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# Discretion as a double-edged sword in global work:

# The perils of international business travel


## ABSTRACT

International business travelers (IBTs) have become omnipresent in multinational enterprises, and yet we know little on how they manage the inherent complexities of their global work. Through a qualitative research design, our study reveals a perturbing job demands-resources mismatch faced by these individuals. IBTs are afforded substantial discretion with respect to how they carry out their global work and this discretion enables engagement in a series of job crafting actions. The job crafting actions we identify in this study inadvertently intensified rather than eased the demands-resources mismatch that IBTs confronted. Our study advances job crafting theory through unpacking the potentially dysfunctional nature of job crafting in a global work context. In doing so, we challenge much of the extant literature which tends to overwhelmingly focus on the positive impact of job crafting actions. Our findings lead us to call for greater organizational oversight and configuration of support structures for IBTs.



**KEYWORDS**

Global work; international business travel; global mobility; job crafting; multinational enterprise

## PRACTITIONER NOTES

1. What is currently known about the subject matter:

- International business travelers (IBTs) play a key boundary spanning role in global firms.
- Ensuring IBTs' motivation and retention is of critical importance to organizations.
- IBTs face significant demands when engaged in global work.
- There is a lack of formalized policies and procedures for flexible global working arrangements.

2. What the paper adds to this:

- It unpacks how IBTs manage the complexity of their global work.
- It facilitates an understanding of the supports available to IBTs.
- It shows how IBTs' demands are intensified by an inadequate support infrastructure.
- It argues that discretion can be a double-edged sword for IBTs – a motivational factor and a threat.

3. What are the implications for practitioners:

- Organizations need to more critically evaluate the need for frequent international business travel.
- Organizations need to consider the aptness of job design for roles that require substantial international business travel to alleviate the significant demands faced.
- Organizations should consider enacting policies around flexible global working arrangements.
- HR functions need to take a meaningful role in providing a greater support infrastructure for IBTs.

## INTRODUCTION

Global work is an essential aspect of multinational enterprises (MNEs) with significant benefits derived, ranging from the expansion of business operations to the strategic use of resources and access to specialized talent (Reiche, Lee & Allen, 2019). This work is highly complex to perform given it involves operating across cultural, linguistic, spatial, and temporal distances (Shaffer et al., 2016) while balancing global and local pressures from contradictory institutional environments (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann, 2020). Global work research thus far has focused heavily on traditional long-term expatriation or self-initiated expatriation (Kraimer, Bolino & Mead, 2016). Literature has long highlighted the challenges and demands faced when embarking on these international assignments, along with the identification of enabling processes and support systems that organizations should design and construct (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen & Bolino, 2012).

Our understanding and knowledge of more flexible global working arrangements, like international business travelers (IBTs), is at a much earlier stage (Jooss, McDonnell & Conroy, 2020). IBTs refer to employees 'who take multiple short international business trips to various locations without accompanying family members', generally lasting between one and three weeks (Shaffer et al., 2012: 1287), meaning that extensive traveling is an essential aspect of their work. Over recent decades, IBTs have become an especially prevalent way to carry out global work in MNEs (Boeh & Beamish, 2012; Deloitte, 2019). Yet, their sheer scale is difficult to ascertain owing to these individuals tending to fall outside organizational reporting systems, and the formalized policies and procedures that are assembled for expatriates (Suutari, Brewster, Riusala & Syrjäkari, 2013).

Some studies refer to the positive individual impacts for IBTs such as exposure to new destinations and cultures, personal growth, learning and development, and career advancement (Dimitrova, 2020; Westman, Etzion & Chen, 2009). Further, Andresen and Bergdolt (2019) point to the potential development of a global mindset, while Demel and Mayrhofer (2010: 305) speak about enhanced psychological well-being through IBTs experiencing 'enjoyment and fun'. Existing research has, however, been more focused on the negative implications of global work and the potentially detrimental effects for individuals engaging in this type of work (e.g., Mäkelä, Bergbom, Tanskanen & Kinnunen, 2014; Park, Chen, Mathur & Wyatt, 2019; Saarenpää, 2018). For example, negative physical health outcomes (Patel,

2011), stress and fatigue (Mäkelä & Kinnunen, 2018), sleeping problems (Mäkelä et al., 2014), role conflicts (Shaffer et al., 2016), and sensory overload (Ramsey, 2013) have all been highlighted. Furthermore, significant time spent away from home, emotional exhaustion, and role blurring have been found to lead to increased work-family conflict and negative impacts on kinships and friendships (Cohen & Gössling, 2015; Saarenpää, 2018). Ultimately, engaging in their global work presents IBTs with significant demands characterized by high physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and personal adversity (Shaffer et al., 2012).

Less clear and considered in the literature is how IBTs confront, navigate and manage the multi-dimensional demands inherent in their global work (Reiche et al., 2019), as well as how they may be supported in this process. This knowledge lacuna is important to redress to facilitate an understanding of the organizational and self-generated supports that assist IBTs in undertaking, motivating, and performing global work. Given the important boundary spanning dimension of their global work (Conroy, McDonnell & Jooss, 2020), there is much importance placed on ensuring that such individuals remain motivated and are retained by organizations (Dimitrova, 2020; Welch, Welch & Worm, 2007). This leads us to our overarching research question of interest, namely, *how do IBTs manage the complexity of their global work?*

We address this research question through a qualitative methodology involving in-depth interviews with 36 IBTs stemming from four MNEs in the medical devices industry. In this exploratory study, our theoretical framing – job crafting – was *not* identified *a priori* but emerged from the data analysis process (Grodal, Anteby & Holm, 2020; Mueller, 2018). Consequently, rather than testing theory we devised job crafting as a framework to 'make sense' of our data (Weick, 1995) and to understand and explain how IBTs' manage their global work. The primary contributions of this study are twofold. First, we elucidate the highly exhaustive and constraining nature of IBTs' global work by detailing a significant mismatch between the demands faced and the resources provided. Specifically, we detail how the intensive conditions that this global work creates are experienced through substantial physical, psychological, and social demands. These demands are in turn inflamed by an inadequate organizational infrastructure in the form of limited structural and social supports. Noteworthy in our study is how we unpack the multifaceted and somewhat evasive nature of IBTs' global work. Many of the demands are more implicit in nature with destructive consequences that are not immediately recognized by either the involved party or wider organizational actors, intensifying the physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and non-work disruption for IBTs (Shaffer

et al., 2012). While the work is often viewed through a positively challenging and stimulating lens, concerns emerge over the sustainability of such frequent international travel. These insights can advance the way we think about the structure and design of IBTs' global work (Reiche et al., 2019), in that the extensive scope, ambiguous tasks, and limited resources produce a work setting that is increasingly precarious for individuals to engage in, and untenable for organizations to maintain. With the continued disruption of COVID-19, a potentially positive outcome may be a more strategic consideration of what is essential business travel and what activities can be enabled through more virtual means.

The paper's second contribution is that we expand the reach of job crafting theory from domestic focused roles to the global work context. In illuminating how IBTs struggle to resolve the discrepancies between the demands of global work and the supports available, we recognize that such individuals may respond differently. This may see them become active 'crafters' of their job (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), especially given the idiosyncratic and undefined nature of their global work and the varied and tacit demands involved (Shaffer et al., 2012). Job crafting theory has overwhelmingly focused on the positive implications for workers (Lee & Lee, 2018; Meijerink, Bos-Nehles & De Leede, 2018). We extend this literature by identifying how the significant amount of discretion afforded to IBTs may unintendedly intensify the demands-resources mismatch inherent in carrying out their global work. There is much latitude to decide upon and 'craft' many aspects around how their work is carried out, i.e., the method, scheduling, and pace of work. On the one hand, this produces positive effects such as fostering intrinsic motivation and self-development. On the other hand, it intensifies the demands faced. Consequently, the high discretion provided sees IBTs served with a double-edged sword or what we refer to as a 'discretion paradox'. As such, we change how job crafting has been predominantly viewed by articulating its potentially dysfunctional nature for global workers.

## THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Job crafting has been defined as the changes individuals make in the boundaries of their work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). This is a self-driven process and motivated by one's needs and preferences that involves individuals shaping their job (Berg, Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2010) without changing the core of their work (Bruning & Campion, 2018). While employers lead work design as typified in the job

description (Humphrey, Nahrgang & Morgeson, 2007), it is difficult for organizations to design jobs that fit the exclusive needs of all individual workers (Grant & Parker, 2009). Therefore, individuals' involvement in shaping a job, which considers their idiosyncratic characteristics and preferences, is increasingly viewed as crucial (Tims, Bakker & Derks, 2012). The process of job crafting – encompassing motives, forms, and consequences of job crafting (Lazazzara, Tims & De Gennaro, 2020) – may not even be noticeable to management (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Job crafting *motives* represent the starting point of the process and relate to an individual's motivation to shape their job in a manner they see best fit (Lazazzara et al., 2020). These crafting motives can be twofold. First, *proactive motives* refer to employees initiating the crafting process to reach goals, find meaningful work, and improve performance (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Second, *reactive motives* relate to the need to craft a job to cope with the adversity, complexity, and pressures of one's work (Berg et al., 2010; Lazazzara et al., 2020). Particularly in volatile, complex, and ambiguous work contexts, individuals may be revealing reactive motives for job crafting in an effort to alleviate some of the strains of their work (Grant, Fried, Parker & Frese, 2010).

In operationalizing job crafting, we adopt Tims et al.'s (2012) approach that uses the *job demands-resources (JD-R) model* (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001). *Job demands* refer to 'negatively valued physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or psychological effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs'; while *job resources* are 'positively valued physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that are functional in achieving work goals, reduce job demands, or stimulate personal growth and development' (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014: 56). According to Tims et al. (2012), individuals may actively make changes to their job to reduce hindering demands, increase positive challenges, and expand and enrich resources. In this sense, individuals may craft their jobs in a way that both increases and decreases job demands (Tims et al., 2012). The reality in complex or challenging roles is likely to be that there are real tradeoffs in how one crafts their job. While seemingly a contradiction, this recognizes that some demands may be a hindrance and add stress, while others actually provide positive challenges. Hindering demands (e.g., unfavorable working conditions, role conflicts) are experienced as overwhelming by individuals, whereas positive challenges stimulate individuals to develop and attain more difficult goals (e.g., taking on additional projects; seeking more complex tasks) (Schaufeli

& Taris, 2014). Increasing structural (e.g., information, policies) and social (e.g., relationships, networks) resources may serve as a motivational factor that enables individuals to manage their job more effectively (Tims et al., 2012), in addition to buffering undesired work outcomes like stress (Bakker, Demerouti & Euwema, 2005).

The JD-R operationalization is closely aligned with two broad job crafting *forms* (Bruning & Campion, 2018; Lazazzara et al., 2020; Zhang & Parker, 2018): *Avoidance crafting* is a general sensitivity toward sidestepping negative or undesirable stimuli, and thus relates to efforts to decrease hindering demands; *approach crafting* is directed towards improving the work situation and solving problems, and thus relates to efforts to increase positive challenges and supporting resources (Lazazzara et al., 2020). It has been reasoned that particularly in a constraining context (i.e., low social support and a high-pressure environment) (Lazazzara et al., 2020), individuals may seek to protect their well-being by avoiding demands and by approaching resources which can subsequently lead to stronger performance outcomes (Bakker et al., 2020). The complex and wide-ranging nature of global work can potentially be a highly motivating, thriving, and rewarding context (Dimitrova, 2020), but is not without significant strains (Burkholder, Joines, Cunningham-Hill & Xu, 2010). While organizational support can enhance how global work is experienced (Caligiuri et al., 2020), job crafting may be used by individuals in an attempt to manage any significant demands.

It is argued that individuals can optimize their person-job fit through job crafting, and consequently experience their work as meaningful (Tims, Bakker & Derks, 2016). There is burgeoning evidence supporting *positive* individual and organizational level job crafting *consequences* such as alignment with expectations, fulfilment of personal identity, enjoyment, personal growth, engagement, resilience, well-being, and performance (Bakker et al., 2020). Some have noted that job crafting may conceivably lead to unintended *negative* job crafting consequences for organizations (Bruning & Campion, 2018; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), for example, dysfunctional effects on job proficiency and citizenship behavior (Dierdorff & Jensen, 2018). There is, however, an almost total absence of research that examines the potential dysfunctional nature of job crafting for individual workers.

In our study, we are particularly interested in the role of *discretion* as part of job crafting. We define discretion as 'latitude of action or control over how one does one's work' (Caza, 2012: 144). For example, discretion might relate to the level of energy that a person devotes to one's work, including the number of long and arduous hours someone chooses to work. Discretion may also relate to how work is done, including practices, pace, and scheduling of work (Caza, 2012). As we know that organizations appear to have limited strategic oversight over IBTs (Jooss et al., 2020), it may be likely that these individuals use the latitude or discretion this affords to proactively engage in job crafting (e.g., to achieve career ambitions), or to reactively engage in job crafting (e.g., to manage the complexities and demands of their global work) (Shaffer et al., 2012).

The job crafting literature tends to describe a positive relationship between discretion and job crafting (Lazazzara et al., 2020) which treats it as an opportunity to make changes based on one's own abilities and needs (Tims, Bakker & Derks, 2013). For example, Lazazzara et al.'s (2020) review paper established that quantitative studies mainly consider discretion as positively related to approach crafting (i.e., increasing structural and social resources and increasing positive challenges) but unrelated to avoidance crafting (i.e., decreasing hindering demands). Similarly, Rudolph, Katz, Lavigne, and Zacher (2017) found that discretion was positively related to job crafting actions – except for decreasing hindering demands. They conclude calling for future research to explore why high levels of discretion might prevent individuals from decreasing hindering demands (Rudolph et al., 2017).

## METHOD

The paper employed a qualitative research design which enabled us to explore the complexity of IBTs' global work. We were interested in speaking with IBTs with demanding travel requirements to hear their lived experiences. The participants were employed across four organizations in the medical devices industry in Ireland which is particularly apposite given it is a highly globalised context in respect to country and industry. As a small open economy Ireland is very reliant on foreign investment which sees it as a gateway to Europe and beyond for foreign MNEs, with many subsidiaries having regional or global responsibilities. This ensures that Ireland often acts as a conduit for MNEs in managing other subsidiaries globally, which increases the likelihood that managers must travel regularly. The organizations operated in a highly

knowledge-based industry ranging from medical surgery to orthopaedics, neurotechnology, diagnostics, and therapies. Global travel was required for a range of activities including building internal and external relationships, knowledge acquisition and transfer, research and innovation, problem solving, and business development. Rather than observing contrasting patterns across organizations, we focused on clarification, replication, and extension of emergent findings (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) at the individual level of analysis – IBTs. This form of replication logic enhances the validity and sharpens the focus of relationships between constructs and the underlying reasons of why these relationships exist (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Data were gathered through in-depth, face-to-face (except two conducted virtually) interviews with 36 highly mobile managers (see Table 1 for interviewee profiles). Personal contacts were used as gatekeepers to identify relevant participants, with some snowball sampling taking place subsequently. Interviewees worked across various functions and traveled for many reasons such as coordinating global teams, project work, attending strategic meetings, participating in global conferences, sourcing and training distributors, or selling products. Our questions focused on understanding the nature of global work in terms of formal oversight or discretion regarding travel and the structures or processes in place in firms. We asked about IBTs' experiences of global travel, the demands they encountered, and the supports received. We concentrated on explicit examples of aspects or events during travel that were viewed as beneficial or challenging (Van Manen, 2016). Follow-up probes helped stimulate further reflections on the physical, psychological, and social effects of their work. The interviews were conducted between July 2018 and April 2019, lasting on average 60 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

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Insert Table 1 here
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An abductive analytical approach was employed which enabled us to understand concepts and motives while utilizing the interviewees' language and concomitantly iterating back and forth between the data and theoretical constructs (Mueller, 2018). The analysis was not a linear process but represented a discussion of generated themes and their alignment to the literature. Specifically, the data analysis process involved four steps (see Table 2 for the coding structure). First, we identified simple, lower-level themes (first order codes) based on the language used by the interviewees. The appropriateness of these codes was considered through detailed co-author discussion, leading to inter-coder reliability. Second, we identified

common broader themes across these initial codes, leading us to several second order codes, which were interpreted and informed by theoretical insights (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). In developing these second order codes we identified *the physical, psychological,* and *social demands* as well as the *structural* and *social resources*, or lack thereof, that intensified IBTs' global work. Third, the combined demands and resources identified in our second order codes laid the theoretical foundations for our aggregate dimensions *global work intensity* and *resource availability*. Fourth, we theorized our findings by way of introducing job crafting *actions*. Importantly, this theoretical framing was *not* identified *a priori* but was generated from the data analysis process. This allowed us to tell a story based on the data, yet underpinned with theoretical arguments (Grodal et al., 2020). Our analysis revealed that a high degree of discretion when dealing with the demands-resources mismatch allowed IBTs to engage in crafting actions. Reflecting on this 'intuitive' explanation (Simon, 1973), we identified job crafting theory as a theoretical frame to explain IBTs' actions. Specifically, we operationalized job crafting (Tims et al., 2012) with the JD-R model (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). This meant that job crafting actions were taken in an effort to manage the demands and resources inherent in IBTs' global work (Tims et al., 2012). Table 2, in particular, supported the theorization of our findings by making sense of and providing order to our rich data (Weick, 1995). This table helped us to examine our exploratory and intuitive insights more systematically, laying out patterns around crafting actions (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021).

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Insert Table 2 here

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## FINDINGS

IBTs' roles were extremely amorphous in nature and scope due to their ill-defined boundaries. A travel requirement of a minimum of 25 per cent of one's time was explicitly stated in most interviewee' contracts. Some, however, traveled significantly more; up to 75 per cent. While contractually stipulated, individuals crafted their global work in different ways, justifying their extensive travel with the need for face-to-face interaction with colleagues, customers, and suppliers, making it *just part and parcel of the job* (Director Supply Planning, STEERCO). Most interviewees illustrated that they had significant discretion in organizing their global work. While *certain business meetings are scheduled in the calendar,* most travel plans were *largely discretionary*

(R&D Director, STEERCO) and some interviewees stated that they had *complete discretion* (Global Manager, CRESTCO) in managing their global work.

> *There is nobody kind of over your shoulders. No one tells me I have to go, but I know, if I do not go to that quarterly meeting, my team is not represented and [the subsidiary] is not represented, so it is kind of your own decision, but that is how you build up the relationships and credibility* (Director of Supply Planning, STEERCO).

This discretion was vividly appreciated and embraced, but it also meant a lack of organizational oversight and travel was often added to IBTs' main responsibilities without due consideration of the proliferating demands it created. IBTs put significant pressure on themselves to increase their travel in fear of missing out on important information or losing opportunities, which led to a more intensive work context. Our findings are structured around our two aggregate dimensions (global work intensity and resource availability) and the two accompanying job crafting forms and actions (approach crafting reducing hindering demands and avoidance crafting increasing structural and social resources).

**Global Work Intensity**

Our data clearly intimates that international business travel adds substantially to the creation of an intensive work environment due to high physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and non-work disruption that can lead to severe strain and negative health outcomes on the individual.

**Physical mobility.** Frequent travel was linked to substantial physical demands which occurred not only during the process of travel, but also while in a host country and back home. It changed one's circadian rhythm with early mornings and late evenings at airports and multiple time zone transitions. Interviewees stated they *find it hard* (Director Supply Planning, STEERCO) due to the *constant sitting* and *lack of exercise* which means *you definitely get run down and the system gets a bit stretched* (HR Manager, CRESTCO). Many argued that it was difficult to exercise given the full schedules and sometimes unknown or even unsafe environments. Being on a business trip also had a negative impact on the choice of food and drink consumption (e.g., less nutritious, more alcohol). Eating out and at irregular times was also quite common, for example, *having breakfast at 4am before you go on a flight* (European Sales Manager, CRESTCO).

Many referred to sleeping problems and tiredness while in the host country and upon returning home. References were made to *adrenalin keeping you going* (Director Supply Planning, STEERCO) and feeling

*like a zombie* (Senior R&D Manager, STEERCO). References were also made to health implications such as *chest and sinus infections* (Senior Engineer Manufacturing, STEERCO).

**Cognitive flexibility.** Psychological demands of global work included performance pressures, excessive workloads, and evening commitments in the host country, while firefighting in the home country. Interviewees highlighted the high expectations set by management, and outlined the *very, very hard-working* culture (Director Supply Planning, STEERCO) *knowing it is more demanding* (Regional Benefits Director, TRONCO). Oftentimes, IBTs' workday got extended because of socializing with colleagues after work in the host country – a demand viewed as commonplace and perceived as an implicit normalization by many. Although not mandated, interviewees viewed these social events as *part of their role* and essential to the success of the business trip. For example, Director Global Regulatory Affairs, CRESTCO explained that dinner invitations were common, and *as a Director... I have to do those.* Similarly, Medical Advisor, CRESTCO asserted that *you cannot avoid dinner* as it was a critical way to build relationships *especially with the local guys.* Such activities required individuals to *always be presentable, … look professional, and play the part* (Global Benefits Manager, TRONCO). IBTs were conscious that they needed to be cognitively alert as they were constantly 'in the spotlight', leading to *exhausting* and *stressful* experiences:

> *You are here for a purpose and you are a visitor, so you act like a visitor. So, when I go, I would expect that I would be always happy, always friendly, do not show my frustration or jet lag, because I would not want a visitor coming to me like that* (Global Benefits Manager, TRONCO).

While traveling, work in the home country had to still be managed. Technology enabled one to stay in touch with home country colleagues, but it also meant that *you are never disconnected* (Sales and Marketing Manager, CRESTCO), constantly *firefighting the inbox* (European Sales Manager, CRESTCO). It appeared that it was *kind of expected,* that you *keep doing your* [home] *work* (Global Business Manager, RANCO). These dual commitments stretched IBTs cognitively and were described as hindering their mental capacity as *things get bogged down in the more operational stuff rather than the things that really add value* (HR Manager EMEA, CRESTCO).

Context-driven psychological demands included managing increased complexity due to cultural and institutional differences between the home and host countries, overcoming language barriers, avoiding risks and hazards, and dealing with corruption and harassment. Interviewees stated that in markets with

high cultural distance to the home country, being aware of the appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication led to additional stress and pressure; IBTs were *just extra sensitive not to say the wrong thing* (Director Supply Planning, STEERCO). Experiences in potentially dangerous locations also led to increased stress levels among some IBTs (VP Total Rewards Operations, TRONCO).

**Non-work disruption.** Global work often included travel at short notice and on weekends which led to social demands such as work-home conflict and work-life balance concerns. Managing family commitments was *especially difficult* for young mothers and dual career couples (R&D Director, STEERCO); balancing *professional objectives and ambitions* was challenging and *stressful* (HR Manager EMEA, CRESTCO), while being away as a parent led to *traveler's guilt* (Program Manager, STEERCO). Interviewees also stated that on return they *would be tired, just getting over the jet lag,* and subsequently *missing out on the social aspects of life* leading to frustration among family and friends (Business Development Analyst, RANCO).

**Avoidance Crafting: Reducing Hindering Demands**

In an effort to address the above outlined aspects of global work intensity, IBTs used the discretion bestowed on them to engage in crafting actions. IBTs took it upon themselves to find ways to manage some of the most problematic demands faced in their global work. To decrease some of the physical demands, which were normalized by IBTs, some noted how they used the only option available to them – to medicate themselves. This was a decision taken without informing management; *I had to go to my doctor and get sleeping tablets for 10 days to just get myself back into… my body clock was just all over the place* (Senior Engineer Manufacturing, STEERCO). Other IBTs tried to reduce some of the physical demands by avoiding business events with extensive social commitments.

> *There is always going for dinner, there is always maybe a couple of drinks and it is fine but over time you can get fairly sick of eating out all the time and the lack of exercise and more eating than anything. But really, I suppose that is up to the individual person to control as much as you can* (Project Manager, STEERCO).

Most interviewees yielded that the heavy workload and full schedule were part of their role stating that *you cannot do this job without 100 per cent, because it will find you out so quickly* and it is a *lifestyle choice* (Global Manager, RANCO). Working times were quite *blurry* as many stated that they would work during a flight, first thing in the morning before or during breakfast, or late evenings in the hotel after meetings and before

bed. However, this often appeared to be the IBTs' choice in that they crafted the pace and timing of their global work in a way that condensed the business trip; IBTs *would rather work twice as hard than stay there twice as long* (Senior Engineer Manufacturing, STEERCO). In doing so, IBTs were unintendedly reinforcing the psychological demands of their global work by failing to challenge the pressurized culture that persisted around global travel and taking all the pressure on oneself. This led to working extremely long days with full schedules. Managing these psychological demands was left to the individual traveler's discretion. While participants reported *more of a focus on health and well-being now in general* in organizations (Business Development Executive, RANCO), it appeared to be overlooked in the context of global work.

The significant social demands, particularly for those with children, saw IBTs craft the pace and scheduling of their work in a way that exerted further pressure *to get in and out* (Director Global Regulatory Affairs, CRESTCO) *as quick as* [they] *can* (Director Supply Planning, STEERCO). For short-distance travel, early morning and late evening flights were preferred *instead of staying in the hotel* for an additional night even though organizations would have accommodated individuals who had to balance what they missed at home (Director Supply Planning, STEERCO). For long-distance travel, many IBTs decided to travel on weekends to *get as much as you can out of the trip* (Manager Advanced Quality, STEERCO). Thus, IBTs often used their discretion in a way that intensified rather than alleviated the demands of their global work:

> *I would always travel on a weekend day to maximize my time and we do not get benefits for that; it is just the expectation. I would then return on Friday nights from Europe or Saturday morning if more global, and back in work Monday morning* (Senior Recruitment Consultant, RANCO).

**Resource Availability**

Interviewees reported a lack of formalized resources to help in offsetting demands that the global work dimension of their roles brought. Where supports were provided by organizations, these were generally informal, ad-hoc, and inconsistent. IBTs were therefore reliant on their agency in crafting their work in a way that increased resources, alongside the limited provisions from their organizations which we categorize as structural and social supports.

**Structural support.** IBTs stated that they had *very little dealings with* (Director Supply Planning, STEERCO) and were largely *disconnected* from HR (VP Total Rewards Operations, TRONCO). Where links

existed, these were at an *administrative level* (HR Manager EMEA, CRESTCO) or in relation to basic *health and safety* components, for example, to provide *vaccines* (HR Generalist 1, CRESTCO). The mobility department, which *had no ties to HR,* was only involved *when it comes to relocation assignments* (Senior R&D Director, STEERCO) but had no role in international travel. Travel departments were limited in scope, primarily booking *flights, travel, hotels, etc.* (Manager, Advanced Quality, STEERCO).

Organizational policies around air travel existed in three of the four case firms. At RANCO, all flights were booked in economy class, which was challenging on long-haul routes, for example, *Australia,* could *be a torture, that is a long way* (Regional Sales Manager, RANCO). The other firms had a corporate flight policy allowing for business travel; however, this was considered implicit and inconsistently applied. For example, Program Manager, STEERCO stated that their department *does not* [fly business] *at all because there is just so much travel.* Similarly, Director Supply Planning, STEERCO criticized the inconsistency in the application of the corporate flight policy, and while it *looks very black and white* on paper, in reality, it *depends on your manager, your budget.*

Policies around flexible working were either not developed or poorly implemented. Instead, organizations provided high compensation packages. In some cases, [for] *travel, the bonuses are eye wateringly huge, I mean massive* (Global Manager, RANCO), and engaging in travel was viewed as *laying the path* for future promotions (Program Manager, STEERCO). However, the focus on monetary rewards was not always preferred by IBTs; for example, Business Development Executive, RANCO asserted that *time off in lieu is more valuable than any kind of money* and highlighted that *travel time is still work time.* While CRESTCO's policy was to get *5 extra days* off per annum when having *more than 40 travel days* during the year (HR Generalist 1, CRESTCO), IBTs argued that this did *not adequately compensate you* (HR Manager, CRESTCO). For example, Sales and Marketing Manager, CRESTCO spent *168 nights* in hotels in 2018 but regardless received only 5 extra days off. At STEERCO*,* no lieu days were guaranteed as *people travel so much, you just could not sustain the level of holidays they would get* (Manager Advanced Quality, STEERCO).

In the few cases where training was provided it was not formalized. Although cultural awareness was flagged as important, little to *no cultural training* was provided (HR Generalist 1, CRESTCO). For example, online modules to build cultural competence were available at TRONCO and IBTs were able to

voluntarily engage with the content. However, while the VP Global HR Operations, TRONCO believed that the online system was *well received,* and *people utilize it,* most IBTs were not aware of its existence.

**Social support.** A network of both professional and personal relationships was leveraged by IBTs as important social support. Supportive colleagues that demonstrated awareness of and understanding for the demands faced by IBTs were essential. For example, some experienced frequent travelers shared tips with other IBTs, while some non-travelers were understanding of IBTs being absent for meetings in the home country; *if you are away, you cannot be diving into all of those*. With non-travelers, *creating awareness* and informing them of when business trips were taking place helped to justify *delegation* of work and facilitate priority setting (Business Development Executive, RANCO). The extent of understanding among non-travelers varied significantly between colleagues within and across firms. There were no formal mentor or support schemes in place, but we witnessed how IBTs crafted their job to increase resources.

**Approach Crafting: Increasing Structural and Social Resources**

The lack of an organizational architecture including policy direction and procedures created pressure for IBTs. The need for more formalized policies and supports around, for example, having *more official flexibility, working from home and stuff like that* (HR Generalist 1, CRESTCO) was articulated. In practice, almost everything was left to the individual IBT to craft their working conditions within the discretion afforded to them. The line manager was seen as vital in that s/he may *throw a blind eye* when individuals actively sought to create more flexible working approaches (European Sales Manager, CRESTCO).

Any form of 'training' that interviewees referred to was classified as individually driven and 'learning on the go'. Gathering information to support IBTs was also driven by individuals; self-study was common, and any information required, *you would look it up yourself* (Director Supply Planning, STEERCO). While IBTs *try and share* information relating to specific markets (Director Global Regulatory Affairs, CRESTCO), situations where IBTs were *thrown in at the deep end* were not unusual (Business Development Analyst, RANCO). Some chose to work with local experts who would provide *updates on latest legislation by country… trends, and information* (HR Manager EMEA, CRESTCO) although approval was required and *really*

*depends on the manager* (Program Manager, STEERCO), highlighting once more the centrality of the direct manager relationship for support and the level of discretion afforded.

To increase social resources, interviewees created their own ad-hoc network with others that traveled regularly, meeting informally to discuss the demands of frequent travel or share thoughts on the supports that helped. Whether IBTs were able to engage in extensive travel depended mainly on the strength of the family support system. Having *somebody that is more supportive* of their travel (Senior Recruitment Consultant, RANCO) allowed IBTs to focus on their job; without such support, it would have been *a lot harder* (Programme Manager, STEERCO); *if I did not have this wife with me, I would be a smoker, I would be completely stressed, and I will either destroy* [myself] *or burn out* (Sales and Marketing Manager, CRESTCO). In various circumstances, this meant sacrifices by the IBT's' partner and strong commitment from relatives were required.

## DISCUSSION

This paper elucidates how IBTs navigate the severe complexity and intensive pressures inherent in their global work. Drawing from job crafting theory (Tims et al., 2012), we analyze IBTs' demands and resources, and the associated crafting actions taken by these individuals to reduce hindering demands and increase supporting resources. Figure 1 illustrates a five-component job crafting process model to global work based on our data and coupled with insights on crafting from Lazazzara et al. (2020). It includes three stages of the process: job crafting *motives*, *forms*, and *consequences*. In addition, it includes *context* and *discretion* as two factors impacting the process. These five components are elaborated on as part of our two primary contributions which are discussed below.

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Insert Figure 1 here
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Our first contribution relates to the job crafting *motives* and *context* components of the job crafting process model. The contribution stems from untangling the complex and multi-dimensional nature of IBTs' global work. We reveal that IBTs' crafted their job in response to *job-related adversity*, thus engaged in *reactive* job crafting. Adversity is the result of what appears to be a concerning demands-resources mismatch faced

by IBTs. We add to the literature on global work arrangements illuminating the perilous conditions this demands-resources mismatch creates for IBTs. Global travel presents a particularly challenging work context for individuals in frequently traversing temporal and spatial boundaries (Reiche et al., 2019). Our findings demonstrate how the scope of IBTs' global work is wide ranging and extensive in navigating multiple locations and time zones, while the specific tasks are varied and ambiguous, often requiring a blend of internal and external facing responsibilities. As part of their global work, IBTs are challenged by physical, psychological, and social demands.

Our findings confirm previous studies in the fields of medicine and health which have identified many physical health implications of engaging in this type of global work (Burkholder et al., 2010; Patel, 2011). In so doing, we deride the idea of 'simplicity' being a key advantage of international business travel (Shaffer et al., 2012: 1287) given that performing this global work creates a diversity of strenuous experiences. Importantly, our research finds that the toll that this travel takes often appears ill-considered and underappreciated by the IBTs themselves, due in part to the concealed long-term consequences. We find that the psychological strain that IBTs experience is amplified by intense performance pressures within MNEs, as well as cultural and institutional complexity in continuously navigating the global marketplace (Ramsey, 2013). We contribute to the global work literature by analyzing several unique demands for IBTs. For example, 'firefighting' involves IBTs juggling dual workloads between both home and host countries, as they keep strong communication with the home country while being away. This juggling act is a result of job crafting by the individual traveler (Berg et al., 2010) rather than a decision made by the organization. IBTs perceived such demands as part of the job, and travelers felt it allowed them to remain 'on top of things'. However, not fully detaching and recovering from work was a problem reinforced by IBTs and this added further strain, intensifying existing demands. Moreover, as IBTs are essentially interlopers in the host country, we find that they face unique performance pressures when meeting internal or external colleagues and clients as they are expected to be professional and follow organizationally defined rules and behavioral guidelines, thus engaging in a process of emotional labor (Wharton, 2009). Displaying expected emotions which are congruent with feelings may be a stressor for IBTs and can lead to emotional exhaustion (Glomb & Tews, 2004). Our findings in relation to social demands illustrate that while relocation is not required, work-family conflicts (Jensen, 2014) continue to play a major role, lead to travelers' guilt, and impact IBTs'

psychological well-being. These observations progress the way we think about how flexible global working arrangements need to be more effectively designed and structured within one's substantive job (Reiche et al., 2019) and the implications this has for individuals that engage in this type of multifaceted work.

While there is an increasing focus on sustainable careers and well-being in many MNEs (De Vos, Van der Heijden & Akkermans, 2020; Guest, 2017), the findings suggest that greater configuration of resources is required where substantive international travel is omnipresent in a role. We therefore refer to the low resource availability as a *constraining organizational context*. The structural and social supports made available are minimal and tend to be implicit in nature and driven in large part by the individual traveler. Issues such as IBTs' circadian rhythm being so interrupted that some were medicating themselves appeared absent from organizational discourse. Indeed, travel appeared to be glamorized and seen as a perk of global work which, in turn, is likely to make it more difficult for individuals to raise concerns. Organizational travel and work policies lacked clarity, were not consistently applied, and provided little flexibility. Information and training provided to IBTs were limited and there were no formal mentoring processes in place. This constraining organizational context intensified the demands and pressures faced by IBTs and impacted individual's patterns around job crafting forms which we will outline next.

Our second contribution lies in advancing existing studies on job crafting forms to the global work context and identifying its potentially dysfunctional impact on individuals who have substantial discretion. Our insights in this regard relate to the job crafting *forms*, job crafting *consequences,* and *discretion* components of the job crafting process model. Specifically, our study provides evidence of both *avoidance crafting* and *approach crafting*. IBTs altered the boundaries of their role to decrease hindering demands and increase structural and social resources (Tims et al., 2012). In an effort to decrease hindering demands, IBTs coped with medication, reconsidered eating and exercising habits, and managed the pace and scheduling of their work. In an effort to increase supporting resources, IBTs asked line managers for flexible working opportunities, sought and shared information, created a network of frequent travelers, and relied on personal relationships and networks. Contrary to Tim et al. (2012), we found no indication of job crafting actions increasing positive challenges (e.g., taking on additional projects; seeking more complex tasks) which we explain through the highly complex and intense global work of IBTs.

We present both *positive experiences* (intended consequences) and *negative experiences* (unintended consequences) arising from IBTs engaging in job crafting. Frequent travel allowed IBTs to perform their role and gave them a sense of control (Caza, 2012). However, work intensification, strain, and health issues were also reported which could ultimately break psychological contracts (Pate & Scullion, 2018). In more severe cases, it may also lead to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Kilroy, Flood, Bosak & Chênevert, 2016). Thus, a key contribution of this study is the provision of evidence of unintended consequences of job crafting which has been largely neglected in the literature to date (Dierdorff & Jensen, 2018; Lazazzara et al., 2020). Specifically, we identify individual's discretion as an important factor which can impact job crafting consequences.

Our study found that IBTs were afforded substantial discretion about how they carried out their global work. While any ambiguous situation requires some discretion (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987), that afforded to IBTs appears problematic in that it often intensified rather than alleviated the demands-resources mismatch. In other words, there appears to be a 'discretion paradox' at play. While discretion is a basic psychological need of individuals, giving them a sense of ownership, intrinsic motivation, and commitment (Van den Broeck, Ferris, Chang & Rosen, 2016), a lack of explicit policies contributes to substantial ambiguity around job processes. We therefore refer to individual's *discretion as a double-edged sword,* revealing the potential dysfunctional nature of job crafting. Our findings highlight something heretofore not evident in the job crafting literature, namely, how many global work demands were inadvertently intensified by the individual due to the significant discretion they were afforded. Moreover, IBTs failed to challenge the pressurized culture that existed around travel in their organizations. In contrary, many IBTs used their afforded effort discretion (Caza, 2012) to devote high levels of attention and energy to their work. This commitment resulted in some traveling up to three quarters of their time and many substantially expanding their working efforts. In addition, individual travelers placed pressure on themselves to travel in condensed time periods. Compressing work into a short amount of time as part of the business trip saw IBTs constantly operating in a high-intensity work context (Piasna, 2018) with long days and full schedules. Additionally, IBTs tried to remain connected in both home and host countries while traveling, normalizing the significant demands that they experienced. This is noteworthy given one of the key purposes and motivations elucidated in Tims et al.'s (2012) job crafting conceptualization was to the avoidance of health

impairment. Yet, our findings showed how the health of IBTs was negatively impacted through their own job crafting actions. We therefore contribute to the job crafting literature by providing an explanation for potential negative consequences of job crafting. Importantly, we refer to discretion as a double-edged sword in a particular constraining organizational context. Thus, it may be the case that low resource availability may be more of an issue rather than the affordance of high levels of discretion *per se*. In other words, discretion is likely to work best within appropriate organizational parameters and support infrastructures which will also aid stakeholders in better understanding IBTs' demanding roles.

Our study offers several organizational implications. We challenge the HR function to take a more strategic perspective and front seat in the provision of appropriate support and inclusion of IBTs within wider workplace policies. Strategic oversight would consider the need to travel in the first instance, allow for a more holistic understanding of its complex demands, and provide structural and social supports suitable to individual travelers. The lack of organizational awareness and understanding of the complex and challenging demands that frequent international travel can place on employees needs to be addressed. Consideration of work design approaches (Humphrey et al., 2007) for roles with substantial travel, as well as a critical view on job crafting and the extent of discretion is needed. When designing jobs with a substantial global travel component, recovery and rest periods as well as flexible working arrangements that provide some degree of latitude should be considered. We submit a cautionary note to organizations interpreting our findings that they should simply erode an IBT's freedom to craft. This is likely to be counterproductive as job crafting actions can contribute to better individual and organizational outcomes. Instead, we argue, organizations should focus their attention on directing appropriate resources to these individuals. Managers can motivate employees to engage in crafting by implementing supportive HR systems. Such systems should include HR processes and practices around training, information sharing and participative management (Hu, McCune Stein, Mao & Yan, 2021). In this context, crafting is more likely to result in intended (positive) consequences.

As this study was limited to interviews amongst IBTs in four MNEs operating in Ireland, future research should expand on the experiences of IBTs and the management of global work in other contexts. Greater understanding of the impact of engaging in global work and crafting one's job on career prospects alongside the strategic value of IBTs for the organization in terms of global talent management (Collings,

2014) and global boundary spanning (Mäkelä, Barner-Rasmussen, Ehrnrooth & Koveshnikov, 2019) would be beneficial. Moreover, the impact of personal factors, for example, increased self-confidence and personality traits (Lazazzara et al., 2020) was beyond the scope of this study and deserves further attention. Another major area of future research relates to the rapidly increasing nature of virtual global work. While the COVID-19 pandemic has led to travel restrictions globally and a subsequent increase in virtual working, lasting post-pandemic effects can only be estimated. In a recent McKinsey report, the expected continuing importance of both travel for certain business operations and virtual global work in MNEs has been highlighted (Curley, Garber, Krishnan & Tellez, 2020). While virtual work reduces the need to physically travel and therefore the associated physical demands, other challenges exist. Initial studies reveal psychological strains based on interpersonal problems, stress, and misunderstandings based on cultural differences (Adamovic, 2018). Thus, understanding how individuals craft their job in a virtual global work setting is required, alongside research on the role of the organization in designing and managing this work (Nurmi & Hinds, 2016). Finally, hybrid approaches combining virtual, international business travel, and other forms of global work also deserve further investigation to better understand the comparative nature of global work.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper we have provided a fine-grained conceptualization of the global work of IBTs and how they manage the inherent complexity involved in what is a highly fragmented context. We illuminate the job crafting actions taken by IBTs to counter the mismatch between intensive demands and scarce resources in a global context. In doing so, our paper suggests that MNEs have yet to develop a strategic approach that accounts for the unique and wide-ranging experiences of those that travel extensively as part of their global work. Our paper contributes to a better understanding of the complex and multi-dimensional nature of international business travel and encourages researchers to further investigate the potentially negative implications of job crafting in a global work setting.

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**TABLE 1: INTERVIEWEE PROFILES**

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

**TABLE 2: CODING STRUCTURE**

| First order codes | Second order codes | Aggregate dimensions | Job crafting forms and actions |
|---|---|---|---|
| - Tiredness and exhaustion<br>- Constant sitting and lack of exercise<br>- Range of infections<br>- Adjusting to time differences<br>- Imbalanced diet | Physical demands | Global work intensity | Avoidance crafting<br><br>Decrease hindering demands |
| - Performance pressures<br>- Intense workload in host country<br>- Evening commitments in host country<br>- Firefighting in home country<br>- Cultural complexity<br>- Institutional complexity<br>- Language barriers<br>- Risks, hazards, and harassment | Psychological demands | | |
| - Travel on short notice<br>- Away on weekends<br>- Impact on family and children<br>- Difficulty managing dual careers<br>- Traveler's guilt | Social demands | | |
| - Economy vs. business class flights<br>- Discretion around travel schedules<br>- Limited policies around flexible work<br>- Monetary compensation<br>- Career development and prospects<br>- Limited formal training available<br>- Little awareness of training options<br>- Informal mentoring/shadowing<br>- Some advice from local experts<br>- Little online learning<br>- Pending on own initiative | Structural support | Resource availability | Approach crafting<br><br>Increase structural and social supports |
| - Personal relationships<br>- Professional relationships<br>- No formal mentor or support scheme<br>- Awareness among colleagues<br>- Delegation and setting priorities | Social support | | |