

How careers of self-initiated-expatriates change in SME sectors:
an empirical explorative study of SIEs in Japanese SMEs

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1. Introduction

The role of internationally mobile workers in supporting economic development of home and host countries have been recognized widely in recent IB and IHRM literature. Among the various types of global workers, Self-Initiated-Expatriates (SIEs), who voluntarily seek for employment in a country outside their own, are a valuable IHRM talent pool. Although SIEs generally have stronger motivations in expatriation and adjustment in the Japanese society and culture compared to corporate assigned expatriates (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009), studies also showed that SIEs might encounter more difficulties with career development and work conditions (Cao et al., 2012; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013). Yozoru (2020) found that SIEs in Japan seem to change their jobs often, which contradicts with traditional Japanese HR system which values loyalty and life-long job security.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how careers of SIE change in SME sectors and how SIEs utilize and develop their career capital to land on jobs in face of various constraints with an exploratory qualitative research. This study can also help us to understand the impacts of SMEs (meso) and larger macro factors on SIEs' career capital development. This question is particularly relevant for Japanese SMEs because most international workers in Japan are employed by smaller companies. Moreover, a few studies found that migrant workers and SIEs access first employment opening through SMEs in host country (Crowley-Henry et al., 2021). However, IB and IHRM literature tend to pay more attentions to expatriates in MNCs, leaving a gap to our knowledge about SIEs in SME sector.

2. Literature Review

Scholars believed that one of the largest advantages gained from expatriation and international work experiences of international workers are associated with their international career capital (Crowley-Henry et al., 2021). Dickmann and Doherty (2008) defined career capital as expatriates' energy, values, skills and networks built up over their working lives and competencies usable within, as well as across, companies. McNulty and Vance (2017) highlighted the non-linear and dynamic

characteristics of expatriates' global careers and found many of their global careers were pursued across national and organizational boundaries in different forms of organizations (including but not limited to MNC, NPO, etc.). However, compared to high status expatriates in large MNCs, less been understood are how SIEs in SMEs sectors develop career capital through international careers, and how SME is involved in this process.

An increasing number of studies have paid attentions to the tension between SIEs and companies. Yorozu (2020) has called on changes in Japanese institutions to address this expectation gap so that mutual understandings can be achieved and Japanese firms can retain the talented international workers. McNulty and Vance (2017) believed companies need to understand how to balance the company goals with personal aspirations and goals of SIEs. And Zikic has developed a framework on how to utilize and integrate skilled migrants' career capital to achieve company goals (Zikic, 2015). In an empirical study on SIEs in Japanese firms, Yorozu (2020) found that many SIEs have changed jobs within Japan because they preferred the variety of work experiences to develop skills, which contradicted with Japanese firms' HR traditions that value loyalty and life-time job security. This issue seems more serious in SMEs in small cities or rural area of Japan, because the culture and populations are usually more homogeneous and companies are less willing to adjust the HR systems for international workers. At the same time, aging population and labor shortage issues are also more severe in those places. Therefore, it is of great importance to understand the career change of international workers and their view and experiences with working in SMEs.

3. Methodology

A qualitative research method is adopted because the SIE research in SMEs sectors is still in its infancy. An explorative qualitative research can help us discover the phenomenon with minimum presumptions and biases. Over the three-years from 2019 to 2022, qualitative data were collected from semi-structured interviews with eleven SIEs in Japan and CEOs of four local SMEs in Tohoku Region, SNS and blog posts of companies and SIEs, company websites and news. In total, twenty interviews were conducted, and each lasted around 1~2 hours. See detailed information in Table 1.

Table 1 Detailed information and career changes of interviewees

	Nation-ality	Sex	Age	Educa-tion	Yrs in Japan	Job, position, industry and career changes in Japan	Interview date
A	U.S.A	M	31	Bachelor	10	ALT English teacher in Aomori → Subsidiary of an Engineering company in Fukushima → Skii resort in Hokkaido → Hotel in Aomori → A small tourism company in Sendai → Private company's English teacher dispatched to a national university in Aomori	22/10/19
B	Taiwan	F	29	MBA	4	Full-time employee of a manufacturing SME → director of the newly established foreign	20/09/25, 21/07/14,

						subsidiary	22/10/28
C	U.S.A	M	29	Master	6	ALT English teacher →return to U.S.A →Tourism beauru in a Kesenuma City →a small marketing firm in Sendai → return to U.S.A for graduate school	20/10/28, 22/10/21
D	Taiwan	M	25	Bachelor	2	Employee of a small marketing firm	20/10/28, 22/10/20
E	China	F	30	Master	7	Employee of a small tourism firm in Sendai →Japanese large marketing firm in Tokyo → American marketing MNC based in Tokyo	22/10/23
F	Taiwan	F	28	Master	2	Employee of an agricultural company in Watari-gun	22/10/25
G	India	M	25	Ph.D candidate	5	Co-founder of a new enterprise in Fukushima	22/10/24
H	Indonesia	F	31	Ph.D	8	Employee of a small tourism firm in Sendai	22/10/30
I	India	M	26	Bachelor	5	Agricultural company in Watari-gun. Agricultural Technical intern→official full-time employee	22/11/1
J	South Korea	M	30	Bachelor	2	Employee of a recycling company in Aomori	22/10/26
K	U.S.A	F	32	Bachelor	7	ALT English teacher in Kesenuma→ Private company's ALT in Sendai→ unemployed	22/11/1

I have used a purposeful sampling method, and snow-balling. The interview questions were sent to all the interviewees at first aftering obtaining their consents for interviews. The questions mainly focused on the following points: their expatriation experiences; how many times they have changed jobs and why; job-hunting process; their opinions and experiences about working in Japan as foreigners; career plan; and, acculturation issues. Data analysis started immediately after interview was conducted and data was collected. The data was analyzed using abductive methods.

4. Findings

Through interviewing 11 SIEs from SMEs of different sectors and sizes, it is found that the SIEs utilized and mobilized their human and social capital to develop professional international careers. Although the choices of work are limited in Japan for SIEs, and challenges are inherent in the host country's culture and institutions, SIEs in SME sectors responded and adjusted by immersing themselves in Japanese culture, developing social capitals and niche talents and expertise. The finding also showed Japanese SMEs are at advantage recruiting SIEs because of the flexibility, relative less formality and closer distance between the SIEs and CEOs. Some SIEs even reported the preferences for SMEs in rural area and small cities instead of large cities. SIEs bridged the skill and knowledge gaps in many SMEs, and have contributed to the development and maintenance of overseas business networks. However, SIEs did face many problems such as discriminations, and mistreatment in SMEs. And although SIEs is talented and possess many professional skills, the work overload was often too large to bare, which can often lead to job resignation. Some of the SIEs attempted to change the environment by holding events to share knowledge and

connect enterprises with foreign talents. In addition, unlike the view of using entrepreneurship as a strategy when encountering career constraints, two SIEs regarded starting own business as a way to solving local social issues with their expatriate experiences and knowledge, along with human and social capital.

5. Discussions

This study provided the empirical evidence for non-linear career trajectories of SIEs in Japan. The findings of this study have implications for SIE and international HRM literature on acculturation, career development, and IHRM issues in SMEs. A dynamic view should be held on the assumptions and definitions of SIEs. For example, low-skilled SIE can become skilled SIE in few years, and motivation and acceptance of mobility also change due to age and life phase development. Investigating the career change of eleven SIEs who had work experiences in Japanese SMEs also has led to inquiries on the nature and role of SME in global mobility. Suggestions for practitioners in SMEs, recruiters, and regional policy makers is improving the promotion of local SMEs as well as the history and culture of the cities, because many talented SIEs have grown strong affections to the local towns and cities.

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