Social Capital, Language, and HCNs as Global Talent

Abstract

Purpose: In expatriate-reliant countries, the challenge of attracting and retaining overseas talent remains, despite the COVID-19 global pandemic restricting international travel. Expatriates depend on formal organizational and Host Country National (HCN) support to facilitate their adjustment when moving abroad. To date, there has been a limited focus on the centrality of language in spanning boundaries between HCNs and expatriates that enables bridges to be formed. This study explored how language influences the social capital accrual and the support received by expatriates from HCNs.

Design/methodology/approach: Rooted in social constructionism, we used semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 20 Nigerian HCNs from two Italian organizations in the construction industry.

Findings: The findings highlight how language is key to effective social capital bridging and show how HCNs act as boundary spanners between local talent and expatriates on assignment. In this study, HCNs have superior language skills and can thus fill the semantic void in communication between the two parties. It emerged that expatriates receive more significant support and higher levels of social capital accrual than HCNs from this relationship.

Practical implications: Consideration should be given to providing formal language training to both expatriates and HCNs. Embedding networking relationships, such as buddying schemes or reverse mentoring, would enhance the social capital of both parties and improve performance. In addition global talent management policies should be adjusted to provide definitive career paths and clearer promotion criteria for HCNs.

Originality: We find that through their language ability, HCNs may have more power over expatriates than previously considered, repositioning their status from a talent perspective. We argue that expatriates should not be considered by organizations the only source of global talent in such a context and that organizations need to offer more definitive talent policies and support that accounts for both expatriates and HCNs.

Introduction

Despite the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the global economy, globalization continues, and a lack of global talent remains a crucial challenge for organizations, even as countries embark on a 'new normal' (Harper, 2020; Ree, 2020). Although global mobility has slowed down considerably, this is predicted to be a temporary situation as individuals and organizations adjust to the constraints presented by COVID-19 (PwC, 2020). Despite some key talent being repatriated during this global crisis, it is anticipated that there will be a return to using expatriate workers once some control over the spread of the virus is gained (Osborn, 2020). For countries reliant on expatriate labor, such as Nigeria (Mwamba, 2008; Fajana, 2009; Pitan & Adedeji, 2012; Abiodun & Segbenu, 2017), the challenge is how to attract and retain overseas talent remains. This challenge is significant given the cost of sending individuals on international assignments (Fee, 2020) and the benefits of the transfer of learning that can be accrued (Fee & Michailova, 2020).

Expatriates depend on formal organizational and Host Country National (HCN) support to facilitate their adjustment when moving abroad (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Howe-Walsh & Torka, 2017). Research into the nature of support from HCNs for expatriates has focused on notions of HCNs as socializing agents (Toh & DeNisi, 2007; Mahajan & Toh, 2014), HCNs as gatekeepers to social networks (Varma *et al.*, 2009), and the impact of social identity and identification that influences expatriate acceptance within the host country (Sonesh & DeNisi, 2015; Ljubica *et al.*, 2019; Yamao *et al.,* 2020). While language skills have been explored from a knowledge management perspective (Yoo, 2020), the centrality of language in spanning boundaries between HCNs and expatriates in enabling bridges to be formed and social exchanges to be made remains under-explored. In this article, we explore how language enables these social exchanges to unfold and contribute to the mutual accrual of social capital.

Nigerian Context

Within the African context, shared cultural values (Hofstede, 1984) are expressed in terms of neighborliness, hospitality, reciprocity, and harmony in building and maintaining the community with justice (Nussbaum, 2003). As a collectivist society, Nigerians are group-

oriented (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). However, collectivism is not exclusive to the Nigerian HCN in-group only, but instead extended by the HCNs to the Italian expatriates through social support offered to them in the form of assistance and shared information.

English is the *lingua franca* spoken in Nigeria, which is taught in schools to facilitate cultural and linguistic unity. English is also the official language for business in Nigeria. Hence it has contributed immensely to the national integration of Nigeria by overcoming the communication challenges of having over 400 indigenous languages spoken by different ethnic groups (Imoke, 2006; Orimalade, 2006).

This article explores how language influences the social capital accrual and the support received by expatriates from HCNs. In doing so, we identify how social capital is accrued by both HCNs and Italian expatriates within construction companies based in Nigeria. The Nigerian construction and civil engineering sector plays a significant role in the economic development, attracting many foreign companies into the region (Oke *et al.*, 2016). Thus, Nigeria forms an attractive contextual setting due to the dearth of research on the subject in this geographic location, thus highlighting a contextual gap.

The extant research has focused on the importance of expatriates being proficient in the local language (Waibel *et al.*, 2011) and how this enables them to act as boundary spanners. This language fluency enables knowledge transfer (Tietze *et al.*, 2017), cultural adjustment (Haslberger *et al.*, 2013), and mutual social capital accrual. Our contributions are as follows: we contribute to the global mobility literature by drawing upon Social Capital Theory to identify how mutual learning acts as a social bridge between the HCNs and the expatriates on assignment. However, it is how HCNs (rather than expatriates) utilize language to act as boundary spanners that is a novel finding of our study and reveals how the power of language changes is critical in social capital bridging. We argue that HCNs, as well as expatriates, may be critical sources of global talent.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: firstly, the notion of social capital in the context of expatriation is examined. Secondly, the methodological approach adopted for this study and the methods used are explained. Thirdly, the findings from this qualitative study are presented, critically analyzed, and the implications are discussed. Finally, conclusions are drawn, and practical implications are presented.

Literature Review

Social Capital

In response to the volume of social capital research, Kwon and Adler (2014) argue that social capital can no longer be perceived as a developing concept; instead, it should be considered as a research field in its own right. As such, the concept of social capital has been explored from several different perspectives, for example, political sciences (Putnam, 2000; Luoma-aho, 2018), ethics (Ayios *et al.*, 2014; Papadimitri *et al.*, 2020), and broader business fields (Woolcock, 1998; Leana & van Buren, 1999; Fernandez *et al.*, 2000; Al-Omoush *et al.* 2020; Khazami, Nefzi & Jaouadi, 2020); in this article, we adopt a network-based perspective (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998; Bai *et al.*, 2020; Fraser *et al.,* 2020). Social capital has been defined as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to position a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). This definition shows social capital as a type of intangible resource embedded in relationships that individuals utilize and exchange through interaction with other individuals in the network. The embeddedness of resources in relationships can be linked with structural dimensions of social capital, which refers to how social interaction benefits members of a social network (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Social capital has been conceptualized from a network's perspective regarding contact opportunities and social exchanges among actors with whom expatriates interact and build relationships (Liu & Shaffer, 2005). Therefore, both expatriates and HCNs may generate and exchange new resources through networking. This conceptualization can be viewed in relation to the notion of power which is essential in exchanging resources. Blau (1964) argues that individuals gain power in exchange relationships by providing other individuals with resources that benefit them. Thus, access to social capital offers individuals in any field a source of power that enables them to seek to dominate others (Bourdieu, 1989). To further understand the social networks between the actors, an understanding of bonding and bridging is necessary.

Bridging and Bonding

Scholars have distinguished between bridging and bonding social capital to capture networking dynamics within societies (Putnam, 2000; Beugelsdijk an&d Smulders, 2003; Coffe & Geys, 2007). According to Putnam (2000), bonding is associated with social networks formed within closed groups (e.g., families and close friends). Putnam (2000) views

bridging as involving social networks created across diverse social settings (e.g., networking within organizations or diverse societies).

Bridging focuses on interactions between individuals from a cross-section of society (Coffe & Geys, 2007). Bridging is essential in generating new ideas (Callois & Aubert, 2007) and can also contribute to the flow of information and reciprocity within networks (Putnam, 2000). Reciprocity is a form of social exchange between two or more parties where returns are expected over time to balance the exchange and support the individuals concerned (Homans, 1958).

In the global talent setting, adjustment is a critical phase in an international assignment during which expatriates rely heavily on support (Ridgway & Kirk, 2021). Traditionally, the focus of research has been on the role of formal organizational support provided to expatriates (Haslberger *et al.*, 2013). The focus of this article is different as it explores how language is used to offer informal support to expatriates by HCNs. HCNs operate as boundary spanners to bridge the gap between two very different cultural groups; Nigerian HCNs and Italian expatriates. Boundary spanners are described by Birkinshaw *et al.* (2017) as individuals who mediate the flow of information within the organization. HCNs' support helps mitigate negative experiences during the new country adjustment and provides a sense of belonging and affiliation to the expatriates that enables them to better understand and interpret the host environment. Individuals who have both linguistic ability and cultural skills can act more effectively as boundary spanners as they can exchange information, link different groups together, facilitate communications and, where necessary, intervene in interactions (Barner-Rasmussen *et al.,* 2014). They also pointed out that linguistically and culturally skilled individuals are also in the best position to act as translators to help reduce misunderstanding before it escalates to conflict in the organization. Thus, this support is vital in helping expatriates understand the host environment, and in turn, it strengthens the relationship between the two parties, leading to mutual social capital accrual. While the existing literature has paid more attention to the role of translators to span cultural and language boundaries (c.f. Blekinsopp & Pajouh, 2010; Yoo, 2018; Wilmot & Tietz, 2020), our study positions the HCNs themselves as translators, and thus boundary spanners.

The role of HCNs
HCNs are citizens of a country who work in the local subsidiary of an international organization (Wayne, 2010). Arguably, they are among the essential groups offering social

support to expatriates, which forms a critical part of expatriates' adjustment process during their international assignments (Arman & Aycan, 2013). Pustovit (2020) found that networking with HCNs enhances expatriates' understanding of workplace norms and requirements. Van Bakel *et al.* (2017) suggest that expatriates in contact with HCNs increase their social capital through the social support they receive from HCNs compared to those not in contact with HCNs. Thus, the frequency of contact and manner of interaction between HCNs and expatriates can result in the accrual of social capital. The more frequent the contact, the greater the opportunities to benefit from the interaction (Van Bakel *et al.*, 2017), which, importantly, we argue is mediated by a common language.

One of the benefits derived from such relationships is the perceived support in learning and knowledge exchange. HCNs are often the best source of information about work and other country's cultural values (Black *et al.*, 1999; Caliqiuri, 2000; Toh & DeNisi, 2007). Information in this regard includes general information about the job, the organization, and the host country, such as the appropriate norms and behaviors and local infrastructure. Having this type of knowledge reduces the stress and uncertainty that expatriates experience and enables them to understand the host country setting (Adelman 1988; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002).

Interactions with HCNs are a source of first-hand information about culturally accepted norms and behaviors in the host country (Feldman & Bolino, 1999; Kim, 2001; Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). However, a productive relationship between HCNs and expatriates does not always occur due to communication problems. Individuals interact and share their experiences through language (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012), enabling them to construct their relationships. Mobility is a catalyst for such sociolinguistic contact (Tseng & Hinrichs, 2021). According to Dowling *et al.* (2008), English is generally considered the language of global business and is central to transferring knowledge in multinational operations (Tietze *et al.*, 2017).

Communication serves as an essential element that connects the expatriates to the host environment (Kim, 2001). Despite English being the taken-for-granted *lingua franca* in global business (Wilmot & Tietze, 2020), the inability of the expatriates to adapt to the host country's language is one of the limitations of expatriates working in subsidiaries (Reiche & Harzing, 2008; Waibel *et al.*, 2011). Expatriates fluent in the host country's language tend to have better relationships with HCNs (Shaffer *et al.*, 1999; Selmer & Lauring, 2015).

However, expatriates who only have basic language skills tend to rely on power-based tactics, such as sending the locals on language training courses rather than using more culturally congruent influencing tactics, such as friendliness. (Peltokorpi, 2010). Communication barriers affect the development of relationships between expatriates and HCNs (Van Bakel *et al.*, 2017) as language differences create barriers to interaction in foreign companies (Peltokorpi, 2010). Thus, this can inhibit the social support and social capital between the Italian expatriates and the HCNs.

There is an assumption that as key talent, the onus is on expatriates to learn the *lingua necessaria* (Waibel *et al.*, 2011) to operate successfully in a foreign country. Indeed, individuals with such language skills effectively bridge communication gaps between expatriates and HCNs, acting as boundary spanners (Urzelai & Puig, 2019; Furusawa & Brewster, 2019).

The preceding discussion shows how enhanced cultural awareness and language skills of HCNs can assist them rather than the expatriates act as boundary spanners, which is the key to social capital bridging. Thus, this study was designed to extend the literature to explore how language spans boundaries between HCNs and expatriates to enable bridges to be formed and social exchanges to be made, and ultimately, social capital accruals for both parties. We, therefore, contribute to Social Capital Theory by emphasizing the role that language plays in facilitating social capital accrual. Thus, in this article, the following research question is addressed:

RQ1: How does language enable mutual social capital accrual on the part of expatriates and HCNs?

Methods

This study explores how the everyday reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) of HCNs in Nigeria is constructed through their interactions with Italian expatriate workers. Social constructionism is rooted in the notion that reality and knowledge are constructed through social interaction among people as they perceive, create, and interpret their environment (Burr, 2015). However, most of the studies to date relating to expatriates and HCNs have been approached from a positivist perspective, for example, Florkowski and Fogel (1999); Hsu (2012) Arman and Aycan (2013); Bonache *et al.,* (2016); Van Bakel *et al*. (2017) and

others. Furthermore, few studies have been conducted in the Nigerian context, revealing a contextual and methodological gap, which this study addresses.

The work of Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) was used to position authenticity, plausibility, and criticality to achieve rigor in this study. Authenticity is portrayed through the inclusion of the biographic information of the research participants (Table 1). Plausibility is addressed by offering a novel methodological contribution framed within social constructionism. Finally, criticality is realized by questioning the implied assumption that support to expatriates is provided only by organizations; an emergent finding from this study is the role of HCNs in such social exchanges.

[Table 1 about here]

A purposive sampling approach was adopted, in which participants were selected who met predetermined criteria designed to achieve the research purpose (Easterby Smith *et al.*, 2012). The criteria were Nigerian senior-level and middle-level HCNs who had worked with expatriates for at least five years. Two case organizations were used to maximize participant access, L&P, and Z&S (pseudonyms), both of which had over 50 years of experience in the construction industry in Nigeria. L&P is a medium-sized enterprise known for constructing roads within Nigeria, while Z&S is famous for building factories, banks, and shopping malls which is also a medium-sized company operating in Nigeria. Both L&P and Z&S are headquartered in Italy and use Italian as the parent functional language in Italy and English as the subunit common business language in Nigeria to facilitate the accomplishment of subunit objectives and local responsiveness (Brannen & Mughan, 2017). Data were collected through 20 semi-structured interviews with HCNs using a topic guide to provide a loose structure (Bell *et al.*, 2019); a pilot study informed the interview guide (Appendix 1). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, following written informed consent for each participant having been obtained. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in English.

The interview data were analyzed, following a three-phase data reduction strategy (Gioia *et al.*, 2012); an excerpt of some codes is shown as an example in Figure 1. Firstly, in-vivo coding was employed using NVivo 10 to capture how the participants described their working experiences (Saldana, 2009). In the second phase, social capital theory was used as an analytical tool to assign conceptual categories and produce a coding template (King and

Brooks, 2017). The third and final phase produced three integrative themes to consolidate meaning and explanation (Grbich, 2007), namely (1) Forms of social capital, (2) Benefits of social capital, and (3) Challenges of social capital. In the next section, the empirical findings are discussed using the integrative themes to structure the presentation of the analysis.

[Figure 1 about here]

Findings and Analysis

Benefits of Social Capital

Reciprocity in the forms of technical expertise, ideas, and information sharing emerged as themes from our study. While both parties (HCNs and expatriates) benefit from the exchanges (Homans, 1958), our findings suggest that it was the expatriates who gained more from the relationship. Francis, from Z&S, pointed out that some of the expatriates benefitted from interacting with the HCNs in the workshop because many expatriates are not very knowledgeable in some aspects of the practical work. Thus, a few expatriates learned practical skills informally from the HCNs, showing how benefits can be accrued through bridging in social exchanges (Clark & Mills, 2012). James, from L&P, relayed a similar sentiment to Francis and indicated how language influences the transfer of knowledge (Tietze *et al.*, 2017):

> *'Let me give you an example, if they bring an Italian to the Electric workshop and he is not an electrician, as soon as he comes he starts learning from us gradually, within a short period of time he knows all that we are doing, and he is learning indirectly from us, the Italian boss will prepare a book in Italian language concerning the work we do, so at work he reads everything theoretically and then he observes us and learns the practical aspect from us.' (James)*

This excerpt shows that learning can occur through linguistic skills, which can stimulate the transfer of knowledge between HCNs and expatriates. Thus, enhanced language skills can facilitate learning and knowledge exchange between HCNs and expatriates, which can further develop the expatriates' social capital.

Harvey, from Z&S, also described how expatriates learned from the HCNs as there were certain things that the expatriates do during work which he corrected, and they too learned from this. This description shows two-way knowledge sharing between some expatriates and HCNs and reveals how bridging may encourage cooperation, as noted by Heizmann, Fee, and Gray (2018). However, in some cases, expatriates left the organization because they felt

challenged by the HCNs having more practical knowledge than them. This decision demonstrates how power relations can impede reciprocity (Gelderblom, 2018; Homans, 1961, 1974).

Challenges of Social Capital

The critical social capital challenge concerning bridging that emerged from our findings was that most expatriates were not fluent in English, the *lingua franca* spoken in Nigeria. Expatriates without strong host country language skills struggle to adjust to the host country (Selmer, 2006). We found that HCNs were adopting the role of translator and, in doing so, establishing themselves in a position of power (Blenkinsopp & Pajouh, 2010). Thus, some expatriates depend on the HCNs for translation in their daily interactions (Selmer & Lauring, 2015). This notion affirms the findings of this study that the HCNs serve as translators illustrating the dependency that these expatriates have on the local workforce and how this might impede mutual social capital accrual.

Our findings indicate that language barriers are perceived as the most challenging issue when working with expatriates in L&P and Z&S. More than half of the HCNs interviewed mentioned language as a barrier that negatively affected their relationship with the expatriates, as noted by Van Bakel *et al*. (2017). The inability of the expatriates to adapt to the host country's language is one of the limitations of the PCNs working in subsidiaries (Reiche & Harzing, 2008; Waibel *et al*., 2011). We offer a perspective that questions whether expatriates are always the primary source of global talent for multinational organizations (Al Ariss, 2014; Vaiman *et al.*, 2015; Collings *et al.*, 2019) as the HCNs, in this case, clearly have superior linguistic abilities. According to Zhang and Harzing (2016), this superior language ability gives these HCNs power over the expatriates. However, Adam from L&P told us of the difficulty he faced when he started working in the company to communicate with the expatriates. He explained how he and his fellow HCNs must listen carefully and clarify the meaning of what their expatriate colleagues are trying to convey:

> *'When I started work here communicating with the Italians was one of the difficulties I encountered because some of them are not very fluent in English. So if you are not very careful you will not understand them clearly.' (Adam)*

Kanan from L&P echoed this, saying that communication is one of the biggest problems he faces in his relationships with the expatriates. He explained how as several of the expatriates

were reluctant to learn English; this meant that some HCNs felt that they had to be proactive and learn Italian in order to facilitate the bridging process:

> *'Sometimes you will not understand them. Sometimes some of them might even speak the Italian language to you that is why I now understand the Italian language a little.' (Kanan)*

On the other hand, Sam from Z&S revealed that a few of the expatriates were taking English lessons to tackle the issue of communication:

> *'Many of them are not so fluent in English they have teachers teaching them English. For example, after their English lessons they try to practice with us, some will be like this is what I have learned today, did I say it right, and if they got the sentence right we say yes if not we correct them.' (Sam)*

Tseng and Hinrichs (2021) note how such transient multilingual communities can arise to share knowledge, especially in a work setting. However, from a social capital perspective, this again reveals how the HCNs help the expatriates with their language skills to enable bridging to occur. Furthermore, this reliance on HCNs highlights how HCNs adopt key roles as boundary spanners (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2017) rather than the expatriates. Finally, this reliance suggests how, contrary to the work of Rasmussen *et al.* (2014), it is HCNs rather than the expatriates in this case who are facilitating intercultural flows. As Welch and Welch (2018) assert, it may be that more organizational support is also needed to facilitate language learning and communication.

It also shows how expatriates may benefit from the goodwill on the part of the HCNs in enabling the expatriates to accrue social capital (Adler & Kwon, 2002) through learning a new skill. However, it is also clear that the HCNs are not benefitting as much from the relationship. Some HCNs complained that they felt disgruntled by the behavior of some of the expatriates. Kylo, from Z&S, explained that the HCNs often felt excluded as even in meetings, the expatriates tended to speak Italian among themselves. This exclusion illustrates how language constitutes a form of power (Selmer & Lauring, 2015) to either enable or constrain social capital accrual.

Ezra from L&P pointed out that translation itself from Italian to English is a problem as many of the expatriates are not fluent in the English language:

> *'They do not speak English fluently but as you begin to work with them you will understand what they are trying to say or communicate with you. Translation sometimes is a problem because if they want to translate something to you they might use the way it is in their own language then translate it directly to you, it is now left for you to comprehend what they are trying to tell you, this is the problem we are facing.'(Ezra)*

This quote reveals how there can be a semantic void where the translation from, in this case, Italian to English requires further sensemaking on the part of the recipient of the message (Tietze *et al.*, 2017). Likewise, in the other company, Z&S, Francis also disclosed that they face problems with translation from Italian to English. However, he stated that the Italian dictionaries installed in their phones have made translation a little easier. He told us:

> *'Most of them do not have a good command of English, they speak Italian to each other, we bear with them until they are able to understand English. Like I have a colleague now that is still learning English, he has an Italian dictionary in his phone if he finds it difficult to express himself he uses the dictionary to translate Italian to English, he then tells you what he wants. So this is helping a lot.'(Francis)*

This excerpt shows how the HCNs must act as principal boundary spanners by helping the expatriates with their language skills and utilizing their linguistic talent to further facilitate the social capital bridging process. This facilitation reveals how successful bridging in social capital accrual is dependent not only on the actors cooperating but also fundamentally is enabled or constrained by their ability to understand each other. Thus, our crucial argument is that the role of language in such global settings should not be underestimated.

Discussion

This article draws on Social Capital Theory to contribute to the global mobility literature identifying how language is the key to effective social capital bridging between the HCNs and the expatriates on assignment. Due to their language ability, HCNs are more effective boundary spanners in this case than expatriates, as because of their linguistic skill, they can fill the semantic void in communication. They do this by listening carefully, asking questions, and using sensemaking to fill in gaps in translation between Italian and English. In addition, our analysis suggests that the more proactive party in the HCN-expatriate relationship is likely to take steps to bridge the gap by, for example, seeking to learn a common language. This finding inverts traditional notions of global talent and might emerge as a boundary spanner in social capital networking.

Our analysis shows how power relations impede social capital bridging. Contrary to the existing literature that indicates that expatriates are employed in positions of control over local subsidiaries (Singh *et al.*, 2019; Kang & Shen, 2018), we show how, due to their language ability, it is the HCNs, not the expatriates (as talent) who arguably hold the most power at times. However, by speaking in Italian in meetings, the Italian expatriates exclude the HCNs from the conversation, effectively wielding social power that restricts the HCNs access to social capital in that setting (Bourdieu, 1989). Furthermore, we show how within some global contexts, HCNs (rather than expatriates) utilize language to act as boundary spanners that, in turn, are the key to social capital bridging. Therefore, senior management teams should not make assumptions about the sources and processes of power in expatriate-HCN relationships and how these impact social capital accrual.

In terms of reciprocity, our findings show that HCNs acquire technical knowledge from expatriates. However, expatriates receive social support, practical knowledge, and the opportunity to increase their language proficiency through informal relationships with HCNs. Thus, HCNs act as boundary spanners by using their language skills to facilitate communication and cultural adjustment (Peltokorpi, 2010). However, this notion illustrates how such interactions do not always result in HCNs benefiting more than expatriates. Instead, there are circumstances whereby the expatriates gain more from the relationship than their HCN counterparts.

We thus contribute to the field of global talent management by showing how HCNs, rather than expatriates, may be critical sources of global talent. Therefore, expatriates are not considered the 'top talent' in this context; instead, the HCNs offer a higher level of global talent. HCNs do not benefit as much, in terms of social capital accrual, from the relationship as expatriates. We, therefore, contribute to the field of global mobility by emphasizing the role that language plays in facilitating social capital accrual in relationships between HCNs and expatriates.

Conclusion

Traditionally, expatriates are perceived as a critical source of global talent. However, this article surfaces that, depending on the language proficiency of the actors, HCNs may be perceived to be more talented. Language competency is central to the effectiveness of social capital bridging in expatriate-HCN exchanges, and those who possess such linguistic skills

are more likely to be successful boundary spanners. In response to the question, *How does language enable mutual social capital accrual on the part of expatriates and HCNs?* Language ability enables mutual social capital accrual by filling the semantic void between HCNs and expatriates by providing a common language to facilitate communication, enhance relationships and improve performance.

Limitations

This study used was cross-sectional and therefore lacks some insight that a longitudinal study would offer into the adjustment process of expatriates. Notably, the data in this study is based on the perspectives of HCNs, and thus, expatriate workers may offer different insights. One other group whose opinions were not explored were the line managers – of both the expatriates and the HCNs and what they perceived to be important in terms of social capital accrual.

Practical and policy implications

The findings from this study have highlighted three areas in which organizations should invest to better utilize and support their global talent, both in terms of expatriates and HCNs. Firstly, language has emerged as central to facilitate the social capital accrual of expatriates and HCNs. Consideration, therefore, should be given to providing formal language training to both expatriates and their HCN counterparts, not just HCNs, as recommended by *Heizmann et al.* (2018). This consideration is essential in contextual settings, such as Nigeria, where the *lingua franca* differs from the native language of both parties. In similar regard, language proficiency should be considered in the recruitment and selection process for HCNs and expatriate assignment selection.

Secondly, this study has highlighted the importance of HCNs in the adjustment process of expatriates. The value of the informal support offered by HCNs should not be underestimated; indeed, there is an opportunity for such informal relationships to be formalized. This formalization to embed networking relationships (Kirk, 2016) may take the form of a buddying scheme or reverse mentoring, thus enhancing both parties' social capital and improving performance.

Finally, there is a need to recognize and reward HCNs as global talent. Therefore, global talent management policies should be adjusted to provide specific career paths and more explicit promotion criteria for this employee group.

Future research

In this article, we question the role of language in the context of global talent management and, in doing so, highlight the vital role that HCNs play in helping expatriates to settle into a new environment. Given restrictions in place for the foreseeable future due to the COVID-19 pandemic, future research should explore how such exchange relations will play out with reduced face-to-face interaction. For example, how will such support relationships develop in virtual workspaces?

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