the network ninja*), who was continually building relationships with a Californian subsidiary, experienced psychological strain from "*having to adapt my style to be more polite*." She disclosed that she had an interview with another firm after speaking with us, and her colleague revealed that she relocated to the subsidiary to escape the relational demands.

Another extreme form of escapism involved resignation. We returned to speak with several interviewees who resigned from their firms. RANCO's Business Development Executive2 discussed how resigning was the only way to cope with the severe psychological strain. She noted, "*I said this is not worth it, it was not a good experience...I got my contract terminated*." RANCO's IB Development Manager also resigned, noting that, when taking a break to renew his passport, "*I realized how much I was missing out...I wanted a new challenge with a better work-life balance*." In sum, an overreliance on passive coping responses may have a dysfunctional impact on individuals' boundary spanning. Table 6 presents empirical evidence for these coping behaviors.

5 | TYPOLOGY OF GLOBAL BOUNDARY SPANNING ROLES

Building on our findings and complementing the theoretical contributions, we have constructed a typology of global boundary spanning roles (Figure 1). This typology is based on the micro-level dimensions of a mobile global boundary spanner's role: *structural* (degree of integrative scope across organizational boundaries) and *spatial* (extent of adaptive breadth across geographical boundaries). The typology shows how variability in these dimensions influences the intensity of demands, the severity of adverse effects, the variety of coping behaviors, and the potential strategic contributions. To this end, we theorize four types of roles: anchored operator, organizational broker, frontier navigator, and global orchestrator.

Anchored operator roles are predictably low in both structural and spatial variability. They carry a restricted integrative scope, confined to a specific function or team and span intra-organizational boundaries through collaboration with other subsidiaries. They have a narrow adaptive breadth, given that they spend limited time in fewer markets, typically in their region, which are contextually similar to their home country. They also have reduced mobility cadence, traveling infrequently on short-haul flights across limited distances. In this sense, demands are experienced as low intensity, with few adverse effects, and it is unlikely that these roles require coping behaviors in any meaningful way. While individuals in these roles can be classified as mobile global boundary spanners, the strategic value they offer the MNE is likely limited. For example, spanning is confined to coordination with familiar actors, the transfer of routine knowledge and superficial learning from a limited set of proximate contexts. These were less

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TABLE 6 Coping responses of mobile global boundary spanners.

Coping responses	Coping behaviors	Empirical evidence
Active coping	Direct action (Working smarter to organize their time more efficiently and reduce intense demands)	*Careful planning*: I will try and identify the right time to travel, so I know let us say on one of our projects there is a planning meeting going to take place in November...I will try and maximize it with one or two other things that might be happening as well (Senior R&D Manager, STEERCO) *Prioritization of markets*: We agreed at the start out of all my countries which were my priority ones and then which ones I want to start on now, so I picked Japan, China and Singapore (Global Benefits Manager TRONCO) *Temporal condensing*: You are glad to get back because 2 weeks in a hotel can be a long time. In terms of the 2- or 3-day trips it can be equally as hard coming back from them (Global Manager CRESTCO)
	Positive framing (Reinforcing the positive reasons behind the trips to regulate intense demands)	*Building new relationships*: The trips are a great opportunity to have meetings with my CEO, to talk about strategy, to develop strategy, to change the organization, implement new tactics (Sales & Marketing Manager CRESTCO). Perfect opportunity to have a couple of thousand physicians in a single location at a single time (Global Manager CRESTCO) *Learning opportunities*: I am going to Shanghai on Sunday. I must make sure I have all my Chinese stuff up to scratch before I present. Something can come up and that is good as well if you learn something new on it (Director Global Regulatory Affairs CRESTCO) *Romanticizing*: I love it...learning so much more from being in the market...you can have a beer on a Tuesday evening by the pool; there are worse places to be (International Business Development Manager RANCO)
	Support seeking (Leveraging different channels of support to temper intense demands)	*Utilizing structural supports*: You can look up flights yourself and say what you want. They have a portal you can go in to see what options are there. I tend to get them to do the work rather than spending hours myself (Manager Advanced Quality STEERCO) I do not get any training, but the travel office is good in that they have all of the documentation, before you travel, you get a little profile via email that sets out the basics of the countries. The cultural dos and don'ts (Global Manager CRESTCO) *Support from line managers*: I have a really good manager...any time I need to offload a bit (Senior Engineer STEERCO) *Delegation to team members*: I am very good at delegating, I have to keep an eye on more global kind of stuff, the lads take care of the day-to-day detail (Director Supply Planning STEERCO)

(Continues)

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TABLE 6 (Continued)

Coping responses	Coping behaviors	Empirical evidence
		Reliance on spouse and family: Straight away she shifted to a 4-day week which in some ways gives her a chance maybe to rest on a Friday when the kids go to school, she can recover herself (European Sales Manager CRESTCO)
Passive Coping	Normalizing (Accepting or ignoring demands without questioning the firm)	*Travel mindset*: It is just part of the job, if you do not do it your ability to do work is greatly diminished...it is just a fact of life and in any multinational travel is just part and parcel of the job (R&D Director STEERCO) *Invoking loyalty*: I want to do what is best for the business and I feel that this is the best thing to do...As much as I find it hard to travel from time to time, especially leaving the kids behind (HR Generalist1 CRESTCO) *Ignorance to inconsistency in policies*: I am a manager for people who travel...you would be hoping people do not talk too much about it and will not start comparing notes and demanding consistency (Manager Advanced Quality STEERCO)
	Escapism (Avoiding or removing oneself from the problem to escape demands)	*Hoping for better outcomes*: I am hoping I have made my last trip this year, I just had it in my head I am not going again; but I know I am (Senior Engineer STEERCO) When I started, I was thinking this is definitely a great job for 3 years, but I am still here after 5 (Global Business Manager RANCO) *Distraction of relocation*: When I took this role my boss was eager for me to move to London or Paris, because access to an international airport...I am resisting that temptation...moving to the US is a strong possibility (European Sales Manager CRESTCO) *Intentions to leave*: I do not think anyone could have sustained that amount of travel. Do not say this to my boss but, no, I do not think I can maintain this in the sense of I don't mind going over and back once a month (HR Generalist2 CRESTCO) But it is an interesting role. I am kind of excited for it. I am just coming up to the limit of what I can do (Senior Engineer STEERCO) *Resignation*: I said I do not want to travel anymore...I also was not allowed to go back to my desk to get my handbag or my jacket, I was marched out the back doors (Business Development Executive2 RANCO) I was grounded last year for a couple of months because I was getting my passport renewed and it was at that point whenever I took a break from the travel, I realized how much I was missing out on (International Business Development Manager RANCO)

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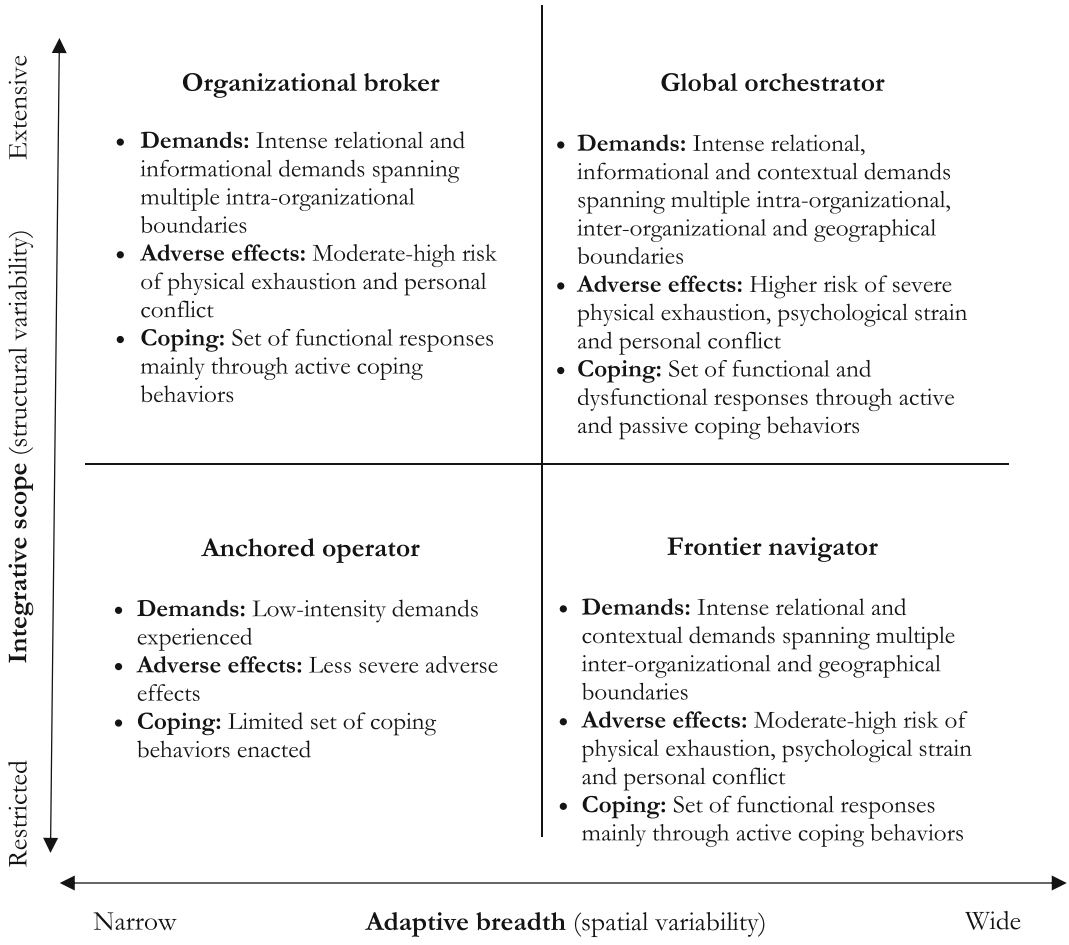


FIGURE 1 Typology of global boundary spanning roles.

prominent in our sample, but examples existed in CRESTCO (HR Manager) and STEERCO (Project Manager, R&D Manager).

Organizational broker roles arise when there is extensive integrative scope but narrow adaptive breadth. Narrow adaptive breadth is manifest in traversing geographical boundaries that are less complex in cultural or institutional differences. Their extensive integrative scope may extend across intra-organizational boundaries such as functions, units, and hierarchies. Mobility cadence is therefore moderate-to-dynamic, with frequent and sporadic short- and long-haul travel across a more diverse range of boundaries within the MNE. These roles have a conventional mandate focused on traversing the corporate structure to augment interdependence across subsidiaries (Santistevan, 2022). This will involve building trust and credibility with key decision-makers as well as sourcing and translating complex know-how across units and functions (Tippmann et al., 2017). These roles face intense relational and informational demands across intra-organizational and geographical boundaries. As such, they confront less intense contextual demands, given that they traverse a concentrated group of markets. Individuals in these roles are exposed to severe physical exhaustion and personal conflict, but will respond through active-functional coping behaviors. Direct action to manage time more efficiently,

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positive framing, and support-seeking can help regulate intense demands and reduce adverse effects. Although some passive coping behaviors may be exhibited, these involve normalizing through adopting a travel mindset, which will not have long-term detrimental effects. Coping effectively in these roles enables individuals to create strategic value for the MNE by coordinating ties between HQ and across subsidiaries (Kostova & Roth, 2003; Mäkelä et al., 2019) as well as sourcing rich knowledge from external actors and translating it across the MNE (Castellani et al., 2022; Minbaeva & Santangelo, 2018). Individuals at STEERCO (Senior R&D Manager; Advanced Quality Manager), CRESTCO (Medical Advisor; HR Manager EMEA), and TRONCO (Global Benefits Manager; VP Global Rewards) operate in these roles.

Frontier navigator roles carry a wide adaptive breadth but a more restricted integrative scope. Spanning multiple geographical boundaries exposes individuals to heightened contextual complexity across regions, facilitating engagement with a diversity of external stakeholders rather than intensive intra-MNE integration. These roles are marked by a moderate-to-dynamic mobility cadence, involving frequent long-haul travel and extended periods of location-hopping. Their core function is adaptation by establishing multi-market connections, identifying distributors, developing sales pipelines and building a market presence. Consequently, individuals face intense informational demands, centered on processing high volumes of explicit knowledge rather than translating tacit know-how within the MNE (Klueter & Monteiro, 2017). As these roles routinely traverse unfamiliar and evolving territories, they experience intense contextual demands (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Kane & Levina, 2017). This was prominent in RANCO (Business Development Managers) and CRESTCO (European Sales Manager). These demands trigger severe physical exhaustion, psychological pressure and personal conflict. Yet individuals in these roles can deploy active-functional coping behaviors, such as direct action, positive framing and support-seeking, that reduce demand intensity and mitigate adverse effects. While passive coping may surface, such as loyalty-based acceptance of demands, initial effects are tempered when paired with active responses. Coping effectively in these roles enables individuals to create strategic value for the MNE, where collective learning about complex cultures or evolving institutional conditions facilitates the MNE's contextual adjustment when operating in unfamiliar markets that resist standardization.

Global orchestrator roles are the most intense and expose individuals to severe adverse effects. Characterized by significant structural and spatial variability, these roles combine wide adaptive breadth with extensive integrative scope. They involve a dynamic mobility cadence, with frequent sporadic trips over long distances and extended periods. This variability arises from continuously adapting to diverse contextual idiosyncrasies while integrating exchanges within, across, and outside the MNE. Individuals face intense demands in brokering ties between internal and external stakeholders, translating locally embedded knowledge across functions, units, and markets, while learning to adapt to cultural, ethical, and institutional unpredictability. Consequently, these roles generate severe adverse effects through physical exhaustion, psychological pressure, and personal conflict. Functioning effectively over time is challenging, as individuals are expected to operate in a state of perpetual motion. While active coping behaviors can reduce demands, significant variability can overwhelm individuals, leading some to resort to behaviors of escapism, such as resignation. This pattern was observed among several interviewees. Conversely, several other individuals who experienced intense demands and severe adversity (Director of Supply Planning STEERCO; Sales & Marketing Manager CRESTCO; Global Manager RANCO) were effectively coping, primarily through a combination of active coping behaviors. However, maintaining this balance over time may be precarious, and individuals may shift toward dysfunctional coping, potentially culminating in

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extreme forms of escapism. Coping effectively in these roles creates strategic value for the MNE across multiple boundaries. We saw examples of this in which active coping behaviors enabled strategic alignment across the MNE network, the recombination of dispersed knowledge for innovation, and adaptation to unfamiliar markets with complex conditions.

Notably, these roles are not static, and individuals may move between them as their structural and spatial dimensions evolve. As the integrative scope or adaptive breadth of a role expands, so too will its mobility cadence, intensifying demands and exacerbating effects. It is critical that mobile global boundary spanners respond to such increases in scope or breadth with active coping behaviors to sustain their strategic contributions to the MNE. Having sufficient role autonomy, collaborative knowledge exchange forums and a supportive culture for collective learning can enable these strategic contributions. Accordingly, our typology extends current understanding of global boundary spanning complexity (Liu et al., 2025), equipping firms to recognize and anticipate its darker side.

6 | THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

In addressing how a mobile global boundary spanner experiences and copes with the demands of navigating multiple boundaries, our study makes two theoretical contributions to global strategy literature. First, we extend prior research on the micro-perspective of boundary spanning in MNEs by showing that temporary colocation is a valuable boundary spanning modality, yet one that imposes substantial demands and adverse effects. Second, we advance emerging work on the dark side of boundary spanning by disentangling the various coping behaviors individuals employ in response. These contributions are detailed below.

Our first contribution advances research on the micro-level perspective of boundary spanning in MNEs by foregrounding the lived experience of mobile global boundary spanners who traverse multiple organizational and geographical boundaries (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Birkinshaw et al., 2017; Minbaeva & Santangelo, 2018; Pedersen et al., 2019). Specifically, we show that temporary colocation serves as a modality through which mobile global boundary spanners negotiate diverse and overlapping boundaries. Drawing on ideas from geographic flexibility (Chai & Freeman, 2019; Choudhury, 2022), we highlight colocated spaces, created through frequent cross-border moves, as indispensable means of establishing the physical copresence and social proximity required to endure the friction, novelty and ambiguity inherent in cross-boundary exchanges (Mäkelä et al., 2019). By repeatedly creating, leveraging, and transitioning among temporary, colocated spaces, mobile global boundary spanners offer a dynamic and agile way to interpret a diversity and multiplicity of collaborative exchanges across distances. Our findings stand in contrast to prior work on the stationary and rigid boundary spanning of expatriates, whose activities are characterized by prolonged colocation at a dyadic organizational (HQ-subsidiary) and geographical (home-host) boundary (Johnson & Duxbury, 2010; Liu & Meyer, 2020; Reiche, 2011).

Our findings underscore the strenuous nature of this boundary spanning modality. Specifically, we identify the collection of relational, informational and contextual demands that arise from habitually connecting diverse actors, sourcing dispersed knowledge and absorbing multilocal differences. We empirically evidence that grappling with these demands leads to a cascade of negative consequences, including physical exhaustion, psychological strain, and personal conflict. Enriching research on the adverse effects of boundary spanning (Jensen et al., 2013; Schotter, 2021; Song et al., 2023), we unpack how these effects fluctuate depending

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on variation in the micro-level dimensions (structural and spatial) of a mobile global boundary spanner's role. These insights advance a mobility-centered view of global boundary spanning in MNEs (Castellani et al., 2022; Minbaeva et al., 2025), showing that roles with a dynamic mobility cadence will exacerbate this experience. By theorizing the complexity and variability inherent in the role of a mobile global boundary spanner, our study emphasizes the critical need for MNEs to define and calibrate their structural and spatial parameters.

Second, we make a valuable contribution to research on the dark side of global boundary spanning (Liu et al., 2025; Zhao & Anand, 2013), by integrating insights from coping theory (Herman & Tetrick, 2009; Srivastava & Tang, 2015) with work on the adverse effects of boundary spanning (Marrone et al., 2007; Rigopoulou et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2019). Combining these bodies of work, our findings highlight how individuals attempt to cope with the complexity, intensity, and variability of negotiating multiple intersecting boundaries. Specifically, we elucidate that individuals employ a range of coping responses to shape demand intensity and regulate adverse effects. Our findings reveal that active coping behaviors, such as direct action, positive framing, and support-seeking (Hajro et al., 2019; Ito & Brotheridge, 2003), facilitate functional boundary spanning by tempering the demands and effects of their integrative and adaptive work (Weiss & Zacher, 2025).

Importantly, our study extends microfoundations research on global boundary spanning by unraveling how individual coping behaviors have strategic implications for the MNE. Specifically, we highlight that active coping behaviors enable mobile global boundary spanners to generate strategic value through network coordination, knowledge mobilization, and contextual adjustment across multiple boundaries. Critically, these relationships are not one-to-one; instead, each coping behavior can facilitate all three strategic contributions. Active coping behaviors are therefore strategically consequential for the MNE, as they foster intra-firm alignment among diverse units, translate rich knowledge into innovation, and sustain collective learning across markets that resist standardization.

We also identify specific enabling conditions that underpin the translation of coping behaviors into strategic contributions. These include role autonomy in organizing cross-border engagement, collaborative forums for knowledge exchange and a supportive culture for collective learning. Notably, these conditions were largely informal, functioning in the absence of explicit mobility policies, advanced knowledge systems or systematic training and support. These insights respond to calls for empirical work on the microfoundations of global strategy (Santangelo et al., 2025) by identifying the mechanisms and enabling conditions through which mobile global boundary spanners' coping behaviors generate strategic value for the MNE.

In contrast, we find that relying on passive coping, which involves behaviors aimed at avoiding or ignoring demands, in response to boundary spanning demands may trigger a dysfunctional cycle that intensifies demands and exacerbates adverse effects (Srivastava & Tang, 2015). For instance, continually normalizing demands can desensitize individuals to escalating risks, prompting self-blame or invoking a sense of loyalty to the company, thereby exacerbating adverse effects. At its extreme, individuals may resort to escapism, cognitively disengage, or resign from their boundary spanning roles (Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005; Tlaiss, 2024). This, in turn, may undermine the strategic value of mobile global boundary spanners by hindering connectedness, restricting knowledge flows, and limiting local learning. These insights highlight how the dynamic interplay among demands, adverse effects, and coping behaviors can shape an individual's boundary spanning.

Our typology also offers an important contribution to global strategy research. Building on work that highlights the integrative and adaptive functions of boundary spanning across

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organizational and geographical boundaries (Mäkelä et al., 2019; Santistevan, 2022), the typology conceptualizes how variation in the structural and spatial dimensions of a role differentially shapes the strategic contributions of mobile global boundary spanners. The typology cautions that roles with significant structural and spatial variability are highly arduous, potentially unworkable and compel individuals to operate in a state of perpetual motion. These insights extend Schotter et al.'s (2017) "rubber band" analogy by showing how firms can harness the spanning "elasticity" of global boundary spanners, but repeatedly stretching across multiple boundaries becomes a tightrope balancing act.

7 | PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Our study has implications for how MNEs can strategically manage the demands faced by mobile global boundary spanners, particularly given the value they offer. To enhance coordination across the MNE, firms should prioritize and invest in boundary spanning talent with strong networking skills. This could involve ambassador programs where recognized boundary spanners are designated to onboard and mentor high-potential talent. Firms should also be strategic about complementing unrealistic travel schedules with advanced technologies such as holographic tools or digital twins. These tools could be dedicated to deepening collaboration among teams of boundary spanners who may benefit from augmented reality. To foster coordination beyond the firm, dedicated sensing trips could be routinized to strategically important subsidiaries or markets, with walkabouts organized to local regulators, suppliers, or industry bodies.

To improve knowledge mobilization, MNEs would benefit from a unified knowledge platform that enables individuals to capture and transfer tacit knowledge from trips. To incentivize sharing, firms could offer bonuses or advancement tied to the extraction of local knowledge that leads to a global best practice. Moreover, using artificial intelligence (AI) to build digital twins of global value chains may empower boundary spanners with the visibility to match local problems to global solutions. Rather than becoming functional or location specialists, firms can encourage boundary spanners to build stocks of general human capital, so their knowledge is globally applicable.

To facilitate adaptation, international HR leaders play an important supporting role. Mobile global boundary spanners should be afforded the same extensive support as expatriates, including cross-cultural training, language provision, and updates on political situations, especially in turbulent contexts. Each trip could have an explicit 'local insights' playbook that identifies key learnings for relaying to others entering that market, without overburdening individuals with additional reporting. Global mobility functions should seek to design boundary spanning roles with clear structural and spatial parameters. Allowing boundary spanners to work from anywhere enables geographical flexibility. Providing hot-desking options across the firm, or registering them as global remote workers, could increase satisfaction and loyalty.

8 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We acknowledge that this study has limitations, but we see these as opportunities for future research. First, our data were collected in a pre-pandemic context, so the importance of digital tools for boundary spanning was not a prevalent theme. We encourage others to explore global boundary spanning through digital modalities or examine how individuals leverage advanced

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technologies to bolster temporary colocation. Our typology can serve as a conceptual guide for research on the strategic value of boundary spanning among global remote workers or digital nomads.

Second, it was not our intention to explicitly analyze how gender variance impacted the demands faced or the coping responses deployed. While we identified differences, they were minor. Others could build on our work through an intersectionality lens to explore how gender, combined with issues of ethnicity, class, or religion, might shape boundary spanning experiences. Third, language was not a prominent challenge in our findings. Our sample was monolingual, with English as the lingua franca. Future studies could examine how inter-lingual translation influences the flow of sticky knowledge across contextual boundaries (Gutierrez-Huerter et al., 2020).

Finally, scholars could use our typology to theorize other types of coping responses available to global boundary spanners and their constructive or destructive effects. Others could use a role overload perspective to examine which coping behaviors trigger coordination costs or collaboration failures. Frameworks like Hirschman's (1970) "exit-voice loyalty" may also be useful for exploring satisfaction or dissatisfaction associated with demanding boundary spanning work. We encourage global HR scholars to assess how the strategic value of mobile global boundary spanners can be incentivized and rewarded, increasing their loyalty and offsetting any exit threat.

In conclusion, while our work reveals the demanding experiences of mobile global boundary spanners, we also provide a roadmap for understanding how these individuals can actively mitigate potentially deleterious effects. By highlighting how to cope with the dark side of global boundary spanning, our paper alters the way we think about how MNE managers can create strategic value in a world that is increasingly separated by discrete boundaries.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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