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Inter-brand career mobility: a study of general manager perceptions and implications for talent management

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine how career mobility in the hotel industry shapes individuals' careers toward general manager roles.

Design/methodology/approach – In this exploratory qualitative research, the authors draw on 45 interviews with general managers from 16 countries. Using abductive reasoning and thematic analysis, the authors adopt a career mobility lens.

Findings – Evolving openness toward career mobility and structural transformation in the industry are catalysts for inter-brand mobility. The authors identify constraints on and enablers of inter-brand mobility. Specifically, the study findings highlight low perceived permeability in upward mobility from four-star to five-star hotels.

Practical implications – Organizations should adopt a talent management culture, working toward reducing constraints on inter-brand mobility. This entails changing long-held, archaic perceptions and investing in employees' transferable skills.

Originality/value – The authors conceptualize and highlight a novel form of career mobility – inter-brand mobility – which differs from traditional organizational and geographical forms of mobility. Further, the authors add to the discourse on the boundaries of career mobility, theorizing the complexities of inter-brand mobility in the hospitality context.

Keywords Employment, Careers, Workforce, Talent management, Career mobility, Labor markets

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

An organization's sustained competitive advantage is inextricably linked to its capacity to strategically manage talent (Baum, 2019), particularly within an increasingly interconnected

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Erratum: It has come to the attention of the publisher that the article Jooss, S., Carbery, R. and Kuosa, M. (2025), "Inter–brand career mobility: a study of general manager perceptions and implications for talent management", International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, Vol. 37 No. 13, pp. 39-63. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-08-2024-1240, was originally published with the incorrect supplementary files. This has now been amended in the supplementary material.

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global landscape characterized by workforce fluidity and cross-border mobility (Hsu *et al.*, 2017). The evolution of talent management over the past quarter-century has fundamentally transformed how organizations conceptualize and operationalize their approaches to managing people (Kravariti *et al.*, 2022) and continues to evolve in the context of unprecedented career mobility and the need for greater strategic agility (Jooss *et al.*, 2024). While talent management has been conceptualized as a systematic and integrated organizational approach to attracting, engaging and retaining valuable employees (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2020), we argue that this definition must now contend with increasingly fluid career patterns and shifting employee expectations around mobility (Ladkin *et al.*, 2023).

The efficacy of talent management initiatives is intrinsically linked to their organizational context and supporting infrastructure, yet traditional frameworks may inadequately address contemporary career mobility patterns (Bagdadli and Gianecchini, 2019). Collings and Mellahi (2009) posit that talent management effectiveness is maximized through a differentiated architecture, and this perspective was further elaborated by King and Vaiman (2019), who emphasize the necessity of complementary systemic elements. While architectural similarities may exist across organizations, the underlying philosophical foundations and contextual assumptions exhibit significant organizational specificity (Vaiman *et al.*, 2021), particularly in how they accommodate or restrict career mobility.

The talent management architecture – conceptualized as an integrated system of processes, practices and frameworks for talent optimization (Sparrow and Makram, 2015) – must now evolve beyond traditional approaches, which are premised on linear career progression within organizational hierarchies (Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012). This assumption is increasingly challenged by contemporary career patterns characterized by frequent transitions and non-linear progression paths (Sullivan and Al Ariss, 2021), including lateral moves, downward moves or evolving job responsibilities without title changes (Ladkin and Kichuk, 2017). In an industry where career mobility is highly valued by employees (Tolkach and Tung, 2019) and which is plagued by high turnover rates, more sustainable career pathways are required (Gebbels *et al.*, 2020; Johnson *et al.*, 2019; Jooss *et al.*, 2023).

Careers can be defined as "an individual's work-related and other relevant experiences, both inside and outside of organizations, that form a unique pattern over the individual's life span" (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009, p. 1543), while career mobility refers to changing jobs, organizations and occupations, both nationally and internationally (Feldman and Ng, 2007). The two principal forms of career mobility encompass organizational and geographical mobility; while geographical mobility considers location changes (Choudhury, 2022), organizational mobility encompasses both intra-firm and inter-firm movement of individuals (Feldman and Ng, 2007). Such career transitions are part of one's career path and overall career experience (Sullivan and Al Ariss, 2021). The careers literature has provided insights into attitudes toward mobility, perceptions of mobility opportunities, the value of mobility for careers and mobility frictions (Feldman and Ng, 2007; Ray, 2024).

Hospitality scholars have, for several decades, highlighted the importance of career mobility (Ladkin *et al.*, 2023), often with a focus on the general manager (GM) role, which traditionally has been viewed as the "target job" of one's career in the hospitality industry (Ladkin, 1999, p. 168). Advancing our understanding of careers of GMs, scholars have provided insights into, for example, their demographic profile (Okumus *et al.*, 2016), educational background and experience (Kim *et al.*, 2009), competencies (Bharwani and Talib, 2017) and individuals' development strategies to reach the GM position (Akrivos *et al.*, 2007). However, there remains limited insight into how career mobility impacts progression, turnover and talent management (Jooss *et al.*, 2021).

Notably, the global hospitality industry has undergone a structural transformation through strategic consolidation, resulting in the emergence of dominant conglomerates such as

Marriott International, Hilton and Accor (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). These "megabrands" have pursued aggressive expansion strategies and achieved brand portfolio diversification, enabling these firms to optimize market coverage (Hultman *et al.*, 2021). This consolidation has fundamentally reshaped career mobility dynamics, enabling expansive internal talent markets and idiosyncratic career progression (Keller and Dlugos, 2023). Employees increasingly pursue career movements across multiple brands within the same corporate ecosystem. This intra-organizational mobility has created complex talent management implications (Jooss *et al.*, 2024) as firms balance standardization of talent practices across brands while maintaining distinct brand identities and service cultures. Considering these changes, and responding to Tolkach and Tung's (2019) call for more research on career mobility to better understand these contemporary complexities, we ask: *how does career mobility in the hotel industry shape individuals' careers toward GM roles?*

In our exploratory qualitative research, we conducted 45 interviews with GMs working in three-, four- and five-star hotels located in 16 countries. We focused on GMs for several reasons. GMs hold the most senior role in a hotel property and thus are able to reflect on their own career path as well as the industry more broadly. They are recognized as having a critical role, overseeing service quality (Wu *et al.*, 2021), shaping organizational culture and ensuring strategic alignment with owners and corporate leadership teams (Bharwani and Talib, 2017). As such, GMs can have a differential impact on organizational performance and be a principal reason for a hotel's success or failure (Okumus *et al.*, 2016). Using abductive reasoning and thematic analysis, we adopted a career mobility lens (Feldman and Ng, 2007). Rather than presenting broad findings on various forms of intra-firm, inter-firm and geographical mobility, we center our findings on the most salient and novel feature, unpacking constraints on and enablers of inter-brand mobility. We purposefully refer to "inter-brand" rather than "inter-organizational" mobility given the structural transformations in the industry (Hultman *et al.*, 2021). We define inter-brand mobility as an individual's movement between brands – which may be across organizations or within one larger umbrella organization.

We contribute to both the workforce and talent management literature (Kravariti *et al.*, 2022; Ladkin *et al.*, 2023) and the careers literature (Chudzikowski, 2012; Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012) by enriching our understanding of how career mobility in the hotel industry shapes individuals' careers toward GM roles. We conceptualize inter-brand mobility as a distinct form of career mobility, which differs from traditional forms of mobility. Moreover, we add to the discourse around the boundaries of career mobility, presenting a set of constraints on and enablers of inter-brand mobility. While GMs referred to a general openness towards inter-brand mobility, supporting the boundaryless career movement, they also reflected on attitudinal forces within the industry and specific human and social capital requirements that limit moves between hotel categories. Specifically, our findings highlight low perceived permeability in upward mobility from four-star to five-star hotels. In doing so, our study provides more nuanced insights into career mobility, theorizing inter-brand complexities.

2. Literature review

2.1 A career mobility lens

Career mobility has received increasing attention since the 1990s (Hirschi and Koen, 2021), with many organizations moving away from offering lifetime employment toward individual employability (Ray, 2024). Career mobility refers to changing jobs, organizations and occupations, both nationally and internationally (Feldman and Ng, 2007). First, job changes refer to significant changes in work responsibilities, hierarchy or title within an organization. This intra-firm mobility either relates to promotions (vertical mobility) or transfers (horizontal/lateral mobility) (Ray, 2024). Second, organizational mobility relates to changes

in the employing company, thus representing a form of inter-firm mobility. This form of mobility may or may not involve a job change and may take place within the same or a different industry (Feldman and Ng, 2007). Third, occupational changes consider vocational redevelopment, requiring fundamentally new skillsets; for example, transitioning into new occupations created by digital technologies (Sullivan and Al Ariss, 2021).

While organizations continue to have core structures build around hierarchies, changes to jobs, organizations and occupations have become more common with the rise of the boundaryless careers movement (Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012). Boundaryless careers refer to the "sequences of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of single employment settings" (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994, p. 307). Ultimately, the various transitions across boundaries imply high career mobility (Chudzikowski, 2012; De Vos *et al.*, 2021). The extant literature has examined a range of factors that encourage employees' career mobility within and beyond traditional boundaries, including structural and occupational labor market forces, organizational policies and procedures, work-group dynamics, personal life circumstances and personality differences (Ng *et al.*, 2007). In this context, emphasis is often placed on employees' flexibility while downplaying potential constraints due to structural or attitudinal forces (Inkson *et al.*, 2012). Here, permeability, referring to the ease or difficulty of entering a new job, organization or occupation (Belous, 1990), plays a significant role when evaluating career mobility.

In addition, research has analyzed the specific career patterns of managers, including the number, duration and sequence of jobs (Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012). This includes the objectively observed career paths of individuals' movement over time as well as the underlying cognitive structures as individuals reflect on their career paths (Arnold and Cohen, 2008). Most studies on career paths center around two dimensions – time and direction. Time matters as career patterns are a sequence of experiences over the duration of one's career. Similarly, direction matters, with traditional career progression being associated with upward promotions. This type of mobility is still the norm in most careers; however, downward and lateral movements have increasingly been recognized when considering direction as a dimension of career paths (Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012).

Early empirical research on career patterns focused on the stability and direction of career paths (e.g. Super, 1957). This was followed by studies centered on individuals' intra-organizational mobility and upward movement (e.g. Forbes, 1987). These studies have also highlighted the importance of early career positions and success in determining career mobility over time (Sheridan *et al.*, 1990). Recently, scholars have increasingly focused on the dynamics of inter-organizational mobility (Cappelli *et al.*, 2014). For example, Bidwell and Briscoe (2010) propose that, at an early career stage, individuals are more likely to work for firms that provide training opportunities while subsequently moving to firms that seek their specific skill profile. Empirical evidence on the impact of inter-organizational mobility on careers is inconclusive, with mixed results across diverse contexts (Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012). To date, most studies have adopted an organizational lens, examining the implications of inter-organizational mobility on hiring, turnover, or performance (for a review, see Mawdsley and Somaya, 2016). In this context, Won and Bidwell (2023) refer to inter-organizational mobility as a double-edged sword in that employers may value diverse skill sets but may also be concerned about higher attrition risks and lack of organizational fit.

2.2 Career mobility in the hotel industry

Career mobility in the hotel industry is characterized by a complex interplay of organizational structures, individual agency and industry-specific constraints that challenge traditional models of talent development and progression, and our understanding of career

mobility (Johnson *et al.*, 2019; Ladkin *et al.*, 2023). While the sector offers numerous entry points and apparent opportunities for advancement, closer examination reveals systemic barriers and structural idiosyncrasies (Baum, 2019) that significantly impact patterns of mobility. The hotel industry also has a long-standing reputation for high labor turnover (Carbery *et al.*, 2003; Gebbels *et al.*, 2020; Park and Min, 2020), with individuals frequently changing jobs and organizations. This creates a paradoxical environment of frequent advancement opportunities amid institutional instability, leading to a form of mobility trap where rapid advancement occurs without corresponding skill development, often resulting in career plateaus at middle management levels (Yang *et al.*, 2019).

Studies on career paths of GMs have highlighted both internal promotions over time and external hires but predominately focused on the time it takes to achieve the GM position, with results ranging from an average of 9–18 years (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2009). The most common pathways included a track record in the food and beverage and/or rooms division departments, with some individuals also having a background in sales (Kim *et al.*, 2009). While much of the extant literature has only focused on when and how individuals obtain a GM role, it has not considered the impact of hotel classification and organizational context on subsequent career mobility. Given that many individuals acquire their first GM role in their 30s (Okumus *et al.*, 2016), their early experiences in the industry have a profound formative effect on perceived and actual mobility. The number of hotels, types of positions within them and both internal and external labor markets may all influence how hotel managers move through their careers. Thus, research that incorporates patterns beyond time and direction (Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012) is required to better understand how mobility may impact individuals' careers.

The globalization of hotel operations (Zhang *et al.*, 2020) has introduced additional complexity to talent management and mobility patterns. Comparative analyses of career trajectories in international hotel chains reveal significant disparities in mobility opportunities between employees with global capabilities and those constrained by linguistic or educational barriers, indicating the emergence of distinct mobility classes within the industry (Smart *et al.*, 2021). Further, gender and cultural dimensions have emerged as persistent themes in recent literature. There is evidence of continued gender-based mobility barriers (Mooney, 2020), particularly in luxury segments (Ryan and Mooney, 2020), identifying subtle institutional mechanisms that maintain a contemporary glass ceiling, despite some progress in overall gender representation (Campos-Soria *et al.*, 2015).

Organizational responses to these mobility challenges reveal significant variation in effectiveness (Tolkach and Tung, 2019). Comparative analyses of talent development programs across major hotel chains identify systematic weaknesses in talent development approaches. Prevalent *ad hoc* promotion practices, prioritizing immediate operational needs over strategic development, potentially undermining long-term career development opportunities (Kichuk *et al.*, 2019; Kravariti *et al.*, 2022). These trends demonstrate the existence of a complex ecosystem of career mobility within the hotel industry. We argue that the limitations of traditional mobility models emphasize the need for a more nuanced understanding of mobility that can account for the multifaceted nature of contemporary hospitality careers while acknowledging the formative impact of early career experiences and organizational contexts.

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

Our qualitative research design allowed us to give voice to GMs, reflecting on their own career paths as well as their observations on careers in the hotel industry based on their

professional experience. Given the exploratory nature of our research, we did not have a specific theoretical construct in mind *a priori* but engaged with literature on career paths more broadly. Our literature section was then refined a *posteriori*, integrating the boundaryless careers concept and the career mobility lens in particular.

We adopted a purposeful sampling approach that centers around information-rich cases from key informants (Patton, 2015). Specifically, we used a combination of two sampling procedures, a common strategy in organizational research (Aguinis *et al.*, 2021). First, we followed criterion sampling, seeking individuals who occupied the GM position in a hotel. We deemed GMs as appropriate interviewees, given they have the most senior role in a hotel, having advanced their careers through various roles over time. We targeted individuals with at least ten years of professional experience in the hotel industry to ensure a seasoned profile with sufficient exposure to career dynamics. Second, we adopted stratified sampling (Patton, 2015) to ensure representation of gender, geographies and hotel categories (i.e. stars classification). We were particularly interested in four- and five-star hotels as we had anecdotal evidence of complex career mobility and associated challenges when moving between these hotel categories. The research design was approved by the university's ethics review board, complying with ethical guidelines.

3.2 Data collection

As all authors have prior experience in the hotel industry, GMs were contacted via their personal network, using email and LinkedIn during a 13-month period (May 2021 to June 2022). We continued data collection until theoretical saturation, and our final sample encompassed 45 GMs in three-star (n = 5), four-star (n = 13) and five-star (n = 27) hotels (see Table 1). This sample size also aligns with other qualitative studies published in leading management journals (Saunders and Townsend, 2016). Specifically, our sample included 11 female (25%) and 34 male (75%) GMs, reflective of the industry's significant gender imbalance at the GM level (Russen *et al.*, 2021). These individuals were located across 16 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas. They were either employed by a hotel chain (n = 30) or managed a family owned, independent hotel (n = 15). We view our broad sample as a particular strength of our research given extant studies on GM careers have focused on a particular hotel category (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2009) or location (e.g. Cassel *et al.*, 2018; Okumus *et al.*, 2016).

Our research participants were very experienced in the hotel business; they held an average of 8.4 positions and had 25 years of work experience. They also held an average of 2.8 GM positions and had 13.4 years of experience as a GM. In terms of their career mobility, they changed positions every 4.1 years and worked for 4.2 hotel organizations (we classify multiple brand experiences relating to one umbrella chain as one organization). Our sample of GMs have also worked across 3.2 countries on average; however, this differed significantly among our sample with 25 GMs having had experience in one to two countries, while 20 managers had experience in a minimum of three countries, with some having worked in nine countries. While there were some upward and downward movements across hotel categories in our interviewees' career paths, participants most frequently transitioned within the same hotel category when changing roles.

The semi-structured interviews focused on the career paths of GMs (supplementary Table 1). We asked the participants to reflect on their own careers and their views on careers in the industry more broadly. For example, we asked: How did your career path to that of GM unfold? To what extent have you planned your next positions, moves and path? What does career progression depend on and what are the barriers for career progression? How does work experience impact the career paths of GMs? To align the interviewing approach

Table 1. Overview of interviewees

#	Gender	Age	Years as GM	Years of experience	GM positions	Total positions	Change rate in years
01	M	40-49	11	20	4	9	2.2
02	M	30-39	4	13	1	5	2.6
03	M	40-49	5	16	2	10	1.6
04	M	40-49	18	27	4	9	3.0
05	M	40-49	13	27	4	8	3.4
06	M	40-49	2	20	2	11	1.8
07	M	40-49	5	20	2	11	1.8
08	M	60-69	28	35	7	14	2.5
09	M	40-49	11	16	1	4	4.0
10	M	40-49	26	26	6	8	3.3
11	F	40-49	4	16	2	8	2.0
12	M	30-39	16	18	1	4	4.5
13	M	40-49	17	27	3	8	3.4
14	M	50-59	25	36	4	7	5.1
15	F	50-59	18	30	5	13	2.3
16	M	60-69	33	42	7	12	3.5
17	M	40-49	2	20	1	10	2.0
18	F	40-49	12	20	1	4	5.0
19	M	50-59	14	31	6	15	2.1
20	F	40-49	3	15	1	7	2.1
21	M	40-49	1	23	2	11	2.1
22	F	50-59	7	30	3	9	3.3
23	M	40-49	15	22	7	10	2.2
24	F	40-49	3	18	1	10	1.8
25	M	50-59	16	29	7	12	2.4
26	F	50-59	13	35	4	15	2.3
27	M	40-49	2	33	1	10	3.3
28	F	40-49	15	23	1	3	7.7
29	M	40-49	8	24	2	11	2.2
30	M	50-59	16	30	6	11	2.7
31	M	40-49	1	21	1	9	2.3
32	M	50-59	31	31	1	1	31.0
33	M	40-49	16	22	1	3	7.3
34	M	50-59	35	39	3	8	4.9
35	M	60-69	22	41	3	10	4.1
36	F	40-49	17	26	2	8	3.3
37	M	40-49	10	21	4	12	1.8
38	M	40-49	17	23	3	7	3.3
39	M	40-49	10	17	4	12	1.4
40	M	50-59	32	34	1	8	4.3
41	M	40-49	18	22	1	3	7.3
42	F	50-59	17	34	2	4	8.5
43	F	50-59	9	34	1	3	11.3
44	M	40-49	3	17	1	6	2.8
45	M	40-49	2	21	1	9	2.3

Source: Authors own work

between the first and second author, the first interview was conducted jointly. The other interviews were completed on a one-to-one basis (n = 21 by the first author; n = 23 by the second author). The interviews were conducted between May 2021 and June 2022 via Microsoft Teams due to the international spread of interviewees and COVID-19 travel

restrictions and lasted an average of 49 min. Consent was given after participants were informed about the purpose of the study, protection of anonymity and secure storing of data; we did not anticipate any major risks.

3.3 Data analysis

We followed abductive reasoning (Grodal *et al.*, 2021) and thematic analysis (Braun *et al.*, 2019) to build insights (Figure 1). First, we familiarized ourselves with the interview data, reading the transcripts and listening back to the audio recordings. As part of this stage, we noted initial themes, including career planning, critical career moments, career progression and career priorities. Second, we decided to center our analysis on what we deemed to be a particularly prominent theme within the interviewees' discourse, namely, individuals' career mobility towards GM roles, which is reflected in our research question. Third, aligned with our abductive reasoning, we iterated back and forth between our data and existing theoretical concepts (Grodal *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, when consulting the literature on career mobility (Feldman and Ng, 2007), we noted organizational and geographical mobility patterns within the discourse. These were also prominent in our interviews. For example, interviewees had highlighted the value of intra-firm rotations between jobs, inter-firm exposure to gain broader experiences and geographical mobility to explore cultures and advance careers.

Fourth, enriching existing literature, we identified inter-brand mobility as the most salient and novel concept in our data, and we engaged in open coding to unpack it further. Fifth, we combined and organized related first-order codes into broader second-order categories (Table 2). For example, multiple codes that referred to organizational culture were combined to a category, labeled "uncertainty around cultural fit." Similarly, multiple codes that referred to individuals' knowledge, skills and abilities were combined to a category labeled "human and social capital requirements." Finally, we reviewed these categories to identify broader themes aligned with our central concept of inter-brand mobility. Here, we noted that multiple categories represented constraints on and enablers of inter-brand mobility, and we went again back to the literature, engaging with the notion of boundaryless careers. Coding was led by the first author but discussed with the second author during regular meetings for validation.

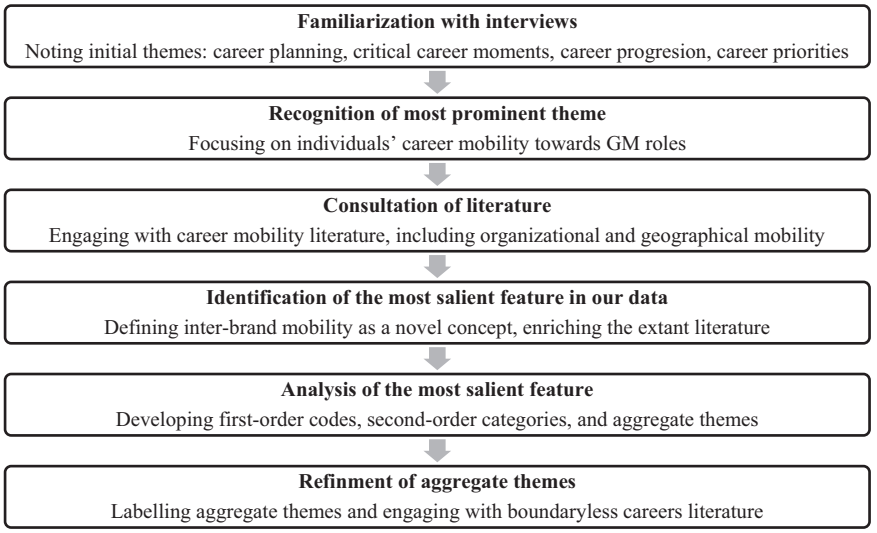
4. Findings

Our findings are centered around the constraints on and enablers of inter-brand mobility. We define inter-brand mobility as an individual's movement between brands – which may be across organizations or within one larger umbrella organization. In the first scenario, individuals move between brands across organizations, for example, from Fairmont to Four Seasons, or from Shangri-la to Mandarin Oriental. In the second scenario, individuals move between brands within one larger conglomerate, for example, within Marriott, one might move from Autograph to St Regis to Renaissance, or within Hilton, one could move from Hampton to Conrad to Waldorf Astoria.

4.1 Constraints on inter-brand mobility

Constraints on inter-brand mobility included:

- industry perceptions;
- uncertainty around cultural fit;
- owners' expectations; and
- human and social capital requirements (see Table 3).



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 1. Abductive thematic analysis process

The constraints raised were primarily related to career moves from four-star to five-star hotels. First, *industry perceptions* were viewed as a significant constraint on inter-brand mobility. Many GMs in our sample were concerned about some of the underlying perceptions within the five-star sector. GM 30 noted that "*guys who are in the luxury arena can sometimes be snobbish about colleagues who work in the four-star business*." This was confirmed by GM 06 who highlighted that "*people at the five-star level might be guilty of saying, 'we are really special, and we are the only ones with these skills and these skills are not available at a four- or three-star level.'*" Other GMs have referred to an ego and a "*stigma around the five-star level of service*" (GM 18). The following two quotes echo these concerns:

> It is all about snobbishness. There is an elitist ego that sits with five-star hotels, and I think it is complete nonsense, but they like and embody it, and it makes them feel good. But it is rubbish. Running a four-star or three-star hotel has the same rules. It does not matter; you have just got a few more bells and whistles. Running a good hotel is running a good hotel whether it is a two-star or five-star, but the five-star elite perpetuate that "quality" and it is not necessary (GM 43).

> "How can a four-star manager be a five-star manager?" People who have this perception are probably a little naïve because the activities and the role of a GM are almost the same in both hotels; you manage teams to deliver products, services, and processes. It is like saying, "can a manager of a sports clothing shop manage a suits shop?" And some would say, "no, it is impossible." It is tailored slightly differently but the basics of managing the shop, arranging displays, selling clothes are very much the same (GM 44).

Various GMs noted that these perceptions have led to individuals, organizations and recruiters adopting a similar mindset. For example, recruiters look for someone with a

Table 2. Coding scheme for inter-brand mobility

First-order codes	Second-order categories	Aggregate themes
• Snobbishness in five-star hotels • Elitist ego in five-star hotels • Doubts about transition between segments	Industry perceptions	Constraints on inter-brand mobility
• Need to carry culture in management role • Switch to luxury culture deemed difficult • Culture may be instilled via a downward move	Uncertainty around cultural fit	
• Career building in particular segments • Particular sought-after experiences on CV • Track records over time	Owners' expectations	
• Knowledge about particular market and clientele • Skills to design and deliver high-end service • Relationships and networks in specific segments	Human and social capital requirements	
• Different perspectives on individual brands • Multi-brand experience is appreciated • Need to respect varying business models	Multi-brand system	Enablers of inter-brand mobility
• Gain diverse experience early on • Avoid being pigeonholed during one's career • Different segments offer different benefits	Early career exposure	
• Focus on hiring for personality, interests, values • More investment in learning and development • Adaptability is key when making career moves	Changing industry dynamics	

Source: Authors' own work

particular background; "*if you have not had any five-star experience early on in your CV, it is very difficult without taking a step back in your career to get into a five-star*" (GM 06). Similarly, GM 13 referred to organizations "*who will say, 'we are hiring nobody except somebody from the five-star properties', and I think that is a mistake*."

> Some say, "no, we will do our career in the luxury space. Why would we go to a non-luxury brand?" Because great positions come up, same pay at the same level, or great promotions, great salaries. "No, no, no, we stay in the luxury space." Sometimes, it is just a perception, "why would I go down?" But it is not going down. It is embracing something different (GM 26).

Second, *uncertainty around cultural fit* was another constraint on inter-brand mobility. This was particularly relevant when moving into a management role within organizations. GM 30 tried to explain the difference between four- and five-star, referring to a "*different culture*," comparing hospitality to the retail industry; "*H&M is different from Burberry or from other luxury brands, right? We are doing things a bit differently.*" A couple of GMs referred to a

Table 3. Additional illustrative examples for *constraints* on inter-brand mobility

Second-order categories	Illustrative examples
Industry perceptions	• "At a management level, I think there is definitely, I do not want to use the word 'snobbery' but there are definitely people that think, 'we are cut above; a five-star person will only do that job for me; they must come from a five-star background'" (GM 06) • "It would be really silly for an employer of a five-star or four-star to ignore somebody that will be coming from a two-star or three-star hotel. I think that would be very short sighted" (GM 36) • "You (five-star) are playing in a different league. There is that perception The expectations are different. The stakes are very high. You manage assets that are normally 200 million each and you need to produce a profit of 30% so you have a big hat to wear; but the so called soft-skills, I do not think they vary much" (GM 24) • "If you work in a three- and four-star hotel, it is nearly impossible to become a GM in a five-star hotel. There is a silver spoon to five star, and if you do not have it in your mouth or pocket, you do not belong to the family. It is the winners' enclosure of the hotel industry. If you have never been in it, you do not get into it at the end of your career either, so I would never get a job in a five-star hotel and maybe they are right not to let me. Maybe I just would not know enough and have enough finesse in either the way I observed service or behave as an individual who runs a hotel. The higher you go up the star rating, there is a much more subservient nature to the industry. I do not mean people bowing and scraping, but more genuflecting to customers and GMs, there is a bit more reverence and I would find all that quite irritating" (GM 40) • "There is probably a perception out there, but to be honest I think all that stuff is just noise. I think at the end of the day, you go into a hotel, and there is so much more than how many stars are above the door. There is the standards, culture, etc. So, while I am saying it is difficult to move between the classifications, it is absolutely not impossible and I do not think there is a hard-and-fast rule. I would not be a subscriber to that" (GM 09) • "There are brands that are just in fashion that people want to see people coming from. The tier of luxury that IHG sits in are easily transferable to JW Marriott, to Edition, etc., as opposed to Ritz-Carlton, St. Regis, Auberge, Four Seasons, Dorchester Collection. The reality is, I am not going to move to GM into those hotels unless I was in a property that was punching way above his weight in its market" (GM 37)
Uncertainty around cultural fit	• "Luxury is a lot more demanding. The customer is a lot more demanding. I think people, especially the ones who have been long in the non-luxury space, need to show the willingness to learn. The willingness to adapt and learn and say, 'let me embrace it.' Do not come in, 'I have been a GM for 20 years, I know I can handle this'" (GM 26) • "Often times, hotels want you to take a step back, before you take a step forward. You have been a GM in a four-star, we would like you to be a deputy in the five-star hotel" (GM 05)

(*continued*)

Table 3. Continued

Second-order categories	Illustrative examples
	• "Traditionally, we would not have brought in GMs from outside, we do more so now, but they are coming from luxury competitors; they are not coming from a three-star or four-star background. Promotion and progression opportunities in the group and industry are happening quicker now, but to move from outside those perhaps top ten luxury brands is more difficult" (GM 07)
	• "The focus on service is something that not everyone has. It certainly can be taught, but not everyone has an understanding and so that also comes with time. There are more people. In order to get things done, you need to have a lot more people than you have in a core brand so there are just a lot more moving parts in a hotel like a St. Regis or a Ritz-Charlton" (GM 19)
	• "The greatest difficulty was convincing myself (that I can move from a four-star to a five-star hotel)" (GM 13)
	• "It would be more difficult to move from a three- to a four- and a four- to a five-star hotel. You might have to transfer across as a junior manager role, the likes of a deputy manager, before you go into a GM role" (GM 02)
	• "I found it condescending. I was told to prove myself (when moving from a four- to a five-star property). I was with the company for twelve years. You got to earn your stripes to become a luxury GM" (GM 45)
Owners' expectations	• "Often asset managers or owners have a perception about the type of person that they wish to employ. I suppose the question becomes about what the owner is looking for. Are they looking for someone who can manage profit and loss, and who can manage culture? Or for someone who understands the market dynamics? It also depends on how far up the chain you are because then you also must change your management style, within reason" (GM 38)
	• "Owners, when they spent $500 million to build a luxury hotel, they want GMs with luxury experience, so we went to a point where we have been moving GMs globally within the luxury hotels" (GM 29)
	• "There are GMs that work for family-owned properties and GMs that work for corporate big brands, your Hyatt's, Hilton's, etc.; I think they are very different. I spoke to somebody lately who is going through a process of interviews for GM positions, and they felt that one of their big issues was that they did not have that big brand experience. Sometimes you must do that to be trusted by corporates" (GM 05)
Human and social capital requirements	• "There definitely is a specific talent to running a high-end, very luxurious property. Not everybody can do it. There is a detail there, there is a sense of the mind hosting that not everybody has. Somebody who can run a 2,000-room hotel cannot necessarily run a 150-room boutique hotel. There are exceptions" (GM 35)

(*continued*)

Table 3. Continued

Second-order categories	Illustrative examples
	• "It is understanding how to operate at the five-star level in terms of consistency; standards are a real focus for quality; and to understand what those guests are looking for in terms of an experience. It is not so much about bedrooms, not 'I need a room, because I am here for business. I am here for experience. I am spending €1,000 a night because I want to have an amazing experience, and it better be amazing or I am going to be looking to speak to you in the morning'" (GM 04)

Source: Authors' own work

very exclusive approach, referring to trophy hotels and differentiating even within the five-star hotel category when hiring:

> To me, I find four companies that are associated with the ultra-luxury hospitality: Ritz Carlton, Raffles, St. Regis, Four Seasons. Peninsula is location-wise. I think the potential is very strong in Asia, but it is still not worldwide. Mandarin Oriental is coming closely. When I hire people, I just look at the last two to three positions. I go quickly. I look for the top four brands. I would definitely consider Mandarin Oriental. Shangri-La […] There are other brands that can be amazing in managing volume, but maybe they are not built on the finesse. And sometimes, there are things you cannot teach (GM 27).

Several GMs noted that a transition into the luxury hotel segment, especially at a management level, would require a downward move for individuals to ensure that they understand the culture, minimizing the risk for the organization (GMs 10 and 40). GM 22 explained that a downward move is required in this situation to instill the culture, which is crucial when leading other people; *"Particularly in a management* role, *you need to be carrying that culture and you need to be that culture, so it is hard to make that transition."* A similar perspective was also shared by other GMs as illustrated in the following two quotes:

> I get a lot of people calling me, "how do you switch from non-luxury to luxury?" That is the big question, and I do not think there is a good answer. I tell them, "move back one step, go for a couple of years as a hotel manager." I know a lot of people really struggle with that. I tell them, "be an amazing hotel manager under a very seasoned luxury GM, you will get promoted to GM in two years." Pluck up the courage (GM 26).

> I think at the very least a non-luxury GM would need to come in as hotel manager before they took over the reins of a luxury hotel. If a GM grew up in a five-star and was driving the culture through the organization from top to bottom and did it relentlessly on a day-to-day basis, then I knew that they were going to be successful; the guest voice scores and employee satisfaction scores were going to be high, and I knew that everything else was going to be perfect. Putting someone who does not know luxury in charge of a luxury hotel is a recipe for disaster (GM 19).

Third, *owners' expectations* were also referred to as a common constraint on inter-brand mobility. This was particularly relevant when moving from a hotel manager to a GM role and related to both moves from family-owned hotels to corporate hotels as well as from four-star to five-star properties (GMs 21, 40 and 43). GM 29 noted that *"people build their careers in*

certain segments," and while moves can still happen, they are more likely to be constrained due to the trajectory and a lack of trust from owners if certain experience was missing in one's career. The following two quotes illustrate these mobility constraints:

> There sometimes is a hesitancy from an owners' point of view; they are looking for five-star experience to be a five-star GM. The career path and trajectory for a lot of guys is that they stay in five stars. I can see why people would see moving as difficult. Yes, they have been in London running four-star hotels, but owners look and go, "oh, four stars are different to five stars" (GM 05).

> The first thing that an owner would look at is, "where is this GM coming from?" If I am building a car and I want to build a really, really fast car and a few test drivers apply, would I look for a test driver in a Toyota or a driver in a Lamborghini, Ferrari, Maserati? Put yourself in their shoes. You may be able to get a driver for them from a Nissan, but you must do a lot of convincing that this guy is really great (GM 27).

Fourth, *human and social capital requirements* were highlighted by GMs in our sample as a constraint on inter-brand mobility, particularly when trying to move into the luxury segment. For example, knowledge and skills about high-end service experiences, the luxury travel market and vision, and sales processes as well as networks and relationships (GMs 01, 35 and 39). Others recognized the need to understand quality delivery, highlighting the clientele in certain organizations (GM 08, GM 29, GM 42, GM 43). *"They have a very specific type of guest, and you may not have the skillset, or you may not understand them if you have taken a gap out of the luxury sector for an extended period"* (GM 23).

> There is an element of that niche experience because you have worked in that environment for so long. I think you could probably bridge it, but there would be a gap. If I walk into the Dorchester tomorrow, could I run the place as well as their five-star GM? I think maybe commercially, I could add some value instantly; but from a service level there would be things that I have just not seen and am not aware of (GM 01).

> In luxury, you must understand the needs and expectations of the guests. "Why do guests get upset by this, why is that an issue?" For us, because the guest is paying that high amount, you gain a better understanding of specifically what their needs are and what you need to do to maintain those and put those situations right when something goes wrong (GM 07).

4.2 Enablers of inter-brand mobility

Enablers of inter-brand mobility included:

- the multi-brand system;
- early career exposure; and
- changing industry dynamics (see Table 4).

First, the *multi-brand system* of large employers was perceived as enabling inter-brand mobility – with some limitations (GMs 10 and 29). Several GMs recognized the value of gaining experience across brands; *"multi-brand experience is critical. It is good to cross brands a little bit because you value them differently"* (GM 26). Various GMs noted that being an employee within a large firm with multiple brands allowed for easier inter-brand mobility as *"there is respect for having worked in that system"* (GM 05). This inter-brand mobility included moves between hotel categories, with some organizations actively encouraging such multi-brand experience.

> I look at Marriott overall and the multiple brands. I have seen people go from a Renaissance or an Autograph into a Ritz Carlton role. One of my very good friends who was the wild card for a Ritz Carlton interview came out scratching his head because he got the job. People like that are a great example that you can jump between brands in an overall company. You are more than capable of doing this, but somebody needs to believe in you and allow you to do it (GM 13).

However, GMs also reflected on the vastly different business models, for example, between select-service and full-service hotels, and the difference between, for example, three-star and five-star properties within the multi-brand system. The following two quotes illustrate this:

> Hyatt promotes or pushes you to do different brands. It is a different experience whether you are in a 600-room Grand Hyatt or a 120-room Park Hyatt. You could cross any brand while progressing in your career. Having said that, to go from a full-service to a select-service hotel and vice versa, I do not think those GMs will have the right skillset and will perhaps not perform very strongly if they get thrown in a position like that immediately. They might have to progress through a Regency brand or through another brand. But that did not exist 15 years ago (GM 03).

> In Hilton, they would have very rarely hired a Hilton GM and put him into a Waldorf or a Conrad unless they had previous luxury experience. A lot of the bigger organizations would value experience at that level, so they do not hire GMs from Hilton Garden Inns or Hiltons and put them into Waldorf; quite the opposite. They are actually going outside their company quite a bit, because they do not have enough talent in luxury (GM 04).

Second, *early career exposure* was viewed as another way to enhance inter-brand mobility. GMs noted that during the first few years of the career, individuals can gain diverse experiences while at the same time highlighting that a move to luxury environment becomes more difficult with time and that it is easy "*to get stuck, being pigeonholed*" (GM 01); "*if you want to move into five-star, I think three years is the maximum, you need to break out of that and either go into four-star or five-star"* (GM 12).

> Five stars are intimidating, and we create that level of intimidation. And you do not fear, when you are young. I got in, when I had no fear. The similarities between three-star and five-star start and end with, "we put food in front of you and there are beds." We speak different languages. I do not see myself running a hotel anymore, it is a luxury brand. It is a different mindset and space to be in. When you are younger, does it define you? I think you define yourself and you become comfortable in that space (GM 31).

GM 38 also highlighted the value of early positions in potentially shaping or accelerating one's career; *"if the firm thinks you are good, they might give you an opportunity that someone else who does not know you might not be willing to risk"* (GM 38). GMs also reflected on the advantages of starting careers in a four-star versus a five-star property, with reasons for both presented in the following two quotes:

> Sometimes people get so caught up in the star rating. Particularly early on in your career, get your experience under your belt. Sometimes you might be better off working in a three-star hotel where you are actually making decisions and you are actually getting those skillsets, developing and leading a team, rather than being part of a five-star team where you will not be able to change the salt and pepper shakers on the table without permission (GM 23).

> Talking about five-star hotels, the advice would probably be to go in at that level, and then you have a great base and you can decide. I think that you probably have better opportunities rather than trying to work for a couple of years somewhere – we are not talking about one or two years – but if you are seven or eight years into your career and you are a deputy manager in a Holiday Inn, if you knock on the door of the five-star hotels, it will probably be a bit harder (GM 38).

Table 4. Additional illustrative examples for *enablers* of inter-brand mobility

Second-order categories	Illustrative examples
Multi-brand system	• "I spent three-and-a-half years in the Waldorf Astoria. I could have been there 10 years, still waiting for the top job in food and beverage. So, I moved across town from the five-star to a four-star property. People said, 'you are mad, why would you do that?' I had seen people in the senior leadership team of that hotel move within Hilton to 4-star properties, but moving up in terms of position, moving up in terms of earning power" (GM 13) • "Within Hilton, I had opportunities to transition very quickly. I got offered a lot of GM positions, at Doubletrees, at Hiltons etc. If you want to be a GM at a Waldorf or Conrad, you got to do the hard yards first, you got to do a Doubletree, a Hilton" (GM 45) • "One of the great things about Marriott is that you become inducted into a large organization that would lay out your career, should you wish to pursue it. I have worked in three different brands within Marriott, each being very, very different giving me an opportunity to grow my skills, explore different areas and still evolve. I think that Marriott, through its structure, would have influenced my longevity with the company. There has never been a reason for me to look at a competitor or another company because all those options are generally available under the Marriott umbrella" (GM 44) • "We could easily see an all-inclusive manager going to a five-star hotel and vice versa, and we are actively encouraging that. The business model is very different in an all-inclusive, the hospitality piece is the same, so you must be acutely aware of that. We have some very great success stories where we have started GMs out in select-service hotels moving into five-star hotels, because they are innate hoteliers" (GM 35) • "There are ways to get there. We have examples of people who started in Hilton Garden Inns, worked there for a couple of years, then moved to a Hilton and now work at the Conrad. I guess not everybody wants to work in every type of brand. I think in both camps (luxury and non-luxury hotels), there are people who cannot make the transition, but also people who can. If you are a GM at the Conrad or Waldorf Astoria, it is possible to move across (luxury) companies. If you are a GM at a Hilton to then become a GM at the Peninsula or Four Seasons is very difficult. But if you are within the (umbrella) company to move across brands, it is possible because you have built a profile, people know you, people might think that you are the right person" (GM 29)
Early career exposure	• "I think there is a point when it is too late to move from a three- or four-star to a five-star hotel. When you become a GM, it becomes very difficult to make a step down. I would say it is somewhere between the hotel manager and GM" (GM 24) • "I had the mentality of you had to be in it (luxury segment) from the beginning to be recognized and progress rather than walking in. If you were front office manager, would you walk in as a front office manager in a five-star hotel? Probably not; you would walk in as an Assistant Manager or Supervisor" (GM 18) • "I would say, the wider experiences you can make at the beginning of your career the better. Then you can say, 'ok, I actually like this or that.' It is a bit like saying, 'I will work in all the departments, but I love sales, so I'm going to stick to sales and go for sales'" (GM 14)

(*continued*)

Table 4. Continued

Second-order categories	Illustrative examples
	• "It is very easy in the hotel industry, based on maybe your first two-three years of actual work experience, to get pigeonholed into a particular sector almost for the rest of your career" (GM 06) • "Candidates who worked in the very well-known five-star hotels will very often have very limited exposure and real experience. However, you could talk to an intern at a busy four-star hotel in London. They may have amassed a wealth of experience, being exposed to situations and business volumes that the person in a luxury hotel could not even imagine" (GM 44) • "When you choose your internship, choose carefully and try and find a company who is going to be able to give you something later on in your career" (GM 30)
Changing industry dynamics	• "At the end of the day, you can teach those skills. It is not that you cannot teach them. Are individuals willing to put the time in is the question" (GM 28) • "As an industry, we need to get better looking outside the traditional roles or places. We have looked at people without hotel experience, but they have skills that are transferable; of course, not all of the skills are transferable, but it is just looking outside the box" (GM 17) • "It is not like it was before, 'if you do not grow up through the brand, you cannot understand Four Seasons and it is not possible'. They are changing on that as well. Once you can learn that technical skill, at least you are conscious of it, you can adapt and you have that sensitivity. It is a lot about attitude, it is a lot about attention to detail and wanting to do that. You can move and the luxury brands are being much more open. Actually, we have had so many people come in at another level and they can actually be developed up. It really can be done. It is down to what the expectations are" (GM 15) • "I am always conscious about my CV that there have been predominately four-star hotels, so to get the opportunity to manage a five-star was very different" (GM 10) • "I do not see a problem in moving across hotel classifications – as long as you have this adaptation mode" (GM 16) • "Moving across companies and classification is much more tolerated now than it ever has been. For me, once there is a story behind it or a sound reasoning to why you have done something, because you wanted a specific, targeted experience, I think that is very difficult to argue against; it comes down to an individual's attitude (GM 11) • "At whatever level, there is always a period of readjustment, so you hire that person because of their personality, drive, wish, and ambition. Whether they have come from a three-star or four-star hotel, I do not really care. I have hired people who have never worked in a hotel; yes, you must have some relevant experience, obviously" (GM 4)

Source: Authors' own work

Third, *changing industry dynamics* were mentioned by several GMs, enabling inter-brand mobility. Among several GMs, a greater focus on hiring for personality, interests, and values rather than an experience-based record of accomplishment in a particular hotel category. For example, GM 13 reflected on the GMs in Ireland, stating that *"they have generally dipped in and out of four- and five-stars for various reasons."* Alongside this, investing in the learning and development of employees to enhance their skills was viewed as an increasingly adopted approach to attract, develop and retain individuals in the industry. GM 06 reflected on "*hotels – the good ones – in the last five or six years, they hire for positive personality traits, and they say, 'we will train the skills at an operational or supervisory level'"* (GM 06). Two GMs explained why the focus on personality and learning was needed in the industry:

> Not that stars will not matter at all, but I think they may matter less. Attitude is going to become more and more important because there is a serious shortage in the labor market. We could be sitting in front of people who have worked for a three-star hotel down the road. They might be coming in and they might have to take a step back, but if they are the right person in terms of attitude, and they have a willingness to learn new skillsets, then anything is possible (GM 13).

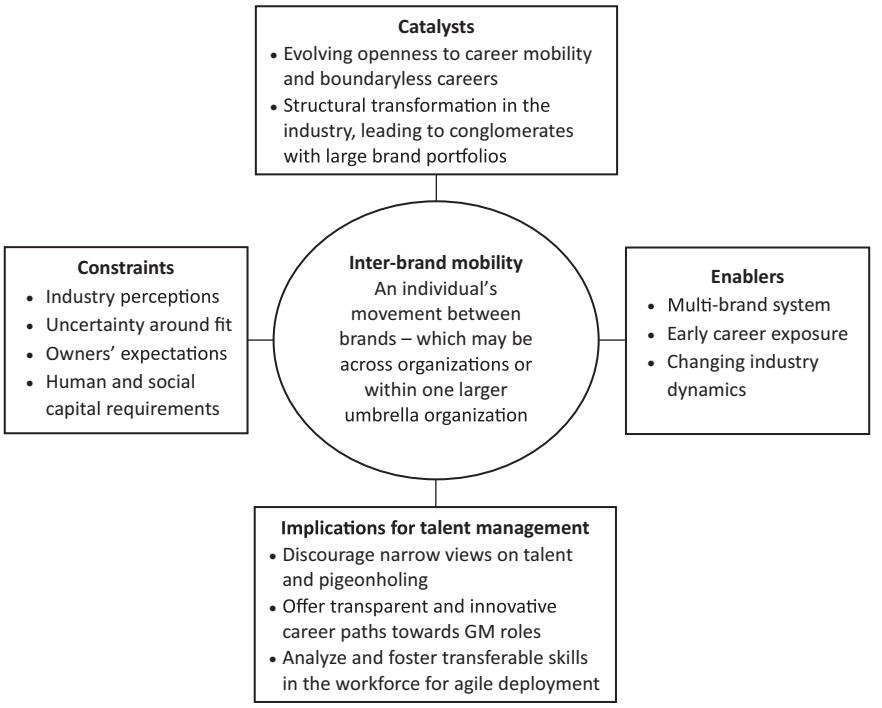
> We employ people who have the personalities and attitudes, and we layer in the skill. If you look at any of the hotel companies and the NASA space project logo, they are not the same. We are not trying to put people into orbit. I am trying to take them out of orbit and put them into happiness. I get some of my best people from four-star and three-star hotels. The only stars I am interested in are the stars that are in your heart and the stars that are in your desire to explore frontiers that you may not have explored before (GM 34).

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1 Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to examine how career mobility in the hotel industry shapes individuals' careers towards GM roles. Figure 2 presents a summary framework, visualizing the most salient and novel theme of inter-brand mobility and its key catalysts, constraints, enablers and implications. An evolving openness toward career mobility and boundaryless careers as well as the consolidation-driven structural transformation of the industry were identified as catalysts for increased attention toward inter-brand mobility. This has produced a paradoxical dynamic: on the one hand, it offers unprecedented opportunities for internal mobility and development within corporate portfolios through powerful internal talent markets (Keller and Dlugos, 2023). On the other hand, it disrupts traditional skillsets and career paths in the industry, previously characterized by stability and clear career ladders (Ladkin and Kichuk, 2017).

Our study diverges from the extant literature in two significant ways. First, scholars have generally focused on the demographic profile, competencies and development strategies toward GM roles in the hotel industry (cf. Akrivos *et al.*, 2007; Kim *et al.*, 2009; Okumus *et al.*, 2016). By contrast, our study provides more nuanced insights into career mobility, theorizing the inter-brand complexities in the hospitality context. We unpack the dynamics that potentially constrain moves and, in doing so, unconsciously influence career paths. Second, the limited studies on career mobility in the hospitality industry have often focused on functional areas within a hotel (e.g. food and beverage, rooms division and sales pathways), or examined a particular organization, hotel category or location, commonly adopting quantitative methods (Tolkach and Tung, 2019). Thus, through our qualitative research design, we provide rich insights into GMs' reflections on inter-brand mobility and talent management in the hotel industry. This approach allowed us to bring their voice to the forefront, raising critique about common industry perspectives around inter-brand mobility.



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 2. Inter-brand mobility – catalysts, constraints, enablers and implications

We echo the concerns raised by our sample GMs, noting that in the light of ongoing talent shortages in the hotel industry, more innovative and inclusive career paths must be embraced. Our findings showed an effort by some individuals and their organizations to focus on talent management, including development, upskilling and reskilling, particularly within the multi-brand system of an organization. For an industry that encompasses a large number of young and inexperienced workers (Golubovskaya *et al.*, 2019), such a development-focused mindset seems critical. In addition, rather than pigeonholing individuals early on into a particular segment due to a narrow view of track records and particular career patterns, participants acknowledged the value of a more diverse view on talents, recognizing transferable skills and offering opportunities for exposure. Beyond inter-brand mobility, this may also include non-traditional paths within the hotel industry (e.g. via revenue, HR or sales and marketing), and openness toward career transitions from other industries (Chudzikowski, 2012) that share a similar focus on service design and delivery. We contend that this ultimately enhances talent attraction and retention in the hotel industry. In the following, we discuss our theoretical contributions, practical implications and limitations and future research suggestions.

5.2 Theoretical implications

Our core theoretical contribution stems from conceptualizing inter-brand mobility as a novel form of career mobility, which differs from the traditional forms of organizational and

geographical mobility (Feldman and Ng, 2007). Having defined inter-brand mobility as movement between brands that may be across organizations or within one larger umbrella organization, we provide a more nuanced view of career mobility. Moreover, we contribute to the boundaryless career notion (Vinkenburg and Weber, 2012), by depicting important boundary conditions, a valuable contribution underpinning the contextually bounded nature of theorizing. The constraining role of boundaries acknowledges that boundaries define limits or resistances (Dahrendorf, 1980), which is highly relevant in the context of individuals' careers. We assert that recognizing the constraints on inter-brand career mobility is important as emphasis within the boundaryless career narrative is often placed on employees' flexibility, downplaying its contextually relevant boundaries (Inkson *et al.*, 2012).

Specifically, we theorize low perceived permeability (Belous, 1990) in upward mobility from four-star to five-star hotels due to attitudinal forces among various stakeholders as well as human and social capital requirements. We explain that a common underlying reason was the perception of varying operating standards and guest expectations between hotel categories. While previous research has focused on understanding the consumer experience in luxury hotels (Walls *et al.*, 2011), we find that these perceptions are also deeply engrained within the hiring decision-makers (i.e. managers, recruiters, owners). Building on studies that have recognized the influential role of hotel owners (see, e.g. Hodari *et al.*, 2018), we highlight their strong impact on hiring decisions, particularly at a GM level. Owners usually are risk averse and trust in established track records within a particular segment of the hotel industry. This is underpinned by a wider discussion of cultural fit, which emerged from our findings and confirms previous studies in the luxury hotel contexts (e.g. Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou, 2019). In addition, and contrary to previous research on social capital and performance (Huang *et al.*, 2021), we found that social capital – built within a particular segment of the industry – plays an influential role in hiring decisions at managerial levels. We assert that this relates to a broad set of employee, industry and customer networks established over one's career. Theoretically, these underlying reasons imply boundaries to the boundaryless career concept, highlighting how career mobility shapes career paths.

5.3 Practical implications

Our study offers several practical implications. First, for individuals, our findings allow for reflection on mobility patterns and may aid in career planning. For example, by being conscious of constraints on inter-brand mobility, individuals can strategically plan their career moves and gain diverse and transferable skills. Individuals can proactively seek ways to develop their human and social capital to reduce the perceived gap by hiring decision-makers. For example, individuals can enhance their human capital by focusing on their professional development. This could include obtaining industry credentials, completing training courses, seeking cross-brand experience or shadowing leaders in other hotel segments. Individuals can enhance their social capital by building professional networks, seeking industry mentors and collaborating on cross-brand strategic priorities for the organization or industry.

Second, organizations should actively work toward reducing the constraints on inter-brand mobility, particularly in relation to long-held, archaic industry perceptions and employees' human and social capital. Our findings highlight the intricate relationship between industry consolidation, strategic brand management and evolving career mobility patterns in hotels. The implications for talent management strategies within these complex organizational ecosystems warrant further consideration, particularly regarding the optimization of internal talent markets and the development of multi-brand leadership competencies for GMs. Organizations should develop a culture of talent management that encourages the exploration of diverse career opportunities and discourages narrow views on talent and pigeonholing of employees.

Providing transparency around the requirements to transition between hotel segments and outlining support mechanisms if one wishes to move brands is critical. This should include clear criteria for moves to another hotel category, for example, from a four-star to a five-star hotel. Support can be offered via targeted development opportunities for upskilling and reskilling, enhancing human and social capital. This encompasses offering diverse experiences alongside upward position-focused mobility, for example, lateral assignments and rotations for exposure across brands and hotel categories within conglomerates. More broadly, organizations should analyze the availability of relevant transferable skills and innovative ways to deploy individuals with those skills in an agile manner, for example, through providing cross-departmental and cross-brand collaboration opportunities.

Third, the hotel industry should consider the reflections shared by the GMs in our study. While some GMs have shared reasons for the constraints on inter-brand mobility within the industry, it is also clear that multiple GMs were quite critical about this approach. Facilitating career mobility provides economic benefits by reducing turnover, enhancing talent retention, deploying talent within the industry and creating a more agile workforce. Reducing constraints on career mobility also offers social benefits, ultimately making careers in the hospitality industry more sustainable, equitable and fulfilling, and contributing to the stability of the industry. We conclude that how the hotel industry portrays itself to (potential) employees is a key consideration when aiming to tackle the ongoing talent shortages. At a minimum, this requires critical reflection on current approaches to career mobility and managing talent.

5.4 Limitations and future research

Our research has some limitations. First, we did not seek generalizability through our qualitative study. We recognize that, despite having a diverse sample of GMs from 16 countries, we cannot fully capture the global variance, which may exist when considering career mobility. Expanding the sample and including other stakeholders such as employees, line and middle managers and HR leaders in future research would therefore be beneficial. In addition, we call for future research to complement our narrative-focused approach with quantitative methods, tracking individuals' career moves over time. At the same time, we view in-depth case study research as a useful method to unearth how hotel organizations manage the career mobility of employees. For example, research could explore to what extent inter-brand mobility occurs and whether it is hindered or supported by organizational policies and procedures. For example, organizations might have talent management policies or mobility programs that actively encourage career mobility.

Second, future research should aim to further understand the constraints on inter-brand mobility in the hotel industry and explore innovative approaches to address these constraints in practice. For example, our research has identified human and social capital requirements as constraints on inter-brand career mobility. Yet, to date, we know little about how the number, duration and sequence of jobs impact the specific human and social capital of individuals. Future research should therefore explore how distinct career patterns facilitate the development of individuals' human and social capital as well as organizational approaches to support employees in their human and social capital development for career mobility. In a similar vein, research that connects talent management and career mobility would be valuable to better understand the role of career mobility in attracting, developing, retaining and deploying talent. The tension between organizational investment in talent and increasing career mobility raises fundamental questions about the future of talent management. How can organizations develop talent management architectures that simultaneously serve organizational needs while accommodating career preferences of GMs? The role of inter-brand mobility in talent management strategies needs to be explicit

so that organizations can balance the benefits of talent development against the risks of external mobility.

Third, given our focus on inter-brand mobility, we did not present findings on other forms of mobility. Future research could expand on other forms of career mobility and also illuminate transitions from/to other industries. Better understanding these career patterns will particularly help in understanding transferable skills across industries and sectors. Finally, future research could critically examine how the various forms of career mobility evolve in the context of changing workforce and macro trends. For example, research might explore whether geographical mobility is being looked at differently following the COVID-19 pandemic and given broader sustainability concerns. Similarly, research might consider whether remote work trends shape career mobility in the hotel industry. While the vast majority of hospitality roles require physical presence, there exists a small subset of hospitality workers (e.g. those in office roles such as finance, marketing, HR), who could potentially work remotely, but we know little on the extent to which this is offered in hotel organizations and how this may impact individuals' careers in the long term.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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