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# **NAVIGATING COMPLEX FRONTIERS: INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVELLERS AS GLOBAL BOUNDARY SPANNERS IN MNES**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 global pandemic calls into question the relevance and sustainability of international business travel as a way to conduct global work in multinational enterprises (MNEs). Although remote working and virtual interactions are becoming more prevalent, MNEs will remain reliant on individual actors that have the capacity to span a multitude of interrelated global boundaries due to their complex and geographically dispersed structures (Carlile, 2004). A crucial part of the global boundary spanning role involves frequently initiating and participating in multiple cross-border social interactions in order to build trust, access and share contextually embedded knowledge and bridge cultural divides (Pedersen, Soda and Stea, 2019). A central problem for global boundary spanners involves understanding how they traverse a globally dispersed MNE structure in order to continuously engage in a range of face-to-face social exchanges. Our study argues that the global boundary spanning role requires a high degree of mobilisation, but this may be complex and intensive, and risks creating potential dangers with excessive workloads (Zhao and Anand, 2013). This paper answers a call to unpack the channels through which the mobilisation of global boundary spanners occurs as well as the distinctive challenges involved (Schotter et al., 2017).

In doing so we draw on insights in global mobility. This scholarship has focused on how expatriates, deployed on international assignments from headquarters (HQ) and stationed within a foreign subsidiary, enhance strategic coordination and integration (Harzing, Pudelko and Reiche, 2016). However, increased volatility and uncertainty has rendered relocation less attractive and sustainable and firms have been looking towards more agile forms of global mobility, such as international business travellers (IBTs). IBTs are individuals employed in a single home location that regularly travel across borders for work purposes, often staying in a location for up to three weeks, without fully relocating (Collings, Scullion and Morley, 2007). Rather than being firmly rooted in one host location for an extended period, IBTs are charged with a distinctive mandate of regularly flying between a variety of countries, addressing a multiplicity of issues, within sporadic and condensed period of times. Of the limited extant literature on this type of flexible international assignees (Shaffer et al., 2012) the potential strategic value of IBTs as highly mobile and flexible global boundary spanners within the MNE has received no attention.

Applying a boundary spanning lens, IBTs are characterised by unique and distinct circumstances vis-a-vis expatriates. Expatriates' boundary spanning roles are characterised by reasonably stable and identifiable boundaries within a single country context (Au and Fukuda,

2002; Johnson and Duxbury, 2010). Comparatively, we argue that IBTs perform a more complex and dynamic boundary spanning role that is characterised by a significant degree of diversity, variability and multiplicity across a wide span of boundaries. One of the significant challenges IBTs confront is the issue of ‘frequent transitions’ (Welch, Welch and Worm, 2007), in that connections established during business travel are rather transient and fleeting, as the lack of prolonged spatial proximity limits recurrent face-to-face interactions (Bozkurt and Mohr, 2011). Indeed, the spatial and temporal variation of their global boundary spanning role may create a ‘quasi co-presence’ (Bathelt and Henn, 2014), and IBTs may have to endure to maintain trust and legitimacy across an expansive network. IBTs may also be confronted with a multiplicity of cultural contexts (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014) with less time to absorb and learn about local cultures given they do not have the same opportunities as expatriates to immerse themselves (Yagi and Kleinberg, 2011). As a result, IBTs may face the challenge of becoming ‘outsiders’ in every market (Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014), struggling to build connections and fully appreciate the value of local knowledge or complexity of local cultures. This is largely due to spending so much time ‘in the air’. We argue that there is a need to move beyond an outdated focus on expatriation (Duvivier, Peeters and Harzing, 2019; Liu and Meyer, 2020), to unearth how IBTs navigate complex global boundaries. This paper therefore investigates *how IBTs enact global boundary spanning roles?* In addressing this question, we utilise a qualitative multiple case study approach with Medical Technology MNEs.

## THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Global boundary spanning is defined as a ‘set of communication and coordination activities performed by individuals within an organization and between organizations to integrate activities across multiple cultural, institutional and organizational contexts’ (Schotter et al., 2017: 404). Characterised by significant ambiguity and diversity across hierarchical, geographical and cultural boundaries, global boundary spanning represents a complex and multifaceted endeavour (Pedersen et al., 2019). It is important to understand the motivation or willingness of individuals in performing these roles as they are difficult for firms to fill given their inherent intensity and opacity (see Liu and Meyer, 2020; Minbaeva and Santangelo, 2018). Research suggests that individuals in these roles face challenges in managing across various global boundaries. For instance, from a network theory perspective, global boundary spanning roles have the capacity to bridge relational boundaries and facilitate interpersonal ties between a wide range of previously separated and unrelated actors (Kostova and Roth, 2003). Knowledge boundaries also exist between disconnected senders and receivers of valuable information (Liu and Meyer, 2020). A central part of the role involves information-processing across these knowledge boundaries, as it possesses visibility and access to diverse and valuable knowledge in peripheral contexts (Minbaeva and Santangelo, 2018). Moreover, cultural boundaries may generate tensions in the channels through which boundary spanning occurs, fashioning communication disruption and knowledge distortion (Zhao and Anand, 2013). However, in managing across these complex frontiers, a central challenge involves ‘maintaining a high level of contact’ with other actors (Zhao and Anand, 2013: 1517). Despite this, there is a limited understanding of ‘how’ exactly individuals in global boundary spanning roles maintain this frequent and recurrent contact or the channels through which this occurs.

Global mobility studies assume that the boundaries expatriates are confronted with are relatively stable, and they have time and space to immerse, learn and adjust to this given context

(Reiche, Harzing and Kraimer, 2009). Conversely, given they never fully relocate, IBTs' boundary spanning roles are more transitory and characterised by a greater degree of spatial and temporal idiosyncrasy. IBTs are given the distinctive mandate of 'globetrotting' between their home and a variety of host countries, spanning across fluctuating boundaries with multiple conflicting demands (Konopaske, Robie and Ivancevich, 2005; Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014). In managing relational boundaries, IBTs are likely confronted with greater network complexity and variability given they span a diverse web of actors. This makes the boundary spanning role of IBTs more challenging in identifying who may be a central node in the network (Bozkurt and Mohr, 2011; Conroy, Collings, Clancy, 2019). Navigating relational boundaries often requires social capital in terms of knowing who to influence in order to access resources - or who can help in solving a certain problem (Duvivier et al., 2019). Given the greater difficulties in becoming embedded to a single location, IBTs may have to engage in collective, repeated and iterative social interactions to foster trust and close connections. Furthermore, they are likely to be exposed to a higher degree of information diversity in managing across knowledge boundaries. Compared to expatriates, IBTs confront the challenge of sourcing and sharing a diverse range of knowledge from across the MNE. Rather than being culturally immersed in one location, and provided with a protracted period of time to adjust, IBTs frequently transition between a broad range of cultural settings thus leading to greater contextual multiplicity than expatriates.

## METHOD

A qualitative research design was followed to enable the generation of novel insights (Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2016). We focused on the Medical Technology industry in Ireland as it is a highly globalised context with significant foreign direct investment flows. A multiple case study approach was used to induce rich theoretical insights from empirical data (Welch et al., 2011), as well as being a suitable method for exploring the intricacies of boundary spanning in globally firms (Schotter et al., 2017). We followed a theoretical sampling approach whereby we employed three selection criteria: a) MNEs operating within and across at least 3 regions (Mahnke et al., 2012); b) MNEs that used substantial international travel for work purposes; and c) MNEs similar in their global coverage and nature, to generate replication logic. Ensuring anonymity, our 4 case firms were titled RANCO, STEERCO, CRESTCO and TRONCO.

Data was gathered primarily through in-depth face-to-face interviews with 36 highly mobile individuals. Interviewees were identified through theoretical sampling in that we targeted those individuals that had extensive experience of travelling internationally. These trips ranged from 2 days (minimum) to 3 weeks (maximum) with most spending a week on average away from their home market. We interviewed across functions, with most people having responsibility for a number of countries in specific regions alongside travelling to their HQ. Interview questions were based on surfacing the nature of the travel that respondents were involved in, as well as how they managed different boundaries, the challenges they faced, who they interacted with, how knowledge was shared, and cultural challenges in this process.

We used an abduction approach which involved iterating back and forth between collecting and analysing empirical data and consulting pre-existing theory (Bamberger, 2018). We followed three steps in analysing these data. First, we identified first order codes aligned to respondents language on boundary spanning. Second, we collated these into second order codes that related closely to 'how' IBTs managed the challenges of their global boundary spanning

role. Third, we developed final aggregate dimensions, which consisted of three interrelated boundaries (relational, knowledge and cultural) that IBTs navigated. In making the conceptual transition from our second order codes to our final aggregate dimensions, we developed ‘guiding logics’, in the form of the distinctive challenges that IBTs faced in managing across three interrelated global boundaries; network complexity, information diversity and contextual multiplicity. These challenges were not identified *a priori* and instead emerged from the data analysis process. We present them in the theoretical context to frame the paper and guide the reader.

## FINDINGS

Our findings suggest that in performing their global boundary spanning roles, IBTs actively confront and manage across relational, knowledge and cultural boundaries. A central theme from respondents was that relying on virtual interactions was not effective when spanning these boundaries, and they needed to engage in frequent international travel. We find that IBTs had a high degree of *normative commitment* in performing their global boundary spanning role, which involved challenges of building relationships, sourcing and sharing knowledge and learning a multiplicity of cultural norms.

### Normative commitment and role overload

Respondents were generally not formally required to travel as much as they did, instead placing pressure on themselves to travel regularly. In some cases, respondents noted how excessive travel was impacting their health, but they refused to travel less, with many commenting that travel is essentially *part of the job* and *a big part of the company culture*. Most respondents noted that they often worked *18-hour days* due to time differences and jet-lag, due to *catching up* on work from home – either early morning or late at night. However, respondents still had a deep sense of normative commitment to travel, noting; *I want to do what is best for the business...and I feel that [travel] is the best thing to do* (HR Generalist1 CRESTCO). Frequent and extensive travel had become the norm in how respondents enacted their global boundary spanning roles, *first thing on your mind is you have to travel, that's the way your mind is set up* (Medical Advisor CRESTCO). Relatedly, respondents generally had a high degree of decision autonomy or agency in choosing when they travel, which location they travel to and how many days/weeks they travel for, within reason. This informal and ad-hoc approach however meant that excessive travel was often left unchecked, leading to adverse consequences in the form of role overload over time.

### Navigating complex boundaries

We find that IBTs boundary spanning roles are complex and intensive characterised by spatial and temporal idiosyncrasies. As suggested, respondents confronted and actively managed challenges of network complexity, information diversity and cultural complexity in traversing relational, knowledge and cultural boundaries.

In managing network complexity IBTs placed a premium on establishing ‘spatial proximity’ and therefore engaging in repeat travel in order to maintain a *deep rhythm of face-to-face communication*. This allows for the development of trust or a *deeper connection* through

informal social interactions and *dialogue*. Travel created spatial proximity for IBTs to *be in the room* or attend certain meetings, which enhanced the potential to make particular connections or establish new links they may have otherwise *missed out on*. Travel allowed for the development of *more meaningful exchanges* and the establishment of *trust*. IBTs regularly engaged in repeat travel as it created the opportunity to build a *deeper sense of empathy* within a complex network. We find that IBTs therefore carry a high degree of relational knowledge and have the potential to act as relational connectors in that they *know whom* to influence in accessing resources or solving problems. However, we also found that there is a danger that managing network complexity may create role overload due to a need to remain constantly connected to a global network, managing across time zones, without any reimbursement for time. In maintaining trust, particularly in Asia, there is a risk of intensive travel schedules over longer distances.

Our findings present some interesting insights on how IBTs manage information diversity across knowledge boundaries. These individuals acted as central conduits, between the home country and a host of international destinations, in sourcing and sharing a diverse range of valuable knowledge. IBTs are important *gatekeepers* in sourcing pockets of heterogeneous knowledge from a variety of locations. In spanning global boundaries, IBTs *source richer knowledge* and *serendipitous knowledge*, which we define as new knowledge that was not initially planned for but provides value and relevance. It is *the information that you get that you did not really know what was going on*. Repeated travel may also lead to more information-rich exchanges, which can generate new and unexpected forms of knowledge. IBTs are also involved in *knowledge relaying*, which is the act of sharing sourced knowledge with those that can apply it to create value. Relaying often results in IBTs performing as *translators*, ensuring that their counterparts understand the meaning and value of complex knowledge. However, we find managing information diversity contributes to role overload. Firms did not fully recognise IBTs as valuable knowledge carriers, and therefore did not effectively support or structure their knowledge architectures in a way that allowed IBTs to effectively capture knowledge. IBTs were regularly under pressure to compile exhaustive trip reports, leading to working longer hours, and often preventing them from prioritising richer exchanges of knowledge.

IBTs also had to navigate contextual multiplicity across cultural boundaries. Contextual multiplicity involves managing a variety of cultural norms such as language, religion, gender and communication. This created uncertainty and ambiguity for IBTs in building connections and sharing knowledge. IBTs experienced situations of cultural misunderstandings across a variety of countries rather than culture shock in one country. Our findings suggest that, with frequent travel, IBTs may have the opportunity to become immersed in different cultures as they begin to learn more, often adapting and changing their style to manage these cultural boundaries. However, we also find that IBTs receive no cultural training, instead acting as cultural navigators through a self-driven learning process. Equally, in perceived 'tougher' cultures, female IBTs were sometimes not given the same opportunities by their firms to learn and adapt. Respondents commented how stress arising from repeated cultural misunderstandings, can create cognitive challenges that contribute to role overload. This was particularly the case in markets that were underdeveloped or had higher cultural distance, which often led to a stressful learning experience of continuous misunderstandings and adaptation.

In summary, our findings illuminate how IBTs enact global boundary spanning roles, acting as network connectors in developing social capital (Bathelt and Henn, 2014; Bozkurt and Mohr, 2011), knowledge repositories in assimilating and transmitting globally dispersed

information (Criscuolo, 2005; Hovhannisyan and Keller, 2015) and cultural bridges in learning and adjusting to local settings.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This paper set out to explore how IBTs enact global boundary spanning roles and in doing so we generate two primary contributions. First, we expand emerging work on the significance of global boundary spanning as a central way to enhance strategic coordination within and across the MNE (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Kostova and Roth, 2003; Minbaeva and Santangelo, 2018; Pedersen et al., 2019; Schotter et al., 2017). We find that global boundary spanning involves managing across three interrelated boundaries; relational, knowledge and cultural boundaries. We detail how global boundary spanning is reliant on establishing spatial proximity through a high degree of physical mobility. Specifically, global boundary spanning involves regularly traversing complex and interdependent boundaries in order to engage in a cycle of frequent and recurrent social exchanges. Our findings reason that, although virtual platforms are useful and becoming more widespread in MNEs (Maznevski and Chudoba, 2004; Nurmi and Hinds, 2016), they are viewed as less effective to face-to-face interactions in generating meaningful exchanges. Importantly, we find that, although the global boundary spanning role involves a high level of normative commitment and intrinsic motivation, when combined with decision autonomy and a lack of formal oversight from the firm, this can have adverse effects in the form of ‘role overload’ (Zhao and Anand, 2013) given the intensity of excessive travel. This finding reveals the potential dark side of global boundary spanning.

Second, we enrich and extend current work on the growing significance of international business travel as a flexible form of global mobility (Bathelt and Henn, 2014; Boeh and Beamish, 2012; Bozkurt and Mohr, 2011; Criscuolo, 2005) by demonstrating the importance of international business travel as a crucial channel through which global boundary spanning occurs. Specifically, we progress the argument beyond expatriation (Duvivier et al., 2019; Reiche et al., 2009), identifying IBTs as unique and valuable global boundary spanners that confront distinctive challenges in enacting their role. For instance, in managing across relational, knowledge and cultural boundaries, IBTs are confronted with network complexity, information diversity and contextual multiplicity. We explicate how IBTs’ global boundary spanning roles are complex and intense as they are confronted with the challenge of not being fully connected to, knowledgeable of, or deeply immersed in any one market. In managing these challenges, IBTs establish deep connections, influence and trust, in order to source, relay and capture rich knowledge, as well as proactively learn and adapt to a multiplicity of cultural norms. IBTs are therefore ‘hyper-flexible’ global boundary spanners that firms need to more explicitly recognise, leverage and support to realise their strategic value and offset any potential adverse effects of role overload.

The current COVID-19 crisis is changing the way global work is carried out and there is an acute need for firms to enhance their virtual communication platforms as a complement to face-to-face exchanges. We anticipate however that international business travel will remain as a crucial channel through which global boundary spanning transpires, but our study argues that firms need to be more conscious of how they support individuals in this process.

## **REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS**