

When at home, do as they do at home? Valuation of self-initiated repatriates' competences in French and German management career structures

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ABSTRACT

While internationally experienced managers are highly sought after, expatriates who self-initiate their repatriation have been shown to face difficulties upon return. However, we lack empirical insights into the determinants of the employability of self-initiated repatriates (SIRs). By investigating how country-specific, career system-related factors influence employability competences of SIRs in the cases of France and Germany, we contribute to the expansion and refinement of the nascent theory of employability competences. Taking account of international context factors, we generate theoretical propositions about employability that serve to develop wider theory (theoretical generalisation). Our interviews with 40 SIR managers show that employability cannot be determined by isolating individual competences. The level and kind of employability competences proved to be determined, rather, by country-specific norms characterising management career structures. These vary for managers with national and international career paths and are moderated by expatriation mode (assigned versus self-initiated), length of stay, destination country, corporate size, and career phase. As such, these competences are relative. In offering specific guidance for the further development of employability competence theory and related future research, we seek to stimulate additional research in the field, to enhance the validity of future studies and to increase their utility for employees, organisations and policy makers alike.

KEYWORDS

Self-initiated repatriation; management career structure; norms; employability competence; international work experience

Introduction

A recent literature review of empirical studies with mainly Western samples of individuals and organisations shows that management careers are still, despite increased interorganisational and international mobility, shaped by the traditional career logic of linear hierarchical progression (Vinkenburg & Weber, 2012). As they pursue employability and career success, managers need to consciously or unconsciously adopt these implicit or explicit career norms.

Comparative research suggests that norms guiding management careers and the resultant career structures differ between countries (Evans, Lank, & Farquhar, 1989; Oikelome & Healy, 2007). While social capital (i.e. a network and the assets that may be mobilised through that network; Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 1992) is decisive for advancement in France, for example, expertise is crucial in Germany (Evans et al., 1989). It follows that self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) are likely to experience different norms while abroad and pressure to adapt to different management career structures. SIEs are defined as individuals who expatriate independently, without company support, and search for their new jobs via the external labour market including local employers (Andresen, Bergdolt, Margenfeld, & Dickmann, 2014). In contrast, assigned expatriates (AEs) who are temporarily sent abroad via the internal labour market of a multinational company (MNC) are less likely to be confronted with different career structures. This is because MNCs tend to apply national career structure norms largely unchanged abroad (Hartmann, Feisel, & Schober, 2010).

Upon repatriation, assigned repatriates are reintegrated into national career systems by their employers via the internal labour market. As such, most are likely to face only minor employability difficulties. By contrast, self-initiated repatriates (SIRs), i.e. former SIEs and AEs who quit their organization abroad and, thus, repatriate without the support of an employer (Ho, Seet, & Jones, 2016) and independently seek new employment at home in a new organization via the external labour market (Begley, Collings, & Scullion, 2008; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010; see Table 1) need to ensure that they readapt to national career structures upon repatriation to secure employment and remain employable (Thijssen, Van der Heijden, & Rocco, 2008). In the case of AEs, the decision to (prematurely) quit the organization that assigned them abroad and to self-initiate their repatriation is the exception rather than the norm in practice. Such decisions may be related to push and pull factors, such as dismissal by an employer due to poor performance abroad (KPMG, 2015), adaptation problems (Deloitte, 2012), a desire to escape or simply an attractive job offer back home.

Repatriates constitute a potentially valuable resource for employers due to their international experiences, social capital, and intercultural competences (cf. Begley et al., 2008). Nevertheless, SIRs have been shown to face a wide range of challenges that hamper cross-border labour

Table 1. Repatriate groups.

		Repatriation via	
		External labour market	Internal labour market
Expatriation via	External labour market	SIE → SIR	SIE → AR
	Internal labour market	AE → SIR	AE → AR

SIE: self-initiated expatriate; SIR: self-initiated repatriate; AE: assigned expatriate; AR: assigned repatriate; cells shaded in grey indicate the focus of current study (SIR).

mobility. Challenges faced by SIRs that hinder the realisation of their growth potential include impaired employability upon return and their international work experience (IWE) not being valued highly by employers (Begley et al., 2008; Guo, Porschitz, & Alves, 2013). As such, it can be assumed that considerable scope exists to optimise the cross-border labour mobility of SIRs for the benefit of all involved.

In this context, three major research gaps exist. First, repatriation research remains focused on AEs who usually repatriate within the internal labour market and with the support of their home organisations (Andresen et al., 2014). In contrast, less than a dozen studies on SIRs have been carried out (e.g. Andresen & Walther, 2013; Begley et al., 2008; Guo et al., 2013; Ho et al., 2016; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010; Walther, 2014). Although literature reports major challenges, very little is known about their causes and about the experiences of SIRs more generally. Specific research on SIR managers and their employability is entirely lacking. Second, our analysis at the individual level of SIR managers' employability competences and of influencing factors is based on the theory by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006). This is still a nascent theory (Edmondson & McManus, 2007) in that it proposes tentative answers to novel questions of how and why different competences enable people to gain employability and suggests new connections between phenomena such as the relationship with career anchors. In adopting a universalist perspective, however, it does not address the impact of country-specific career tracks (see Lo Presti & Pluviano, 2016). Third, at the structural level, existing descriptions of management career structures and their typical norms (e.g. Evans et al., 1989) omit any description of specific norms governing how IWE influences managers' opportunities to secure adequate employment and develop their careers upon repatriation.

The aim of our qualitative study is a theoretical generalisation of our results. We strive to refine, adjust and expand Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden's (2006) nascent theory of employability competences by applying it deductively to SIRs and inductively identifying the kind and level of employability competences they need to secure desirable employment on returning home as well as influencing variables in an international context (Lewis, Ritchie, Ormston, & Morrell, 2014). Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) developed their employability competences mainly by looking at local employees and supervisors at one large Dutch company.

Thus, neither the potential influence of a non-Dutch career structure and of organisational specifics nor the impact of international mobility on employability has been considered so far. In view of the nascency of employability competence theory and the comparably low state of knowledge in our field of interest, our research questions are open-ended, and methodologically, we chose to collect rich, detailed qualitative data via interviews with a view to identifying patterns, taking a social constructivist stance (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

Our research questions at the structural and individual level are:

Research question 1: How do country-specific career structures influence required employability competence profiles?

Research question 2: Within each country context, which specific employability competence profiles apply to internationally mobile SIRs and open up lateral entry options at higher management levels (i.e. opportunities to commence employment at a level above the usual entry level)?

To answer our research questions, we explore context- and group-related repatriation conditions for the specific cases of two groups of management-level SIRs returning to France and Germany. We chose these countries as both are leading European economies and both are currently experiencing a 'war' over talent being fought out by numerous companies with international operations (Manpower Group, 2014). In view of talent shortages, SIRs constitute a potentially valuable staffing pool (Begley et al., 2008) for MNCs seeking globally competent managers. Moreover, little is known about how career structure norms in France and Germany affect internationally mobile managers, and few comparative studies of the two countries exist (see Stahl & Cerdin, 2004 as an exception). By providing insights into norms prevailing in management career structures in France and Germany which impact on the lateral entry of SIRs, we seek to contribute to employability competence theory by highlighting the need to contextualise competences. Our intention, in so doing is, to contribute to international employability research and practical discussions in the field and to deliver research results that may be of utility to expatriates, organisations and policy makers alike.

To achieve our aim and to answer our research questions, we will proceed as follows. First, structural and individual determinants of repatriation success are described. After briefly reviewing prior research on the repatriation of AEs and SIEs, we summarise the literature on management career structures in France and Germany and address typical norms and their implications for employability competences. We then outline our methodological approach and present the results of our comparative study of the perceived employability competences of SIRs, i.e. former SIEs and AEs who repatriated to their home countries France and Germany on their own initiative. On this basis, we then discuss how structural conditions determine how these competences are valued, draw

general conclusions from our results that represent a contribution to employability competence theory in an international context, and derive implications for research and practice.

Structural and individual determinants of repatriation success

Repatriation: effects of international work mobility

IWE is considered a valuable asset and sometimes even a requirement for careers in organisations operating internationally (Kraimer, Shaffer, & Bolino, 2009), but downsides have also been identified for AEs. Repatriated AEs often find themselves placed in positions they consider incompatible with their competences, leading to frustration over the lack of recognition accorded to their IWE (Bossard & Peterson, 2005). AEs nevertheless continue to view IWE as an asset enhancing their external labour market value (Stahl & Cerdin, 2004). In this vein, Suutari and Brewster (2003) found that 60% of their respondents indicated having received an external job offer upon return, with 23% of repatriates even receiving four or more. According to the Brookfield 2016 report, 32% of the 163 global companies surveyed confirmed returnees' higher marketability as the most common reason for post-repatriation attrition.

Repatriation literature remains focused on the return of former AEs via the internal labour market; the experiences and challenges of SIRs moving via the external labour market have largely been neglected up to now. In addition to the repatriation motives of former SIEs (Guo et al., 2013; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010), the repatriation experiences of SIRs have been analysed in terms of cross-cultural adjustment and career capital (Andresen & Walther, 2013; Walther, 2014). Begley et al. (2008) indicate that SIRs are likely to face more challenges than AEs returning via the internal labour market; these include finding new employment, financial concerns and emotional distress. The lack of recognition of SIRs' IWE by Irish employers constituted a major problem and led to Irish SIRs downplaying or hiding their IWE in order to become more attractive to employers. Those who managed to secure employment tended to find themselves in lower-ranking positions than they had previously occupied and could not make use of competences acquired abroad. While Begley et al. (2008) did not conduct systematic analysis of contextual factors in interpreting their results, Andresen and Walther (2013) discovered that repatriates to France, Germany and Denmark faced country-specific conditions affecting how their IWE and career capital was valued. IWE was highly valued by German employers, for instance, but perceived negatively in Denmark. More empirical evidence is clearly required if we are to understand SIRs' repatriation experiences.

In this study, we focus on SIRs' perceived employability, i.e. individuals' subjective estimation of their ability to secure new employment upon return (Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006). As perceptions typically guide behaviours, perceived employability can be seen as a driver of SIRs' job

search decisions and activities. We expect contextual and individual factors to determine SIRs' perceived employability, i.e. norms in French and German management career structures that apply to this specific group of internationally mobile individuals and SIRs' profiles and activities to secure employment upon repatriation.

Table 1 outlines the four different repatriate groups and their relocation paths via the internal and external labour markets.

Management career structures in France and Germany

Research has identified variance in career structures and norms between France and Germany (Evans et al., 1989). Are SIRs' IWE and employability competences valued differently in France and Germany because of these country-specific norms influenced by national cultures and institutions?

The typical German management career structure is based on a tradition of formal apprenticeships and functional career paths. Academic achievements gained at institutions of higher education and reflecting a candidate's level of specialist knowledge usually play a major role in the recruitment processes of German companies (Alexandre-Bailly, Festing, & Jonczyk, 2007). In contrast to the French case, the institution itself is barely relevant. Zettler, Kramer, Thoemmes, Nagy, and Trautwein (2013) found no significant correlation in Germany between the higher education institution type attended and early career success. Traditionally, individuals (including those with doctoral degrees) enter organisations close to the bottom of the hierarchy and are placed in a suitable function after a trial phase of job rotation between functions that serves to identify an individual's talents and potential (Barmeyer & Davoine, 2008; Evans et al., 1989). Individuals then build up expertise in this function that in turn opens up access to management positions. The fact that almost every second German top manager holds a PhD indicates the prevalence of expertise-based access to hierarchical positions (Davoine & Ravasi, 2013). Evans et al. (1989) describe German career structures as being closed to lateral entry at higher levels, since management positions are occupied by individuals who have gained in-depth company-specific knowledge. Moreover, top managers' interfirm mobility is lower in Germany than in France (Davoine & Ravasi, 2013). These factors all represent potential barriers for SIRs.

In contrast to Germany, elite educational degrees such as those awarded by the prestigious and highly selective Grande Ecoles are decisive hiring factors in France: former students at elite institutions tend to recruit individuals from their networks (Barmeyer, 2010; Evans et al., 1989) and thus influence their career success (Alexandre-Bailly et al., 2007). At lower hierarchical levels, social capital, i.e. the network of social connections that a person can effectively mobilise (Bourdieu, 1998), is also important, but less decisive: it opens up access to information on potential vacancies or the profiles sought by companies (Dany, 2003). Employees progress in

diverse functional areas, underlining the importance of broad-based generic knowledge and strategic, analytical thinking skills (Alexandre-Bailly et al., 2007; Barmeyer, 2010). Lateral entry is possible in France: top management positions are typically filled with high potentials from the French external labour market with public sector experience (Davoine & Ravasi, 2013). IWE is not seen as a critical success factor in itself, but can be linked to personal qualities or achievements (Evans et al., 1989). Norms characterising the French and German management career structures are summarised in Table 2 (on the left).

It is clear, then, that SIRs face distinctively different management career structures even within Europe (Davoine & Ravasi, 2013). These structures represent potential barriers to managers switching countries. However, we lack knowledge of how norms underlying different career structures affect (a) their permeability to lateral entry of SIRs via the external labour market and (b) how IWE is valued and how it influences SIRs' employability. Our empirical study focuses on these two aspects.

Individual employability competences and their importance in French and German management career structures

Our study analyses the perceived employability of SIR managers from a career-related point of view (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). SIRs typically pursue modern careers that are self-directed across different employers and countries (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). To obtain employment in the native labour market, SIRs need to possess and optimally deploy knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) as well as further characteristics that make them valuable to current and potential employers (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). We use the employability competence theory elaborated by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) to understand how French and German SIRs perceive their own employability. As it covers both job-related issues and career development, the framework can highlight the value of SIRs for organisations and address our research questions. Moreover, it usefully integrates a range of other employability-related issues including job-related qualifications, career self-management, flexibility, adaptability, and continuous development (e.g. De Grip, Van Loo & Sanders, 2004; Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003; Forrier & Sels, 2003; Fugate et al., 2004; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Van Dam, 2005). Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) define five employability competences: occupational expertise complemented by anticipation and optimisation, personal flexibility, corporate sense, and balance.

Occupational expertise refers to human capital that influences both individual employability and organisational effectiveness (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Fugate et al., 2004). Occupational expertise enhances social recognition: those possessing it are perceived as high performers and excellent professionals by key figures within organisations.

Table 2. Norms of the French and German management career structures.

Norms	General norms (derived from literature)		Norms for SIRs (empirically-based)	
	France	Germany	France	Germany
<u>LATERAL ENTRY</u> at higher management levels	Possible (with comparatively higher interfirm mobility)	Closed (reflected in comparatively low inter-firm mobility)	Possible	Possible
<u>HIRING CRITERIA</u>				
-IWE	Not expected	Not broadly expected; In MNCs preference for internal assigned expatriation	Valid for some SIRs Linked to personal qualities Moderated by expatriation mode, destination country, career phase	Valid for most SIRs Critical success factor Moderated by corporate size
-Occupational expertise				
<i>Generic KSAs</i>	Most important	Least important	Valid for some SIRs	Valid for some SIRs
<i>Sectorial KSAs</i>	Important	Important	Valid for few SIRs	Valid for few SIRs
<i>Specific KSAs</i>	Least important	Most important	Valid for few SIRs	Valid for some SIRs
-Social network	National network most important, esp. at higher hierarchical levels (recruitment; access to information regarding vacancies etc.)	Social network comparatively less important	Valid for most SIRs: National, professional network	Valid for most SIRs: Broad inter-/national, private and professional network
-Educat. background	Reputation of institution	Subjects; grades	Reputation of institution	Subjects; grades
<u>CAREER PATH</u>	Multifunctional	Functional	Multifunctional	Functional

Note: Valid for most (14–20 respondents), some (7–13 respondents), or few (0–6 respondents) interviewees.

Adaptability to change and development takes two forms. *Anticipation and optimisation* involve an employee's creative preparation for future changes at work in search of optimum job and career outcomes. This entails proactively monitoring the environment to identify opportunities and threats (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008), acquiring knowledge about labour market opportunities for career development, transitions and job moves (Forrier & Sels, 2003; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005), and comparing one's own KSAs with current job opportunities and requirements (Fugate, 2006). Optimisation is reached when an employee manages to balance personal preferences with labour market developments. *Personal flexibility* describes the competence to reactively take advantage of change at work and in the labour market (see also Fugate et al., 2004).

Employees displaying *corporate sense* identify with their organisation and its goals and participate actively in decision-making. They collaborate at departmental and organisational levels, are active in occupational communities and (sectoral) networks and share responsibilities as well as knowledge and experience in these contexts. Expanded social capital is likely to boost organisational effectiveness and to help employees identify and benefit from career opportunities.

Achieving *balance* between conflicting interests, more specifically between (a) the interests of employers, (b) the work, career, and personal interests of employees, and (c) employers' and employees' interests requires an honest relationship between employers and employees. Building on reciprocity ensures all parties benefit from arrangements and that a balance is reached between investments and benefits.

These employability competences are considered universally valid (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). The studies of Begley et al. (2008) and Guo et al. (2013) suggest, however, that SIRs' ability to find new employment is not only influenced by their individual employability competences, but also by contextual factors that could 'promote or inhibit the effective use of employability' (Forrier & Sels, 2003: 106). We posit that contextual factors determine not only the 'use' which can be made of employability, but also the required content and level of employability competences sought. SIRs' specialist knowledge could, for example, constitute *occupational expertise* and be an important hiring factor against the background of functional German career structures. In France, however, *occupational expertise* is reflected in multifunctional careers as generalists (Davoine & Ravasi, 2013) and job- and organisation-specific KSAs are valued relatively less highly. Moreover, *corporate sense*, including strategic alliances and social networks, is likely to be decisive for SIRs seeking to re-enter French management career structures (Evans et al., 1989). Thus, employability competence theory represents a nascent theory (Edmondson & McManus, 2007) in that it proposes tentative answers to how and why different competences enable people to gain employability. We aim to contribute to an expansion, adaptation and/or refinement of the theory by considering context variables relevant for persons pursuing an international career.

Research methods

Sample selection and material

We chose an explorative and interpretative qualitative research approach for two reasons: (a) There is a dearth of empirical studies and a paucity of theory on self-initiated repatriation, and (b) There are gaps in our current knowledge on the specifics of French and German management career structures and on perceptions of the employability competences of external applicants with international experience (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). We aimed to uncover and understand repatriation experiences, the interpretations and perceptions of each SIR, and SIRs' actions flowing from their social construction (Bluhm, Harman, Lee, & Mitchell, 2011). As such, we identified semi-structured interviews as an appropriate tool for gathering SIRs' perceptions of their experiences. Interviews lasted for an average of 1 h (59.2 min) and were conducted via telephone (n = 20) or Skype (n = 20). All participants consented to the interviews being taped, and all were transcribed verbatim.

To obtain a diverse sample and to depict information-rich cases, we selected our interviewees purposefully based on three theory- and empirically-driven criteria as explained in the following: nationality, as the primary variable, was complemented by expatriate type and gender. Table 3 illustrates our qualitative sample plan.

Table 3. Qualitative sample plan.

	French repatriates		German repatriates		Total
	Former SIEs	Former AEs	Former SIEs	Former AEs	
Male	6	6	6	6	24
Female	6	2	6	2	16
Total		20		20	40
Additional characteristics:					
Age (mean)	43 years		41 years		
Length of stay abroad (mean)	5.4 years		4.5 years		
Countries of destination	Europe: 15 Asia: 3 North-America: 2 Africa: 4		Europe: 16 Asia: 4 North-America: 2 Africa: 0		
Persons with multiple stays abroad:	7		4		

Our quota sample comprises 40 SIRs returning to France ($n = 20$) and Germany ($n = 20$). In terms of expatriation type, we included both AEs ($n = 16$, 8 per country) and SIEs ($n = 24$, 12 per country), because the careers of AEs and SIEs differ, as shown in our literature review (see also Ho et al., 2016 for a mixed sample of SIRs). We included more SIEs than AEs to reflect typical sample distributions in many comparative studies of AEs and SIEs that contained a majority (50–70%) of SIEs (e.g. Jokinen, Brewster, & Suutari, 2008; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). We used the criteria set out in Andresen et al. (2014) to distinguish between AEs and SIEs, i.e. the initiator of the key binding activity in the job search (AEs: organisation; SIEs: individual), work contract partner (AE: current; SIEs: new), and organisational mobility (AE: internal; SIEs: external labour market). Most AEs tend to be male, while self-initiated expatriation appears to be typically less gendered (e.g. Inkson & Myers, 2003; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). This is why we chose a 3-1 quota in favour of male compared to female former AEs and a 1-1 quota for male and female returning SIEs. Thus, 24 repatriates were male (12 AEs, 12 SIEs) and 16 were female (4 AEs, 12 SIEs).

On average, interviewees were 42 years old (Germany: 41, France: 43) and had spent 5 years abroad (Germany: 4.5, France: 5.4). Thirty-one relocated to a European country, seven to Asia, four to the USA and four to Africa; eleven expatriated to more than one foreign country. All had completed tertiary studies to at least Bachelor level, and all had been deployed abroad and intended to work in management positions for commercial enterprises upon repatriation. Interviewees were mainly recruited via social networks (Xing, Viadeo) by posting information to

relevant group members via notice-boards requesting them to contact us or by analysing CVs of potentially interesting respondents ourselves and sending personal invitations. This was rounded out by direct and indirect personal contacts (e.g. alumni of a European study programme that were contacted by mail or phone) and by snowballing, i.e. recommendations of other interviewees. In view of our purposeful sampling strategy, the combination of these three recruitment approaches enabled us to access a highly selective target population of SIR managers that are demonstrably difficult to locate and reach (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Ritchie, Lewis, Elan, Tennant, & Rahin, 2014).

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using an integrated generalisation design combining qualitative and quantitative analysis phases (Barkin & Sjoberg, 2017; Lewis et al., 2014; Srnka & Koeszegi, 2007). The quantification of qualitative data is used to support or expand upon qualitative data, to effectively deepen the description, and to display interpretations in a clear way (Barkin & Sjoberg, 2017; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). This discovery-oriented approach offered significant insights into our research problem while also ensuring a degree of scientific rigour. It facilitated valid comparisons between the French and German subsamples and generalisations from our results geared to refining, adjusting and expanding the nascent employability competence theory as suggested by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) to encompass an international dimension (theoretical generalisation). This is necessary in order to explain specific observations (valuation of French and German SIRs' employability competences) in their particular contexts (country-specific career structures) (Lewis et al., 2014). In line with our interpretive research approach, the scope of our generalised results can be only moderate — they will not necessarily hold true across a range of other cultures. Their consistency is also likely to be moderate; in this sense, our generalisations could be regarded as propositions to be tested in the future (Payne & Williams, 2005).

The qualitative material was collected and recorded (stage 1) and then transcribed verbatim (stage 2). The instrument validity of the interview guideline was ensured by translation and back-translation of the questions as a consistency check (Brislin, 1970) and by pre-testing our interview guides in French and German. To understand the participants' perspectives optimally and to boost the validity of our results, we gathered and analysed data in the interviewees' native languages (i.e. French or German); language reflects cultural phenomena and contextual details. The two persons involved in data collection and in data analysis are fluent in both French and German.¹ For this publication, the verbatim quotations of the interview partners were translated into English.

With the help of unitisation (stage 3) and categorisation (stage 4) we used our entire data to create codable units of meaning and to develop a category scheme in multiple cycles. We used existing categories derived deductively from employability competence theory (with employability as one main category and employability competences as higher-level subcategories; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). We adapted these deductive categories in iterative steps to match our data, i.e. the information emerging from the interviews, reflecting contextual particularities of the French and German management career structures, and inductively developed new categories. The final schema (displayed in Table 4) comprises ten main categories, each containing up to five subcategories, yielding a total of 26 categories. This deductive-inductive procedure (Kuckartz, 2014; Mayring, 2014) contributes both to reliability, since ‘standard categories’ can be repeatedly used, and to validity, since the inductive development of original categories captures the essence of phenomena (Druckman & Hopmann, 2002). Our detailed, hierarchical category scheme served to reflect the precise meaning of the units being coded optimally and thus to maximise the validity of our results.

Table 4. Final category scheme.

Super category	Main categories	Subcategories
Permeability of management career structures	Re-entry success	Unproblematic re-entry Difficult re-entry Unsuccessful re-entry Challenges upon repatriation Role of social network
Individual determinants of repatriation success: employability competences	Occupational expertise	Job-related KSAs General KSAs Acquirement of social recognition
	Anticipation and optimisation	Willingness to learn and to develop Awareness of opportunities and threats
	Personal flexibility	Openness to change and new experiences Adaptation to host country Re-adaptation to home country
	Corporate sense	Identification as a member of a group Identification with organisation, its goals Social capital
	Balance	Balancing individual interests Mutual exchange relationship between employee & employer
Structural determinants of repatriation success: norms in management career structures	Impact of IWE on the development of employability competences	Development of KSAs Development of social capital
	Valued assets in the French and German management career structures	International experience Job-specific KSAs Generic KSAs Educational background
	Valuation of IWE	In general Ability to apply KSAs acquired abroad

During coding (stage 5), categorisation was implemented by executing clearly defined coding rules based on our category scheme. Category definitions and key anchors served as rules to ensure consistent coding (Mayring, 2014). MaxQDA 11 was used to arrange and code the material. The author and a second person independently defined categories and

delimited units of analysis (unitising reliability) and coded them (interpretative reliability). This intersubjectivity contributed to achieving verifiable and reproducible outcomes. To increase the reliability of our process, we documented and reflected on decisions taken as research proceeded. Intercoder consistency (reliability) proved good with a Cohen's kappa of .84 (Landis & Koch, 1977).

In a second quantitative step, we systematically transformed our qualitative material into numerical data and produced a descriptive analysis (Mayring, 2014; Srnka & Koeszegi, 2007). Quantification served to record how often categories occurred, a factor which may give added weight to their meaning and importance and justify their more in-depth description (Kuckartz, 2014; Mayring, 2014). This step also allowed us to probe for potential differences between groups (expatriation mode, gender, destination country) and to exclude alternative explanations. The few differences noted are reported below.

Results: French and German SIRs' employability competences

The majority of SIRs (18 German, 17 French) reported that finding a position in their home country was easy, for instance because they had several job offers to choose from (5 German, 5 French) or secured new employment quickly (8 German, 8 French). Only five SIRs (2 German, 3 French) faced major difficulties and were invited to very few job interviews. Thirty-eight subjects found employment; two French SIRs became self-employed in view of insurmountable difficulties. Investigating the transition challenges and success factors gives insights into the valuing of SIRs' employability competences in France and Germany and into the permeability of management career structures to external lateral entry of SIRs.

Occupational expertise

Job-specific KSAs

As experienced professionals, all 40 SIRs possessed a range of job-specific KSAs, but these differed in scope. While 16 SIRs (12 German, 4 French) were experts in specific fields, i.e. they had largely spent their careers to date in specific professional fields without switching functions and sectors frequently, a large proportion of the SIRs (8 German, 16 French) had changed functions and sectors several times and broadened their KSAs to encompass a wide range of fields. As such, the German sample contained more functional experts who reported having been recruited due to their expertise in a specific field. French participants had typically followed multifunctional careers and saw their sectoral knowledge as important for securing a job offer upon return.

A minority (7 German, 8 French respondents) acquired additional job-specific KSAs during their time abroad. These were mainly younger respondents with little prior work experience who gained greater responsibility while abroad, and expatriates who occupied new functions. For instance, a German SIR reported being given more responsibility in the UK than he would have had as an employee in Germany at this early career stage:

I think that I would not have obtained this chance after such a short time here [in Germany], whereas there [in the UK], they have much more confidence in you and you do not have to produce God knows how many certificates before people believe in your competences. (German SIE, male #1)

Generic KSAs

While the expatriation phase enabled less than two-fifths of SIRs to develop job-specific KSAs, all interviewees acquired generic competences abroad, especially intercultural (31), managerial (27) and language skills (27). For 21 SIRs from both countries, foreign languages (10 German, 8 French respondents) and managerial skills (2 German, 3 French respondents) were valuable ingredients in getting a job upon return. Intercultural competences proved more relevant for German employers — they were a factor for 7 German interviewees, but only 1 French interviewee.

In German management career structures, job-specific and generic KSAs were perceived as being valued equally by employers. In France, generic skills were perceived to be valued more highly than expert knowledge. For instance, a French SIR was hired (even though she lacked job-specific KSAs) because of her sectoral knowledge as well as the language, intercultural and managerial skills she had acquired abroad:

“Simply because I had the experience in telecommunications, I had the languages, English, German, French. So it was good for them. I had the experience of having worked in Germany, it mattered a lot. (...) Because especially in management (...) they need to have people who know what it means to have worked abroad, to have a multidisciplinary team and a mixed team.” (French SIE, female #1)

The majority (11 German, 14 French respondents) could apply KSAs acquired abroad upon repatriation, with job-specific KSAs (8) being mentioned less frequently than generic (15) ones. While the French returnees were better able to apply their generic (10) than their job-specific KSAs (3), German returnees reported making equal use of both (5 each).

Social recognition

Almost all repatriates (19 German, 18 French) reported receiving recognition from their peers and superiors, mainly for their IWE, competences and achievements. Most returnees approached their job searches strategically by applying for positions where they could make use

of their IWE, e.g. in terms of language competences or knowledge of a foreign market. They felt their IWE was positively recognised and an important factor in gaining their new jobs (19 German, 13 French respondents). Of those, nine returnees (5 German, 4 French) reported that they were offered their positions mainly because of their work experience in a *specific* country:

“And I think my international experience in the US also played a role, because the company plans to enter the US market in the near future.” (German AE, male #1)

SIRs were particularly sought after in German SMEs, perhaps because attracting employees with an international background is difficult for them considering their lower salary levels vis-à-vis MNCs.

While no German experienced negative reactions, three French SIRs indicated that their IWE was perceived negatively. Destination countries, expatriation types and career phase proved important for French career structures. Whereas AEs seemed highly regarded, SIEs were less valued. Recruiters appeared to be unfamiliar with self-initiated IWE and to have difficulty appraising its value, not least because of issues over verification. In addition, KSAs acquired in Africa were not regarded highly: French employers perceived stays in African countries (mainly former French colonies) more as tourism than as work. Expatriation immediately after graduation without accumulating significant work experience in France also impeded SIRs' repatriation. Taken together, these factors indicate that IWE may be more highly valued in German than in French management career structures:

“In France, the valuing of international work experience, while it has improved, is still far behind certain countries such as Germany, the United States or England.” (French AE, male #1)

All SIRs, in sum, demonstrated high occupational expertise in terms of professional knowledge and a wide range of generic KSAs, mainly developed during expatriation, and almost all received social recognition. French employers' recognition of SIRs' IWE was moderated by destination country, career phase, and expatriation type. In Germany, SMEs particularly valued IWE. Upon repatriation, most interviewees were able to apply KSAs acquired abroad, particularly generic ones.

Anticipation and optimisation

Willingness to learn and develop

Almost all interviewees (19 German, 18 French) demonstrated willingness to learn and develop. Continuous development was highly important to German and French repatriates (10 each), both for personal fulfilment and to enhance their labour market value. In addition to promotion prospects, opportunities to acquire new competences influenced interviewees'

decisions to remain with employers or accept alternative offers, up to and including decisions to expatriate or repatriate. The threat of career stagnation motivated ten SIRs (5 German, 5 French) to change employers:

“But at [company name], in principle, after the first year I already had the impression that I wasn’t making progress, and that’s why I switched. At the end of the first year, when I started at [company name], I started a new saturation curve, so again steep learning progress and growth, but just that the saturation curve lasted not a year, but four years and again, but much later, I had the feeling that I had got stuck here. And then I moved to Germany, and so far I do not feel that I have arrived at such a turning point.” (German SIE, male #2)

Development opportunities were realised by 17 SIRs, of which 14 were SIEs, through (additional) tertiary studies (7 German, 6 French respondents) and training or courses (2 German, 2 French respondents). In general, no major differences between the German and French SIRs’ willingness to learn and develop were identified.

Awareness of opportunities and threats

One-third of the SIRs (9 German, 4 French) were aware of opportunities and threats in their home country and gathered information about developments in the labour market in general and within their companies or sectors. For instance, a French SIE decided to obtain an additional diploma in accounting to prepare for her repatriation. She anticipated that she would face no difficulties in finding employment upon her return due to high labour demand in this field. A German AE realised that developments in his industry were stagnating and opted to switch to a more stable and innovative sector where he could develop competences that would stand to him in the future. The proactivity of the SIRs is also reflected in their job search efforts: half the SIRs (12 German, 8 French) repatriated after signing a work contract in their home countries.

The importance of being aware of developments for optimising one’s prospects is demonstrated by the case of a French AE who did not gather information about salary developments in France and accepted a salary below the market level:

“Because in fact what happened is that during the 2000s wages increased significantly in France and I did not know and so basically, the mistake was that I sold myself below what a French person would have taken at my level.” (French AE, female #1)

Two SIRs encountered major job search difficulties because they were not willing to accept the salaries offered, feeling that they did not reflect their qualification level and extensive IWE.

In sum, almost all SIRs (19 German, 18 French) were willing to learn and develop, but most (11 German and 16 French SIRs) lacked awareness of opportunities and threats in their home labour markets and tended to overestimate their own value. No differences between French and German career structures were evident.

Personal flexibility

Openness towards change and new experiences

A clear majority of SIRs (18 German, 18 French) welcomed change and were open to new experiences. This trend was even more prevalent for SIEs (21) than for AEs (15). Examining the expatriation and repatriation motives in our sample reveals that 23 SIRs (9 German, 14 French) were driven in their career decisions by the prospect of new experiences and challenges:

“Actually, to go into the unknown and say, “I know nothing.” It is gradually about creating a new world. To create a professional life, and next to it a personal life, and next to it the curiosity to discover lots of things. (...) So yes, it is the thirst for adventure, to learn.” (French AE, female #2)

Their openness toward change is also reflected in SIRs’ desire to explore new countries and cultures. Seventeen SIRs (10 German, 7 French) reported having been motivated by their interest in a specific place (one German SIE had always dreamed of living in New York), by curiosity about how other cultures work, or by the challenges of working in multicultural teams.

Adaptation

More open than rigid in their attitudes, the SIRs were well-placed to adapt to and cope with different environments in areas such as the divergent working practices and lifestyles of their host and home countries. Twenty-one SIRs (9 German, 12 French) confirmed that they successfully adapted to the host country during expatriation, both on a cultural and professional level, and learned over time to *‘play the local game’* (German SIE, male #3). One respondent reported adaptation difficulties and even workplace bullying:

“I was not happy in London. I never warmed to the company and the culture (...). Although I had worked a lot with Englishmen in the past, it was only when I worked there that I noticed how different it is there, how hierarchical, how anti-German they are.” (German SIE, female #1)

Twenty-one SIRs (11 German, 10 French) reported successfully re-adapting to work habits and everyday life in their home countries. No German reported severe difficulties adapting back, but five French returnees experienced culture shock on returning.

Moreover, 26 respondents (10 German, 16 French) changed functions and sectors frequently (occupational expertise) and demonstrated their ability to adapt to new employers, organisational cultures and sectors. IWE enhanced SIRs’ flexibility and adaptability:

“(...) the whole period abroad, I lived in almost a dozen countries with times where I moved every three months, six months. So when you arrive somewhere, you have to start over. So this is a big capacity to adapt, to be flexible. A capacity to adapt also in relation to culture.” (French SIE, female #2)

To conclude, the majority of SIRs showed personal flexibility. While adaptation created difficulties, no structural career specifics were identified.

Corporate sense

Team membership and identification with the organisation

Almost half the SIRs (9 German, 9 French) considered themselves part of a team and ascribed high importance to teamwork, for instance to pooling knowledge, helping each other out and making decisions jointly. A quarter of SIRs (11) developed strong bonds with their employers, mainly due to long tenure:

“Emotionally, I found it difficult in part, because I, not just me but my wife, we both felt really happy in our jobs and felt so well connected that we almost had the feeling we would betray them a bit [by leaving].” (German SIE, male #1)

Moreover, 10 SIRs (4 German, 6 French) demonstrated strong commitment to the goals of their respective organisations. Two French SIRs even left their employers after a merger as the company spirit had changed and they disagreed with the new strategy.

Social capital

Most of the SIRs extended their wide personal (10 German, 12 French) and professional (16 German, 14 French) networks during their expatriation. Several SIRs (6 German, 4 French) became members of, for instance, associations, business clubs or a fraternity. None of these networks related to the company or function they exerted. Only one French SIE mentioned using his network for professional matters; the others pursued personal interests.

While abroad, almost a quarter of the SIRs (3 German, 6 French) lost their professional networks in their home countries, mostly due to the length of their absence. The French, unsurprisingly, were especially keen on staying in contact with fellow alumni, underlining the importance of alumni networks in France. However, significantly more German (12) than French (7) returnees used their social networks to gain access to professional opportunities such as jobs, projects or advice. Surprisingly, only one French SIR found employment with the help of a former fellow student. French SIRs confirmed the difficulties of accessing job opportunities in France without social networks, and one SIR was convinced that his weak social network would lastingly affect his career negatively:

“Our network in France was very poor because we had developed our entire career in Germany. So, it was very difficult to come home and to have people who make you come home. And when you already have ten or fifteen years of work experience, without a network, it is difficult.” (French SIE, female #1)

In sum, a minority showed corporate sense. Only a quarter of SIRs developed strong bonds with and commitment to their employers. Social networks were mainly used exclusively for personal but not professional purposes, although they proved important particularly for re-entering German career structures.

Balance

Balancing individual interests

Considerably more German (11) than French (3) SIRs indicated having put considerable effort into balancing their work and personal lives while abroad. Several French SIRs supplied a possible explanation for this in the form of the French culture of long working hours:

“In France, there is one thing that is important, and that is that we work late. We hold meetings, we do not respect too much the personal lives of employees, or rather of leaders. The leader works late. He must work thoroughly. He must arrive early and leave late. This is not necessarily efficient, but it’s like that.”
(French SIE, male #1)

Seven respondents mainly focused on their career during their expatriation: they worked overtime and neglected their social lives. Most of them were young and flexible and had no caring responsibilities. However, another eight SIRs – again more German (6) than French (2) respondents – indicated having shifted their focus away from being purely career-driven and toward a more balanced lifestyle during expatriation. Triggers for this shift included growing older, caring responsibilities and health issues resulting from overwork and psychological distress.

Mutual exchange relationship between employee and employer

Seven SIRs (6 German, 1 French) reported deciding to leave employers abroad due to an imbalance of interests. Aspects mentioned were a lack of career support and organisations’ refusal to support further education. For instance, a German SIE was dissatisfied with her employers’ lack of appreciation of her contribution:

“The company did not appreciate you, neither financially nor in any other way. The same with superiors. I worked there for three and a half years, and then I realised over time that it is only important that I hit my numbers. The rest didn’t matter.” (German SIE, female #2)

To conclude, a minority of SIRs achieved a balance between competing work, career and personal interests, while more German than French returnees managed to balance their work and private lives. Only for a minority of SIRs, mainly Germans, did their own interests dominate over those of their employers.

Summary

While all SIRs demonstrated *occupational expertise*, the picture for the remaining employability competences was more diverse. Most were willing to learn and develop (*anticipation and optimisation*) and open to new experiences, as reflected in their international and organisational mobility, which increases *personal flexibility* and the ability to adapt to change. However, only half of the SIRs considered themselves team-oriented, and only a quarter identified with their employers. While most SIRs extended their social networks while abroad, only one built up a social network for professional purposes (*corporate sense*). An imbalance of investments and benefits, including a lack of career support, pushed seven expatriates toward changing employers (*balance*), reflecting the importance of a mutual exchange relationship between employer and employee. Most interviewees lacked awareness of opportunities and threats in their home labour markets (*anticipation and optimisation*), and almost half had difficulties adapting to their home country (*personal flexibility*). In consequence, most SIRs tended to perceive the conditions on offer (e.g. salaries) as not fully satisfactory; their IWE had left them with an unrealistic impression of where they stood. The longer IWE had lasted, the more the risk of not feeling adequately valued increased. Table 5 summarises the perceived employability profiles of French and German SIRs.

Discussion: the impact of country-specific management career structures on employability competences

Implications for employability competence theory considering international context variables

We aim to expand employability competence theory by adding an international dimension in the form of insights that can be generalised from

Table 5. SIRs' perceived portfolio of employability competences.

(Perceived) Employability competence portfolio of ...	French SIRs	German SIRs
	Competence possessed by ...	
Occupational expertise		
• Functional KSAs	Few	Some
• Sectorial KSAs	Most	Some
• General KSAs	Most	Most
• Social recognition	Most	Most
Anticipation and optimisation		
• Willingness to learn and develop	Most	Most
• Awareness of opportunities and threats	Few	Some
Personal flexibility		
• Openness towards change, new opportunities	Most	Most
• Adaptation success to host country	Some	Some
• Readaptation success to home country	Some to few	Some
• Variation in the range of duties	Most	Some
Corporate sense		
• Identification as a member of a team	Some	Some
• Identification with the organisation, its goals	Some	Some
• Social capital:		
• Maintenance of professional network home	Few	Some
• Creation of professional network abroad	Most	Most
• Usage of social network for organisational interests	Few	Few
Balance		
• Balancing individual interests	Few	Some
• Balanced exchange relationship employee/employer	Most	Most

Note: Competences possessed by most (mentioned by 14–20 respondents), some (mentioned by 7–13 respondents), few (mentioned by 0–6 respondents) interviewees.

our results (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Lo Presti and Pluviano (2016) note critically that focusing on the competency side of employability means that insufficient attention is devoted to individuals' social capital and, but rather to their environments. In our view, focusing on individual factors (human capital, higher formal education) and structural factors (labour market opportunities) that are expected to condition employability (Berntson et al., 2006; Lo Presti & Pluviano, 2016) is not enough. Our argument is, rather, that the level and content of perceived employability competences is contingent, i.e. dependent on prevalent career structures. Individuals with a comparable set of human capital and faced with similar labour market opportunities can meet local career structure norms in one locale and be employable there even as they are unemployable in a different environment with different career structures where the fit is not given. Our contributions are structured according to our research questions in the order in which they were outlined in the introduction.

Our *research question 1* addresses how the context of country-specific career structures influences required employability competence profiles. Heterogeneous management career structures persist within Europe (Davoine & Ravasi, 2013), as we illustrated through the examples of France and Germany. Our qualitative study corroborates the presence of differences between French and German management career structures as

perceived by the interviewees. These career structures, in turn, influence the competences which make individuals employable. For example, occupational expertise was shown to result from generic KSAs in France vis-à-vis functional KSAs in Germany, and social capital is of central importance in France. While the kind of employability competences proved to be universally applicable in both countries, as argued by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006), we conclude that the content of employability competences differs significantly between French and German management career structures and impacts employability in each context. The nature of employability competences matters as well as their level. This leads us to:

Proposition 1: The relevant content and level of managers' employability competences (a) is influenced by country-specific career structure norms and (b) differs between France and Germany.

However, the literature on management career structures has dealt mainly with national and organisational careers up to now (e.g. Davoine & Ravasi, 2013; Evans et al., 1989). International careers across organisations as pursued by SIRs moving via the external labour market have not been expressly addressed. Thus, with *research question 2*, we set out to examine whether country-specific general norms for employability competence profiles are also applied to SIRs pursuing international and inter-organisational careers.

Employability competence theory posits that employable individuals anticipate change and optimise their work situation and labour market value through continuous development. This would imply that SIRs cultivate awareness of the general norms of French and German career structures while abroad and develop their profiles accordingly to boost their employability upon repatriation. But most of our interviewees lacked awareness of opportunities and threats in their home labour markets, and almost half reported difficulties adapting back. For example, when comparing SIRs' perceived employability competences in terms of occupational expertise and social networks (see Table 5) with general norms prevailing in French and German career structures, it becomes obvious that SIRs do not fully meet pertinent criteria. While all French SIRs (20) perceived themselves as possessing the generic KSAs that appear to be the most important in France, only a handful (6) had maintained the French professional networks that play a decisive role in opening up access to jobs (Evans et al., 1989). Only some German SIRs (11) indicated possession of the type of functional KSAs that appear to be most important in Germany (Evans et al., 1989), but many endeavoured to maintain (7) and expand (16) their German professional networks. Interestingly, more German (12) than French (6) SIRs profited from their networks when job

searching; this appears to be untypical for French and German career structures (Alexandre-Bailly et al., 2007; Evans et al., 1989). If employability is predicted not only by the level of competences present (Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010), but also by the kind of competences, as argued above, we could expect SIRs to experience reduced employability. However, the observed mismatch in the level and kind of employability competences and the general norms of French and German career structures need not necessarily prove problematic in terms of employability if the norms applying to SIRs differ from the prevailing country-specific norms.

In line with French management career structures, in which recruitment takes place at all hierarchical levels (Evans et al., 1989), all but two of the French returnees successfully gained employment. Perhaps more surprisingly, all German SIRs also found jobs, mainly in high-level management positions, even though German career structures have been depicted as excluding lateral entry above lower hierarchical levels (Evans et al., 1989; see also Davoine & Ravasi, 2013). Despite Vinkenburg and Weber's (2012) finding that managerial careers still follow predefined linear patterns, career boundaries now seem to have shifted and to allow for more varied career patterns, including international moves. This new permeability, at least for internationally mobile employees, may be driven by the persistent talent shortage in German organisations (Manpower Group, 2014) and/or by increasing demand for international experience prompting employers to recruit externally, especially in SMEs (KfW, 2012). The external labour market value demonstrated by 'our' SIRs thus confirms Suutari and Brewster's (2003) findings, but it contradicts Begley et al.'s (2008) study, which showed a majority of SIEs facing difficulties upon repatriation. Apart from sampling reasons, this might be explained, first, by specific norms characterising Irish career structures and, second, by the fact that Ireland was economically disadvantaged at the point when the data was gathered, with fewer companies operating internationally and lower demand for globally competent employees (see also Berntson et al., 2006). To conclude, context is likely to influence the perceived employability competences and repatriation success of SIRs (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). We propose:

Proposition 2: SIR managers with employability competence profiles that do not fully accord with the prevailing norms in French and German career structures can still be employable if such managers are seen as representing a distinct group to which different rules apply.

Proposition 3: (a) The relevant content and level of managers' employability competences is influenced by their career paths, and differences between

national and international paths exist. (b) SIR managers' expected employability competence profiles differ between France and Germany.

SIRs' IWE constituted their most valued asset and the most important factor securing them employment. Its perceived value was significantly higher in Germany (18) than in France (13). IWE tended to boost generic competences, especially managerial, intercultural and language skills, more than job-specific ones (similarly Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Fink et al., 2005; Fitzgerald & Howe-Walsh, 2008). This highlights the importance of globally competent employees for companies operating internationally in Germany (Kraimer et al., 2009). French SIRs perceived their IWE as negatively valued on the basis of expatriation type (self-initiated), length of stay (long-term), destination country (in Africa, mainly former colonies) and career phase (early) and therefore as damaging to their employability in the context of French management career structures. Despite the emergence of modern career models, traditional organisational careers, including expatriate assignments, are still anchored in French management career structures (Dany, 2003) as they provide stability and meet the need to avoid uncertainty which is prioritised relatively more in France (Hofstede, 2006). While IWE was a critical success factor for German SIRs, French SIRs' success in other countries was more linked to personal qualities or achievements (Evans et al., 1989). This leads us to:

Proposition 4: (a) SIR managers' IWE constitutes their most valued employability asset and is the most important hiring factor for repatriates to France and Germany. (b) IWE is valued significantly more in German than in French career structures. (c) The value of IWE is moderated by expatriation type, destination country, career phase in France, and length of stay abroad. Negative moderations are observed for self-initiated and long-term expatriation, expatriation to less developed countries including former colonies, mobility during an early career stage, and longer stays abroad.

Occupational expertise represented the second most important hiring factor. However, it proved to have different meanings for SIRs in each of the two management career structures. Our findings underscore the emphasis placed on expertise (*Fachwissen*) and functional career paths in Germany and on multifunctional careers in France (Barmeyer & Davoine, 2008; Davoine & Ravasi, 2013; Evans et al., 1989). In both countries, however, the relatively most valued assets of SIRs were generic KSAs. German SIRs perceived large companies as being functionally or technically oriented and smaller companies as more open to generalists. In contrast to the Irish SIRs (Begley et al., 2008) and empirical findings regarding the repatriation of AEs (Bossard & Peterson, 2005), most SIRs in our study were also able to apply the KSAs acquired abroad. One possible

explanation might be SIRs' strategic targeting of positions in which their IWE would be useful for their applications. We conclude:

Proposition 5: (a) Occupational expertise has different meanings in French and in German management career structures (sectoral versus specific KSAs). (b) Company size moderates the importance of specific KSAs as a hiring factor of SIRs in Germany, with larger companies valuing specific KSAs more than small companies do. (c) In both countries, generic KSAs are more important hiring factors for SIRs than specific and sectoral KSAs.

A majority of interviewees established and maintained personal networks, as is common for AEs and SIEs (Bozkurt & Mohr, 2011; Jokinen et al., 2008). As these facilitated access to job opportunities for half of the SIRs, mostly Germans (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001), this factor may have helped to compensate for perceived employability competence gaps. This indicates that social capital is not only important for SIRs in French management career structures, as postulated by Evans et al. (1989), but also in the corresponding German structures; this is in line with the findings of Stahl and Cerdin (2004) that more German than French expatriates show boundaryless career orientation. Although French SIRs were particularly interested in staying in contact with fellow alumni (Barmeyer, 2010), as might be expected, those who lost their networks or lacked social capital due to their expatriation shortly after graduation experienced severe employability problems, especially because many vacancies in France can only be accessed through social networks (Barmeyer, 2010).

Proposition 6: Social capital facilitates SIRs' access to job opportunities in France and Germany and may compensate for perceived employability competence gaps.

Table 2 (right-hand columns) summarises characteristics of the French and German management career structures determining the valuation of SIRs' employability competences, as perceived by SIRs. We established that the closed nature of the German management career structure to lateral entrants at higher levels (see Evans et al., 1989) proved surmountable for SIRs. Moreover, social capital does not only play an important role in French, but also in German career structures. It helps SIRs to compensate for employability competence gaps, especially in terms of anticipation and optimisation. While broad personal and professional networks were valuable for German SIEs, national professional networks were decisive for French SIRs. SIRs were confronted with expertise-driven German and multifunctional French career paths, but they could compensate for KSAs they lacked with their IWE. IWE increasing SIRs' occupational expertise more in terms of generic than in relation to job-specific competences affected German SIRs' repatriation positively and formed the major reason

for them being hired, especially by SMEs, in line with the boundaryless career model. Specific KSAs were the next most important factor. By contrast, self-initiated IWE gained at an early career stage or in certain countries harmed French SIRs' employability, underscoring that the traditional organisational career, including expatriate assignments, is still anchored in French career structures. Whereas IWE was a critical success factor for German SIRs', French SIRs' success in other countries was more linked to personal qualities or achievements.

Our study contributes to the expansion of the current employability competence theory by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) by considering international context factors. While the kind of employability competences proved to be universally applicable across countries, as argued by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006), we conclude that the content and level of employability competences is context-dependent. The required employability competence profiles differ significantly, with an impact on employability, (a) between country-specific career structures and (b) for employees with domestic and international career paths within a specific career structure.

Implications for practice

These context- and group-related characteristics influencing employability have multiple implications for SIRs' career self-management. First, to be employable upon repatriation, SIRs need to invest in their competences while abroad. As the content and level of required employability competences (e.g. kind of occupational expertise, social networks etc. as defined by Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006) are likely to differ between their host and home countries, SIRs might find maintaining two different profiles a struggle. This situation is further aggravated by the fact that SIRs' employability is not a stable construct but dynamically evolves over time while abroad (Kirves, Kinnunen, De Cuyper, & Mäkikangas, 2014) as contextual attributes, including the management career structures in the host country contributing to the process, are likely to differ (Forrier & Sels, 2003). Moreover, SIRs need to anticipate that their personal profile will likely be evaluated differently before and after expatriation due to their international career path and that the employability competences they had prior to expatriation may need adjustment, especially their occupational expertise and social capital.

Second, employers seem to use destination countries and the standing of employers abroad as a proxy for evaluating SIRs' competence level and employability. Even before their expatriation, SIRs should anticipate this and optimise their choices to ensure their employability upon repatriation.

As the destination country affects SIRs' employability at home, consideration should be given to its perception by and value for potential future employers. French expatriates would be advised to favour corporate assignments from their home country over self-initiated expatriation to foreign organisations. Both French and German SIRs could profit from building solid social networks before expatriation and cultivating them while abroad: relationships proved valuable in terms of opening up access to jobs upon return. German SIRs who cannot maintain the expected 'German' standard in their specialist KSAs while abroad have the option of seeking more generalist roles upon repatriation and could consider working for SMEs. Unsurprisingly, SIRs' IWE is most valued by organisations operating internationally, so it makes sense to target these. Employers who benefit from opportunities to buy in intercultural competences and access to international networks may be prepared to accept the potential costs of providing training to adjust SIRs' occupational expertise.

Limitations and implications for future research

We were able to add to the overall body of current knowledge in the field of international employability research. Moreover, our study is one of the few to investigate career success as an outcome of employability (Lo Presti & Pluviano, 2016). However, as our findings and conclusions are based on a limited sample of 40 SIRs, additional qualitative and large-scale quantitative empirical work would be required to confirm, modify or refute them (Payne & Williams, 2005). Given the study's explorative nature, our focus lay on understanding SIRs' perceived employability and the perceived norms determining how the employability competences of SIRs are valued in different career structures. While the quality of our data is good and our conclusions are substantiated by the evidence gathered, our qualitative research design may not have eliminated alternative explanations or constraints on generalisation. For example, motives for going abroad (personal or job-related) could have an impact on future employability. If Howe-Walsh and Schyns (2010: 266) are correct that SIEs who relocate for personal reasons may be 'willing to accept a position that has a low fit with their prior work experience', such work experience outside their specialisations would have profound implications for the development of their occupational expertise and would most likely affect their employability upon repatriation (depending on the prevailing norms in the relevant management career structures). Since nearly all our highly skilled interviewees (18 French, 19 German) indicated career-related motives for moving, such a distinction could not be made here. Including SIRs who failed to secure employment upon repatriation could also help to

generate alternative explanations and to identify a minimum level of employability competences that is needed to be successful upon return and/or a maximum deviance from standard career norms that still allows for employability.

Given that only SIRs were interviewed, this study confines itself to the perspective of individuals. Future studies would ideally also take in the organisational perspective on norms underlying career structures and impacting on SIRs' employability. Ideally, the perceptions of triads consisting of SIRs and of their employers in their home and host countries could be compared and integrated to elaborate the richness and complexity of the norms and factors influencing SIRs' employability in greater depth. A longitudinal study would facilitate the analysis of SIRs' development as compared to that of organisational repatriates in terms of the extent to which international experience gained is utilised by employers at home, the dynamic evolution of employability competences, and career success abroad and in the years after repatriation.

Conclusions

The extensive difficulties faced by SIRs according to the literature formed the departure point for this study and its examination of how norms underlying country-specific management career structures determine employability competences and SIRs' career success. In search of theoretical generalisations, we used the nascent employability competence theory by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) to compare French and German SIRs, and we contribute to its expansion by exploring international context factors. Taking the cases of France and Germany, we demonstrated that employability cannot be determined by isolating individual competences. *Country-specific norms characterising the structure of managerial careers* were shown to determine the level and kind of competences that in turn determine employability. Within each career structure, the relevant content and the level of employability competences differed between managers with *international and national career paths*. Moreover, context variables such as *expatriation type, length of stay, destination country, corporate size and career phase* moderated the valuation of SIRs' employability (e.g. occupational expertise) and IWE. Social networks proved to be a crucial instrument enabling SIRs to access job opportunities upon return. We were able to show that perceived employability dynamically evolves over time as the context (in terms of the country-specific management career structure) changes. Our results indicate that some employability competences are more important than

others in the context of specific career structures, and that competences are therefore relative. SIRs need to be aware of divergent norms to adapt flexibly to and become employable in different career structures.

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Note

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