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in Sweden and Finland**

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**Unexpected Moves:  
High-Skilled Foreign Workers in Multinational Headquarters  
in Sweden and Finland**

I was waiting for the tram, a little late for work you know. Cold, typical Helsinki day. I am in my work clothes; skirt, blazer, a little bit of make-up. There is this other young guy, I think Indian, a student or something probably, at the stop too. This old Finnish guy arrived, he was kind of drunk—you know you see that all the time around here—and first asked me, he says, ‘Where are you from? Are you from Mexico?’ I didn’t answer, and he turned to the Indian guy and shouted angrily now, ‘Welcome to my country! Welcome to my country!’ Yes, welcome indeed...(…)…You can get upset of course, but… He wasn’t dangerous or anything. And he’s had too much to drink and, well, they are not used to seeing these foreigners around.

Sanam, 31, Employee at Helsinki headquarters of Finnish multinational<sup>1</sup>

How did Sanam, from the Middle-East, end up among the morning tram-stop crowd at the edge of Europe, in Finland? She is not married to a Finn, not a diplomat, not a refugee. Foreigners, especially those who are visibly identifiable, especially if they do not fit those categories, are still a rarity here. Surely, the little country that has given the world Linux and Nokia has vastly increased its reputation internationally in the information age, claiming almost a sort of mythical charm, often from afar, in high-tech circles. One might venture to guess the fellow tram-rider in this anecdote may be among the still small but increasing number of foreign students in the engineering schools of Finland. Sanam herself is not a student either, though. She is an electronics engineer and she moved to Helsinki about a year ago because this is where the headquarters of the multinational corporation she has been working for in the past four years is.

The encounter is a reminder that Sanam has not arrived in the most cosmopolitan of cities, but one would certainly not think that based on what one sees and hears while waiting in the lobby of the corporate tower where she works. Many of Sanam’s coworkers in this facility do not look or sound like they were born and raised in Finland, though it is hard to tell if they are passing through town on a quick business visit or are staying on for some time or even settling down here indefinitely. One thing is for sure: This stream of passers-by does make it difficult to dismiss offhand the pictures and stories in the company brochure about a "truly global workforce" as nothing more than PR.

Indeed, the mental images that the term "workers on the move" conjure up have changed dramatically in the so-called age of globalization. We routinely run into living examples of how a whole spectrum of workers ranging from nannies to academics, to maids, to entrepreneurs, to sex-workers, to electronics engineers (and many others) now earn their daily bread in new-found homes away from home. As the editors of this volume note, however, the geographical mobility of the highly-skilled has so far received less attention than it deserves both theoretically and empirically.

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<sup>1</sup> All names of individual persons and companies have been changed here to protect anonymity.

The global circulation of labor does not take place, to the degree that it happens at all, in friction-free, time and space-blind, impeccably "rational" labor markets, as sociologists love to point out to the economists. In much of the migration literature today, it is almost redundant to point out that labor flows are informed by various forms of connections and networks that could, in purist economic theory, be regarded as imperfections. (Boyd 1989, Tilly 1990, Gurak and Caces 1992, Massey et al 1993) A massive amount of scholarship has been devoted to the specific task of identifying the nature, power and resilience of the networks that give shape and form to contemporary migration, may these be based predominantly on history, kinship, ethnicity or nationality. High skilled workers do not enter circuits of movement in social vacuum: Well-known cases like Silicon Valley attest to the possible significance ethnic/national/kinship ties can have on the flow of high-skilled labor. (Alarcon 1999, Saxenian, Motoyoma and Quan 2002)

There is, however, a particular type of work organization inside which the movement of high-skilled workers might involve countries or cities where few, if any, of their co-nationals, or at least ones they are directly related to, may have set foot before: the multinational corporation. Understanding the dynamics of movement inside multinationals is important in the effort to map out the global mobility of the highly-skilled for three reasons: First, multinational corporations are the employers of many of the world's workers with high levels of human and cultural capital, and, arguably, they stand to claim this title with growing frequency in the future. Secondly, in becoming leaner (and, according to many, meaner) through outsourcing their labor-intensive activities to subcontractors, multinationals have become increasingly more concentrated employers of high-skilled workforces. Finally, because a multinational corporation is, by essence, a global network and, its functioning predicated on the flow of resources inside this network, it provides a trans-national infrastructure in which high-skilled workers are likely to move or be moved: They are, after all, from an organizational point of view, one such resource, and possibly the companies' most valuable ones. In investigating the mobility of high-skilled workers, then, multinational corporations deserve a closer look.

Much of the analysis of multinationals focuses on the organizational imperative to come up with a "solution" to the "problem" of coordinating business activities transnationally (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1989). By contrast, I explore the human consequences of the way work is done inside these structures as they relate to the mobility of real, individual workers. The "anomalous" cases of those high-skilled foreigners who now appear among the morning rush crowds on their way to the high-tech zones around Stockholm and Helsinki underscore a novel phenomenon. And yet they may still be rare, they are not as rare as they were ten years ago. What is the role that multinational corporations play in making encounters with these foreigners, even in these places, possible and, increasingly more common?

### **Multinational Corporations and the Mobility of the Highly-Skilled:**

In management scholarship it is widely agreed that the core *raison d'être* of the multinational corporation (henceforth MNC) as an organizational form is precisely the facilitation of flows of the factors of production through the inclusion of dispersed nodes of activity under one overarching network and thereby the minimization transaction costs

over space. (Porter 1986, Ghoshal 1987) Much of the globalization literature also concurs on the centrality of mobility to flexibility and of this, in turn, to the way MNCs carry out business (Harvey 1989, 2001, Sklair 1995, Waters 1995, Held et al 1999, Friedman 2000). Such agility over space and around national regulation is, in fact, what has made MNCs so crucial to the debates about the suggested enfeeblement of nation-states in the global economy today.

In terms of how MNCs "do globalization" by rendering the factors of production mobile, we know quite a lot about their command over capital, but not nearly as much that over labor. In fact, MNCs are widely notorious (or famous, depending on one's position) for moving *towards* labor, rather than moving labor *about*, for cost, productivity or efficiency purposes. They are increasingly eager and able, unless otherwise convinced or restrained by other actors, to take their operations wherever these may be carried for maximum profit. The jobs that flexible arrangements adopted by multinationals help create and those they, concurrently, destroy, has been a hotly-debated topic in both scholarly and political conversations. Much of this attention has justifiably turned to the quality of working conditions MNCs offer to the low-skilled workforce they employ, mostly indirectly, around the world. (Barnet 1995, McMichael 1996, Klein 2002, Bakan 2004, among others)

High-skilled workers are usually only fuzzily sketched in on the fringes of this portrait and then, mostly in popular, rather than social science, media. Such depictions would have readers believe that the high-skilled employees of MNCs are "global souls" (Iyer 2000) who shuttle between meetings in equally sleek branch offices of their companies around the globe. Tirelessly mobile and effortlessly cosmopolitan, they embody the best that the "borderless world" (Ohmae 1990) promises to be. Not only are they employed by MNCs, they are at the same time the most avid consumers of these companies' brand-name products and services. If anyone may have indeed gained the "freedom of extraterritoriality" (Bauman 1998: 28) that distinguishes the privileged of the "global age" (Albrow 1997), it should be these people who are literally and figuratively "going places."

Given the emphasis on flows and networks in understanding transnational processes, especially as they relate to the movement of people in social science literature (Castells 1996, Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton 1999, Sassen 2000, Smith 2001, Savage, Warde and Ward 2003) it is interesting that the MNC-as-network has not been subject to much sociological analysis. In the "world cities" paradigm, there is detailed demonstration of how the central nodes of global financial flows are also homes to the headquarters of many multinationals, with special attention paid to the polarization of labor markets into a high-paying, high-skill and a low-paying, low-skill end in these urban spaces. (Sassen 2000, Massey 1988). Despite the emphasis on the significance of the mobility of capital to the mobility of labor in this framework (Sassen 1988), the *direct* role played by multinationals in human mobility remains an underexplored theme.

There is expectedly massive management scholarship on the MNC, and especially the discussions on knowledge transfer (Wernerfelt 1984, Ghoshal and Bartlett 1990, Gupta

and Govindarajan 2000) and expatriation (Edström and Galbraith 1977, Dowling, Schuker and Welch 1994, Selmer 1995) do provide us with certain tools and information about the circulation of human capital as conceived of and intended by corporations. These, however, as is communicated by the choice of central concept, retain a focus on issues of efficiency or productivity, as well as a largely prescriptive tone aimed at making the MNC a better-lubricated machine. Discussions of knowledge-transfer are often disembodied in the sense that they do not, on the whole, make the connection between workers as real people and the knowledge they are expected to diffuse. Expatriation and repatriation discussions do look at individuals, but with the important exception especially of Jon Beaverstock's work (Beaverstock 2001a, b,c) (which comes out of geography) here workers are of interest primarily in their capacity as conduits. The bulk of the scholarship remains mired in a heavy dose of cultural essentialism on the one hand, and a practical psychologism, on the other. In general, these studies do not tell us very much about the variable modes of mobility as navigated and experienced by actual workers.

In what different ways *do* high-skilled workers move inside the MNC then? Does employment at multinational corporations help make migrants out of foreigners or only "traveling salesmen"(and women) whose "homes," however often and for however long they are left behind, are not fundamentally reshuffled? How are employment at multinational corporations, various other forms of ties to specific locales, and the pursuit of geographical ambitions related in the concrete instances of actual careers of high - skilled workers?

I attempt to answer these questions here by looking closely at the actual career trajectories of a group of high-skilled workers employed by two large MNCs. As suggested by the title and the preceding discussion, the cases of the foreigners in the headquarters of these corporations in Helsinki and Stockholm claim a privileged place in this effort. The two MNCs were in one of the flagship sectors of the global economy today, with respect to its sheer volume of business, leading role in the creation of new technology, and the geographical reach of its markets. It is more serendipitous, rather than consequential, that they are in the business of connecting people while they are mobile.

### **The Global Expansion of Mobile Telecommunications Multinationals:**

Mobile phones are ubiquitous today. It is hard to keep in mind how rapidly that happened. In 1995 there were about 50 million mobile phone subscribers in the world. In 2005, that number is expected to be over a 1.8 billion. Nearly 700,000 people are signing up for mobile subscriptions around the world every day. (<http://wireless.newsfactor.com>) Judging by current trends, mobile phone subscriptions will exceed fixed-line subscriptions sometime in 2005. Mobile phone penetration rates have increased exponentially, hovering now around 70% in Europe and reaching as high as 90% in Sweden and Finland. Importantly, expansion of mobile phone usage has not been an exclusively affluent-country affair. Although penetration rates are expectedly lower in poorer countries, mobile telecommunications technology is being adopted by them as well, often more rapidly than fixed-lines. The sheer volume of business implied by even

the most incremental increases of market penetration in China and India alone put the populous developing countries at the heart of the mobile telecommunications sector's future. Certainly in terms of the markets that it serves and the geographical reach of its products, this is a global sector.

Telecommunications used to be the quintessential service/business under the purview of nation-states with close links, in fact, to the military and defense industries. Recent developments, including the wave of deregulation that has swept over the world since the early 1990s and the privatization of many national PTTs in otherwise quite different countries, have changed that. The liberalization of telecommunications coincided with the ascent of mobile technologies, which, taken together, have radically altered the structure of the sector and its line-up of major players.(Pehrsson 1996)

Despite widespread deregulation, transnationalization tendencies in the operator segment of the sector have lagged behind those of privatization. For every operator with global or at least regional ambitions, such as TMobile or Vodafone, there are several times as many national ones. By contrast, both the handheld device and the network infrastructure ends of the sector are dominated by multinational corporations, including the MNCs in my study. The Nordic region in general, and Finland and Sweden in particular, have led the development, standardization and commercial use of mobile telecommunications technologies. While the list of the world's top MNCs is dominated by American firms, the two giant Finland and Sweden-based MNCs have in a way created one significant sectoral niche that bucks the trend.

To be clear, that telecommunications technology is developed by a few major companies and then sold to the rest of the world is itself not a new arrangement. In the age of fixed-line telephony, PTTs around the world purchased and used networks developed by Motorola, Ericsson, Siemens and the like. Yet although the claims that MNCs today have few, if any, special ties to headquarter countries are at best far-fetched (Mair 1997), it is still the case that they are no longer merely domestic companies selling internationally. The telecommunications giants of the yesteryear were more strictly domestic in that their various functions, including manufacturing, were either exclusively or much more densely concentrated on their home turfs. Even when these companies had production plants in low labor-cost areas of the world in the past, these were in a limited number of locations. More importantly, before the liberalization of the telecommunications business and especially the rise of mobile telephony, the presence of the MNCs away from their home countries took the form mostly of dealing with overseas customers, typically state economic enterprises, for the sales, maintenance and upgrade of fixed lines. This did not necessitate the setting up of permanent offices in too many locations around the world. The proliferation of branch offices in the sector came about as recently as the 1990s. Thus, in addition to the reach of their markets, mobile telecommunications MNCs today are also global in the sense that they physically exist, in their manufacturing plants, branch offices and even Research and Development facilities, across a much higher number of geographic nodes around the world. Both MNCs discussed here have offices and hence, a permanent, material presence marked by the same, globally-recognized logo, in over 100 countries.

### **Unlikely Destinations--Sweden and Finland:**

While the mobile telecommunications multinationals have, so to say, taken these Swedish and Finnish firms where they have never been before, the headquarter countries themselves have been slower to let in newcomers with high educational and professional credentials. Neither Sweden nor Finland is a popular migration destination for high-skilled workers or, for that matter, in general. Perched on the Northern tip and, according to many treatments, the periphery of Europe, these countries stand out even among the European Union countries for their low levels of population inflows, including from other member states. (Recchi et al 2003)

There are, actually, important differences between the experiences of the two countries when it comes to migration. Having sent as much as one fifth of its population to the New World around the turn of the century, Sweden only began to receive sizeable numbers of immigrants, around 10,000 per year, in the 1950s. This largely unskilled-labor migration reached its peak in the 1960s before it dwindled. After the late 70s and early 80s, Swedish migration policy turned decisively towards receiving political refugees and asylum seekers instead of labor migrants. (Ekberg and Gustafsson 1995, [www.migrationsverket.se](http://www.migrationsverket.se)) There is much talk today in Swedish media and academia of a "multiethnic" or even a "doubly creolizing" (Hannerz 1996) Sweden (or at least Stockholm), albeit one with problems of segregation and discrimination. (Frykman - Povrzanovic 2001) Since the early 1990s, close to a million of Sweden's population of nearly 9 million have been foreign-born. (Statistiska Centralbyrån 1997) Finland is far less familiar with taking in outsiders. Itself traditionally an immigrant sending country, and mostly to neighboring Sweden, Finland has become a net receiver of migrants only recently, since the early 1990s. The number of foreign-born in Finland has quadrupled in the 1990s alone, although with a starting point of about 25,000, and notwithstanding the country's total population of just over five million, this is still a very small number. (Forsander 2002, Joronen et al 2002)

Sweden and Finland routinely rank at the very top of lists for all that is "good" in the world: quality of life, life expectancy, income equality, technology development, education and much else in between. The Nordic countries as a whole have long represented the social-democratic model of strong welfare states. (Esping-Andersen 1990, Baldwin 1990) Although there are obviously differences in the way they formulate public policy, against the backdrop of the world as a whole, both Sweden and Finland are clearly very generous in their universal welfare provision schemes that include the middle-classes. At the same time, they have exceptionally competitive economies. The World Economic Forum ranked Finland first and Sweden third on its competitiveness report in 2004, with the USA squeezed in between.

Both countries have largely financed their generous welfare provision by doing business beyond their small domestic markets—Sweden's population is around nine, while Finland's is around five. They have both, therefore, long relied on international trade; the former mostly in steel, forestry and mining and the latter in pulp and paper products. Traditionally strong in engineering, both countries have become leaders in the

development of new information technologies, resulting in especially Finland being taken as a living example of the information society.(Himanen 2002) These are places where, almost like social laboratories for futuristic technologies, the locals enthusiastically take to using the most cutting-edge gadgets. They have also become, mostly due to the successes of their MNCs, become almost synonymous with the "mobile revolution" since the early 1980s. After all, the increasingly universal GSM technology followed on the example of the regional NMT system that was developed and utilized in the Nordic region.

Both countries have literacy rates of 100% and have drawn upon their highly -educated labor forces, and among these especially the strong expertise in technical and engineering fields, as valuable human assets. It is therefore probably not surprising that in both places, high-skilled workers constitute but a fraction of recent migrants. So far, they have not been needed all that badly. Against this backdrop, MNCs appear to be vanguards in importing the rare high-skilled foreigners, however small these still may be in sheer numbers. Stockholm and Helsinki, despite being important hubs in the Nordic region, the former more so than the latter, they are not among major world cities. They do not appear all that clearly on the mental map in which the jetsetters that high-skilled corporate workers are supposed to be roaming.

The headquarters of multinationals still retain the most important control functions (Massey 1988, Sassen 2000) and they are still the Rome, in many ways, of various--if not all--roads leading from the branch offices that cater to specific local markets around the globe. The MNCs in the study have offices in over 100 countries around the world, but their corporate functions and their research and development facilities do remain clustered in the capitals cities of these Nordic neighbors. Both were among the top ten employers, respectively in Sweden or Finland, although the weight of the Finnish MNC is considerably greater in the Finnish labor market than of the Swedish MNC in its home country. Because the number of workers in the MNCs had fluctuated greatly following the boom and freeze of the mobile telecommunications market between the early 1990s and the early 2000s, I refrain from giving exact numbers here. However, the payroll numbers of the two corporations were, at the time of research, merging around 23,000 in each headquarters country.

### **Following Real-Life Tracks:**

Although I have placed the foreign workers employed at the headquarters at the center of this piece, the empirical material that informs my discussion comes from a larger research project. The project included a third mobile telecom MNC based in the USA, and a third fieldsite, in Istanbul, Turkey.

In total, I carried out in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 72 MNC workers, quite evenly divided between Finland, Sweden and Turkey. (Having to do with issues of access, it did not prove feasible to conduct interviews in the US). In Finland and Sweden, the bulk of the interviewees were employees of the MNC based there, while in Turkey interviews were quite evenly divided among the branch offices of the three MNCs.

Especially in the Turkish branch offices, which ranged in size from 50 to 200 employees, my interviewees included those high-up in the business hierarchy, including Vice Presidents and Human Resource Managers. In general, however, my interviewees were high-skilled workers in middle-level ranks, with varying managerial duties and powers. Almost all of them worked in the network infrastructure, rather than mobile handset divisions of the MNCs. There was a range in the the primary functional divisions of their jobs, including research and development, marketing and sales, and more purely engineering-based work, which itself had numerous sub-categories.

All of the foreigners in the two headquarters, and the majority of the interviewees in the larger study were in the 30-40 age range. Except for a few exceptions especially in Sweden, they belonged to the cohort of employees hired by the companies in the mid-90s. All interviewees had finished at least 3 but mostly 4 to 5-year university degrees, and many had graduate degrees, including PhDs. The vast majority of these degrees were in technical fields, many in electronics or telecommunications engineering. There were a handful of workers with degrees in economics or management, and even one interviewee in Helsinki who had a degree in philosophy but these were in the category of exceptions underscoring the rule. Women made up slightly more than a third of the group of 72 interviewees.

I used several different initial entry points into the company networks in each site, including official channels, engineering unions, prior acquaintances, and, in one case, a list-serve for an "international club" of MNC workers. From these initial contacts, I found additional interviewees through directed snow-ball sampling. It was directed in the sense that, despite the general tendency on the participants' part to refer me to an exceptionally well-traveled (and/or a foreign) colleague, I asked them to provide names for co-workers who may not have been mobile on the job at all. I also tried to pursue several functional strands, such as research and development, marketing and sales, or instruction, so as to get a better-rounded picture of the range of experiences. 20 workers in the study were foreigners employed at the MNCs' various functional divisions at the headquarters, twelve in Finland and eight in Sweden. Their countries of origin included Belgium, China, Germany, Finland, France, Hungary, India, Iran, Turkey, Sweden and Venezuela. Seven were women and thirteen were men.

Life-histories are an extremely useful tool in understanding both what people do while working for multinationals and what multinationals do with their workers. Although the average age of the workforce in the sector, because of its massive growth in the past decade, is somewhat skewed to the younger side, *all* of the foreign workers had worked for other employers prior to taking up a job with their current company. All of them, in fact, had worked for another *type* of employer, ranging from academic institutions, government companies, domestic firms in home countries, to even domestic firms in Sweden or Finland. Their career histories therefore particularly shed light on the differences of working for/in a multinational as compared to other kinds of employers, and the role these may play in bringing foreigners to unlikely destinations and/or keeping them there.

### **Global Dispatch—Moving to the Rhythm of the Markets:**

There is, when business is going well, much movement across the global network of mobile telecommunications MNCs. Among my 72 interviewees, only about one in ten had never traveled internationally for work. The movement of individual workers is closely tied to what transpires in the business markets, so it is not surprising that this cohort, who mostly started their careers as the sector took off, were so likely to have gone overseas on the job. Mattias whom I met in Stockholm, was a technical instructor in the late 90s and remembers having counted to realize he had been "on the road" 140 days in 2000. Markku in Helsinki verified the mythical story that his MNC at one point chartered a weekly flight out of the city to a customer site in Southern Europe because it was cheaper to do so with the number of people they had working on a project.

When mobile telecommunications technology began its rapid expansion in the early 1990s and picked up still greater momentum in the middle of the decade, there was a flood of business for the MNCs, as much of the world awaited being rewired. Governments around the globe, with the obvious concentrations in Europe, Asia and the Americas, issued their first operator licences through highly-publicized competitive biddings, one after the other. If awarded a licence, the operator would proceed to purchase the network equipment from a vendor, like one of the two MNCs here, as well as the services involved in the installation and implementation of the network. Who gets the network systems up and running and therefore makes conversations on one's mobile phone possible remains largely invisible to the end-users. If the two MNCs in this study are globally recognized names today it is mostly because they also manufacture mobile handsets, but in fact bigger monies are often at stake in the infrastructure end of the business.

In this initial phase of the emergence (or, one could argue, creation) of brand new markets basically from scratch, geographical movement for workers from the MNC headquarters appears to have been pervasive. The first task at a given market location would typically have been the preparation of a contract bid to gain the "account," the business of a mobile operator. Because a contract requires exact specifications of technical details, it necessitates either constant or very frequent contact with the potential customer. In many cases, a certain product or solution that is to go into the network has to be customized for the local market, or according to what the mobile operator wishes to offer among its commercial services, and this precipitates greater contact with the customer still. The preparation of a contract is an extensive affair organized as a major project. Even if specific parts of the project can then be delegated to workers who may be spatially dispersed, the need to be in close contact with the customer requires a permanent presence in the market unit at least by the core members of a contract team. This stage of courting the potential customer was narrated by many interviewees as having been "intense," involving 80-hour weeks, sleepless nights at the office and the like. An engineer from the Swedish MNC recalls the teams of three MNCs camping out at the same hotel in China while preparing bids on an account there and bumping into each other in the lobby during the days leading up to the customer's decision.

According to interviewees who worked on projects in the bidding phase in places as varied as China, Brazil and Moldova, to name just a few, contract preparation can last anytime between six months to a year and a half. Because the greater part of the world's markets adopted mobile technologies in the span of the same five to ten years, and also because in many markets there were multiple operators that were to build their own networks, the MNCs had to set up shop, and do so quickly, in a myriad of locations pretty much all at the same time.

In case of a successful bid, the actual "roll-out" begins. For the high-skilled workers, the "installation phase" involves everything from scoping out the appropriate spots across the operator's coverage area to place the base stations for transmission to the supervision of their actual placement on these spots: an effort that may take them "climbing up rocky foothills," "driving around in cars on dusty roads for weeks," and sweet-talking their way into (and on top of) private buildings. The "implementation phase" involves getting the software running on the system, which, in turn, is both preceded and followed by extensive testing. Throughout these efforts contact remains close with the customer, and tasks are carried out often in mixed teams of workers from both companies. After the system is handed over, contact is continued for maintenance, problem-solving and repair purposes. This is work that requires real people, in real time and space. Most of the time, for most of these tasks, the MNC has to dispatch workers to be on the ground, working hands-on, and interacting face-to-face with the customer.

Although the relationship with the customer continues in some form for as long as the equipment stays in use, the bulk of the network equipment vendors' business and profits is generated through the sales of the products and services involved in the roll-out of new infrastructure. Rounds of technological upgrades that build upon the existing network are again, eagerly pursued as new business, but these are, on the whole, not nearly as profitable as a cycle of infrastructure construction begun anew. Only when customers adopt newer technology that is so different from the preexisting one that brand new infrastructure needs to be put in place, that the stakes go high up again. This is why the expectations of the MNCs have been so seriously thwarted after 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation mobile licences were bought by operators around the world for extremely high price-tags, but commercially viable business plans for their actual operation have been so slow to come.

That is also the reason, in many ways, that during the time I conducted fieldwork, between the summer of 2001 and the winter of 2004, interviewees almost invariably talked about how their life on the job had suddenly become static. The frenzied growth of the markets had subsided by 2000, and, by 2001 there was very little new business on the horizon. As exuberant market outlooks got hastily recast and uncertainty about future sales and growth descended upon the golden sector of the global economy, the stock prices for many of the flagship companies either froze or fell. As quarterly reports after quarterly reports revealed the need for a substantial reality check on expected earnings, executive boards became more vocal about the necessity for major restructuring. Big rounds of lay-offs swept across the pay-rolls of most of the big players, including especially one of the MNCs discussed here. When there was work to be done around the world, moving people around was necessary, and when there was money to be made,

there were the funds to pay for such movement. Once the sector went into a standstill, various arrangements in which workers are moved around were the first on the chopping board of the corporations' long lists of cost-cutting measures.

The sequence in which markets unfold, as outlined above, also captures the overall direction and rhythm of most of the movement associated with high-skilled MNC jobs. The companies initially needed a mobile workforce, or, rather, had to mobilize their current workforces, because they had to simultaneously accomplish two things: First, they had to carry out the tasks required by the various stages in market development as discussed above, and secondly, they had to build the local competencies in the market units hoping that business opportunities in these places would not be temporary. Until the latter could be achieved, the first was predicated on the allocation of resources from elsewhere in the MNCs' global network to the particular market unit in need.

For the immediate task of bidding for a contract, expertise was typically culled from the large and varied human resources of the headquarters. A contract bid is an extensive affair not only in terms of duration, but also in terms of the variety of skills it requires. While some workers work on contract bids from beginning till the --variably bitter or happy—end, others come in to take care of specific tasks or to substitute a temporarily missing project team member. A project team is therefore made up of a combination of local workers and workers sent to the particular site for variable durations.

Building up local competence involved the hiring and training of large numbers of new workers around the world. Many of the MNCs' current country offices were set up in the 1990s to establish a more permanent presence in chosen locations, especially if these markets were thought to be significant even in the case that the first contract bids did not yield successful results. Organizational development of this sort necessitated the movement of individuals with sufficient leadership skills and, more importantly, managerial experience, to the new markets. It is widely stated and known in especially the Swedish MNC that the top executives in market units are often from the headquarters. These managers, in addition to responsibilities associated with the immediate business in a local market, also need to undertake those having to do with the recruitment of locals and the consolidation of a solid skills base in the local unit. The goal is to get the unit to the point where it can stay afloat with at most intermittent support from either the headquarters or other centers of expertise. No matter how fast recruitment and training take place, getting a local office self-sufficient generally requires these expatriate managers to stay on the ground for considerable amounts of time, at least a year or, more often, two.

Global growth in the mobile telecommunications business therefore set large numbers of MNC workers on the road for different periods of time, to accomplish a variety of tasks, and in wide-ranging directions. The MNCs attempted to accomplish their stated goals by moving people about in a combination of short stays of up to six months, generally referred to as "business travel", and longer stays, anywhere from six months to two years, in the category of "overseas appointments", or, as they are more commonly referred to, on expatriate contracts. The career histories of many of the high-skilled workers in the

sector today are checkered with a series of alternating moves of these kinds, the incredible momentum of the 1990s having filled up many resumes with interesting combinations of country names. On many occasions, business travel destinations morphed into "current address"es, which, then, changed again. These accounts show that, like market expansion, the individual workers' geographical mobility can be frenzied, subdued or be at a standstill.

### **Orbits Inside the MNC:**

The lists of city and country names that plot the career trajectories of workers reveal the difference the entry point makes for the orbit of one's movement inside the MNC. The personal histories of the workers at the headquarters almost invariably included travel, often multiple times, to the new markets as they emerged. In the earlier part of the 90s trips to various European markets seemed to be common, while as the decade progressed the destinations became more varied, including markets farther away in Asia and North America. Given the goals such movement was intended to accomplish, as discussed above, it is not surprising that a pattern of ripples-from-the-center-to-the-nodes emerges from the individual histories taken together.

That is not to say, however, that the workers in the branch offices do not, or, during the boom of the sector, did not, move. All of the workers of the Nordic MNCs I interviewed in the branch offices in Istanbul had been to the headquarters at some point, typically quite early in their tenure with their employer. It is important to note, though, that even if workers from a local office move towards the "center" of the MNC, this center might not be the global headquarters. If there was a regional headquarters within greater proximity, this may be the more common destination of travel by those employed in the branch offices. Among the workers of the US-based MNC's Istanbul office, for example, only one had traveled to the headquarters near Chicago, whereas almost all others had been to the regional headquarters in London.

Of course, not all the moves from local offices are even *up* the corporate geographical hierarchy. The larger, more established market units that have developed competencies earlier are expected to provide the expertise needed by the less established markets in their "vicinity." Many MNC workers in the Istanbul branch offices had extensively traveled to the less developed markets in places like Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, or Romania, while both Venezuelan workers I interviewed in Stockholm talked about their multiple trips to and stays in various other Latin American countries after joining the MNC in the Caracas office.

The different directions of the traffic between the headquarters and local offices correspond to differences in the reasons why travel would take place along each route. I have already detailed why workers from the headquarters would need to travel farther out across the MNCs' global network, but what brings employees in branch offices to those otherwise unlikely destinations in Stockholm and Helsinki?

In most cases the first visit to the headquarters involved attendance in a training event, with alternating sessions of classroom instruction and, if applicable, hands-on practice.

Companies have largely standardized the training for specific technologies or skills and these are organized in modules, offered at whatever specific location is calculated to involve least traveling by participants as a group. In recalling travel to the headquarters for training, workers talk about the considerable confinement of their time to the classroom and their interactions to those with the instructors and other course participants-- usually a combination of others from various offices of the MNC and workers from customers. In town usually for two or three days and at most up to about a week, travelers for these occasions largely remain students/curiosity visitors with limited, if any, exposure to the workings of the company at the headquarters. In some other training arrangements participants get at least a rudimentary sense of the way work is carried out at the center, when they are brought in to learn-by doing, either through taking part in small projects or taking on specific tasks in ongoing large projects. A good part of Jonas' job in Stockholm as a supervisor in a testing lab, for example, is the training of visiting workers from local offices around the world who come here to familiarize themselves with particular technology during stays of about a month to six weeks.

In some other instances, travel to the headquarters involves reporting to or consulting with a higher-up who is in charge of a particular project in a given market unit. Although the on-site team has primary responsibility in the accomplishment of given tasks, they do have to report, in formal and informal ways, to a "responsible manager" at the headquarters. Some of these visits, in the accounts of the interviewees, appear to have been important in keeping faces attached to names, and to help retain a stronger sense of the "reality" of the connection. Some others were more specific in goals and intentions, including reporting back of the demands of the potential and present customers and an assessment of whether the MNC would be able to deliver accordingly. Various accounts of going to the headquarters to "explain to them what (was) going on on-site" communicate something of an ambassadorial spirit to these trips, as they involved a sort of brokerage effort on the part of the local unit workers to negotiate a realistic solution between the headquarters and the current or potential customer in the market unit.

In general, then, when the workers from the headquarters go to the local markets, they typically do so as "experts"-- to get things in gear, the business off the ground and the branch office on track. When people from the nodes of the global network travel to the headquarters they usually do so for training and, to get a level of exposure-- though often strictly limited-- to the larger company, and to communicate the specific needs and ambitions of the market units. In this sense, travel between the headquarters and branches usually highlights the respective positions of MNC workers, if not in command and decision-making, then at least in the knowledge hierarchy inside the global network.

### **The Benefits of Movement:**

Even if all the factors that precipitate the movement of workers inside the MNC are at play in full-force, and all at the same time, the majority of the MNCs' workforces are of course "at home," rather than on the road, at any given point in time. Although movement on the job may sometimes become obligatory, in general the number of

workers needed for dispatch is but a fraction of the total number of workers in a given location. In other words, traveling on the job is often, at least to a degree, a matter of choice. Why would MNC workers want to move, either on business travel or overseas appointments?

Travel has its charms. Especially at the beginning of careers, when most workers did not have substantial family responsibilities, they were rather unanimously enthusiastic about an opportunity "to see different places and experience different cultures." Among high-skilled MNC workers from the branch offices in developing countries, even though many are from relatively privileged middle-class backgrounds, travel overseas per se was a novelty. Emre, from Turkey, commented that going overseas was "the stuff legends were made of" among his university crowd. For the generally well-traveled Northern Europeans, who may have gone vacationing in Spain with their families while growing up or gone on the rite-of-passage Interrail trips while at university, going to foreign countries is less likely to be a complete novelty. Yet they too were active in seizing opportunities to travel on the job. In the case of short visits, part of the attraction is a chance to see places that are not "the most common destinations." "(You see the) main capitals in major countries, but you also see these smaller parts, small cities, different countries that you would never go to on vacation," Anders said in Stockholm. Interestingly, this notion about the appeal of the uncommon destination also came up frequently in the accounts of trips to the headquarters by workers in the local units. Çağlar sounded rather proud while recounting his first visit abroad ever, asking, "You know, people go abroad first to France or England or such, and here I was, going to Finland. I mean, who goes to Finland for their first time overseas?"

There are material benefits to business travel, the emphasis on which varied greatly among interviewees. In general, travel itself was not by any stretch a luxurious affair. Everyone but the very top-level executives traveled coach class and stayed in "good but not five-star hotels" or apartments rented by the MNC in country sites. There were occasional dinners with the management or workers of the local offices, but no lavish entertainment written off on the company account. The major material perk for travel seems to be the per diem travel allowance, estimated to be in the range of \$50 - \$75 a day in most travel destinations. Especially the Nordic workers were quick to point out that this allowance was tax-free, and many interviewees emphasized that because they would be traveling to take care of what was usually an urgent task, they often did not get much time to spend money anyway. Coupled with the reimbursement of many personal expenses, the "extra cash" added up, especially since, during boom times, so many workers were on business trips so often. Marja in Helsinki said that particularly during the early years in her career, money from her travel allowance would almost match her salary.

Perhaps a still more beneficial outcome, and one possibly with longer-term consequences, of traveling is the extension of one's professional network inside the MNC, especially globally. Because there are usually people traveling in from multiple locations to a particular site, the connections to be made during travel are not limited to the ones with those employed at the local unit. In the case of workers from various

branch offices, this is also a frequent place to get to know others, there typically in more supervisory roles, from the headquarters. Such contacts are crucial in one's inclusion in future project teams. Furthermore, connections first established during business trips can lead to subsequent offers for overseas appointments. An expatriate arrangement may well follow from repeated visits to the same locations, with each visit taking up to 6 weeks and involving close interaction with those in decision-making positions at a local office. Esra had traveled to Singapore twice already when the office there suggested she comes there on a two-year contract. Fredrik had traveled to South Korea back to back so many times that the local management there thought they should take him on as an expat so that he could work with fewer interruptions.

Travel does seem to have somewhat diminishing returns, however, if it involves only the repetition of the same or similar tasks and/or remains too strictly limited to the same destination or the same work partners. Many interviewees agreed that after numerous experiences of "shuttling between base stations and customers' offices," "getting on those long flights to Asia", or "teaching the same things to the local staff over and over again," the excitement over travel for its own sake wears off rather quickly. Unless the professional capacity in which one is traveling or the destinations or both change, travel can, and does seem to, lose much of its initial charm.

By far the more desirable and desired way to move on the MNC job, both professionally and materially, is expatriation. Although, even in the most frenzied times, less than 3% of the MNC workers were on long term expatriate contracts, almost half of my interviewees had had such overseas appointments and some of them several times.

In this arrangement, there was much greater emphasis on "the cultural experience" as opposed to the "place experience" that was so frequent in the accounts about travel. The former is different in that it involves everything associated with functioning within a different working environment and "way of doing business" on the one hand and, being an inhabitant of a foreign city or country, on the other. These experiences are appreciated more on their own terms by some, but they are also important because they fortify resumes. By definition, workers are sent out on overseas appointments if their specific skills or expertise are much needed at a particular site and, as such, the arrangement is a kind of official seal of recognition by the MNC. However, according to the interviewees, the acquisition of cultural dexterity and an enhancement of one's capacity to work in different settings with different customers and co-workers was just as significant for professional development. Vibeke in Stockholm voiced the common view on expatriate contracts in a somewhat cynical tone by saying that "as long as one does not stay too long," these appointments are "flashy" and they "help it easier to go up the corporate ladder."

An overseas appointment is of course also the far more materially beneficial way to move inside the MNC. Although the specific conditions of the appointments vary considerably, expatriates typically receive generous salaries from their "temporary" employers and get to keep their home-country salaries, too. Accommodations, often much more lavish than dwellings at home, a company vehicle and/or driver, children's tuition for attendance in

international schools, language classes for self and spouse were among the fringe benefits workers on expatriate contracts enjoyed. Perhaps still more important than keeping the salary of the home-base job was that fact that the workers got to keep the job itself in the first place. "A *real* expatriate contract gives you the guarantee to have a job to come back to," said Markku, contrasting this with the newer (and fewer) arrangements offered to people in the cost-cutting era.

There are, even in boom times, few instances of movement on overseas contracts *to* the headquarters, especially once adjusted for the proportion of the operations that are concentrated there. These appointments typically involve, as Stig, with twenty years of experience in the Swedish MNC suggested, an effort to lure high-paid, top-level Anglo-American managers, who need additional incentives to take their careers to these notoriously high-tax/suppressed-salary corporate labor markets. While this may generally be true, such must have been the extent of movement inside the MNC in the 90s that three of the 20 foreign interviewees in Helsinki and Stockholm had in fact arrived there first as expatriates from the branch offices.

This closer inspection of the modes of movement on the MNC job shows that while high-skilled workers employed by these companies may be mobile, and in general derive various benefits from their mobility, neither the "mobile condition" nor the benefits attached to that are constant or continuous. MNCs take workers at the headquarters out to the world much more often than they bring others in to the headquarters. Yet despite the unbalanced account sheet, that they were the locations for the headquarters of MNCs had resulted in Helsinki and Stockholm welcoming visitors who otherwise would most probably never have made it there. Brief visits and the rare instances of relatively longer but still temporary stays aside, though, had MNCs in fact been instrumental in more permanent imports?

### **High-Skilled Foreigners in the Headquarters in Stockholm and Helsinki:**

Out of the 20 foreign workers I interviewed at the headquarters, four in Sweden and two in Finland had arrived there through their movement inside the MNCs' global networks. Praveen and Syed both came from the same branch office in India, two exceptional cases of workers from the branch offices arriving in Stockholm with expatriate packages. Tiscar had been hired in Venezuela, dispatched to Argentina on an overseas appointment, where the working relationship with the Swedish workers not only led her to develop a great liking for and curiosity about Sweden, but also helped get a local contract at the headquarters. Luis, also from Venezuela, had been in Stockholm for five years and did not plan to return to Venezuela any time soon. Emre and Umur came to Helsinki from Turkey. Why would these high-skilled workers want to stay in these cities that are not homes to that many others with similar qualifications?

Materially, living and working in MNCs in Finland or Sweden on local contracts is far less advantageous than doing so on expatriate contracts. Praveen and Syed and Luis first arrived on lucrative overseas appointments. When the MNCs decided to do away with the expensive contracts, they were given a choice: They could either go back to their earlier jobs, which were in their home countries, or stay, but "go local." Praveen says

that that meant a nearly 50% reduction in his salary income and this would have been the same for the other two. The average salaries for engineers in large companies in Sweden and Finland are notoriously low. Yet all three decided that they would be materially better off if they stayed, defining "material" in wider terms than merely "financial" and taking into consideration the overall quality of life. Praveen and Syed have children in school, and they both discussed the high-quality of education in Sweden as being important for their futures. Luis talked about the combustible political situation in his home country and how his concern with safety made Europe a sensible home. They agreed, as did the other foreigners in Sweden and Finland alike, that the general orderliness and efficiency of life in and outside of work made living in these places a "comfortable" experience. A range of social services that even middle class workers can count on the generous welfare state to provide, from universal health care to public transportation to workers' protections, were mentioned in support of this assessment.

In fact, such relatively diffuse material benefits overlap heavily with cultural and social preferences that may or may not make Sweden and Finland desirable homes. The social democratic ideology that permeates the organization of civic and work lives in the Nordic countries is certainly one, at its heart, about how material relations between the members of a society should be governed. These interviewees voiced a number of reservations about the "reality" of living under strongly social democratic regimes and discussed their conflicts with locally prevalent conceptions of work, leisure, competition, achievement and affluence. These comments were very often prefaced, however, with the expression of a strong preference to living and working in a "humane" country, as opposed to what they portrayed to be the Number 1 destination for those corporate workers in pursuit of "lots of money," "big cars" and "big homes": the United States. It is not wise to generalize from the views of so few, but not completely unwarranted to suggest that socio-cultural notions governing the distribution of material resources in a given location also figure into the evaluations and calculations of tenous migrants.

In terms of material and social/cultural considerations, in other words, many of the incentives to stay or leave are informed as much, if not more, by the *national context*. While the MNC might be instrumental in allowing foreigners their first step into unknown territory, long(er)-term commitment decisions ultimately depend on the desirability of living in the larger local environment in which the particular MNC office, including the headquarters, operates. This is truer still for workers who have families, as the well-being of other family-members are often even more directly influenced by the various kinds of resources that nation-states make available to them in given settings. Expatriation contracts that sustain lives somewhat suspended in space in luxury-land are not tenable infinitely and if "overseas appointees" wish to stay somewhere, they must do so as "locals." MNC employment is therefore able to bring in foreigners to Stockholm or Helsinki the degree that life as a local MNC worker is attractive to them in these places.

Professionally, life *is* likely to be attractive at the headquarters. The headquarters is an attractive destination for MNC workers because the nature of the work experience is different at the organizational core. Here one is simply "closer to where it all gets done," where "decisions are made," where "you can see how it all begins," in the interviewees'

words. Many who had worked in branch offices commented that the organizational depth is not comparable with the range of possibilities the headquarters offers. "You can only go up that far" in the branch offices and, "there are not that many different kinds of things to do."

One of the most cherished advantages to being at the headquarters is that it is the best place to establish contacts and gather information about the various ongoing things across the MNCs' global network. To come around one full ironic circle, one of the ways in which such contacts and information make a difference in the career plans of employees is that they better equip them to find out about and seize opportunities for *movement* again. The headquarters are the single best-positioned launching pads for those seeking opportunities to move somewhere else that might meet their ideal company/country combination even better. It is not possible to generate definitive claims about the durability of the "settled" condition for those who had experienced first-hand how MNC-employment can enable one to move around the world: There were far too few cases at hand and, at the time of research, little opportunity to do anything but remain put, (and, if possible, employed) in the mobile telecommunications sector. Nevertheless, as the sector began to show signs of picking up at the tail end of the fieldwork, Luis, for example, moved on to another position in Spain. It is not unreasonable to think that once the sector kicks off into another round of "musical chairs," those who have gone through an intra-company move might attempt a subsequent one.

The foreigners MNCs bring in to Helsinki and Stockholm therefore may or may not be "keepers," to use the term by one interviewee. However, MNCs are also important in making encounters with high-skilled foreigners more possible and frequent in these contexts because, in addition to possibly pulling them in through their global networks, they also constitute a resort for those high-skilled workers who are looking for ways to *stay*, and do so without it having to be a professional sacrifice. Of the 20 foreign interviewees at the headquarters 12 had initially arrived in Sweden and Finland for reasons and channels other than those internal to the MNCs. Eight were already living in these cities when they found and took up the MNC jobs. Another four had decided, after earlier, brief visits, that they wanted to move there more permanently, and looked for a job that would allow them to realize that ambition. I consider these cases in some detail next to understand the different ways in which MNC-employment may help keep high-skilled workers in a specific place.

One, albeit still uncommon, way to have arrived in Finland and Sweden for (future) high-skilled workers is as students. This was the case for six of my interviewees. Sweden and Finland are not even minor blimps on the global radar of foreign student flows. In Finland's largest institution of higher education, the University of Helsinki, out of over 37,000 registered students in 2003, there were only 1,266 guest students, only a fraction of which were conceivably there for the entire duration of their degree studies. In Swedish statistics at the national level exchange students are grouped together with degree students, but in 2003 there were a total of 5,509 new permits given to foreign students in the country, altogether. Foreign students in these small countries are not only a small group in absolute terms, but proportionally as well. However, among my

interviewees, those who had initially come to Sweden and Finland to attend school did constitute a discernable sub-group. Starting off in India, Iran, Venezuela, Turkey and Hungary, these life/career histories reveal various commonalities:

After earning his BSc and MSc in electrical engineering, rising up at work to become the manager of a factory by his late 20s, and working as an instructor at the university at the same time, Tahsin says he looked at his life in Tehran and thought, "This is *all* I can do here: This is the limit. I *have to go*, I *have to go*, I have to go." To go abroad was an overriding desire, and to go for a PhD appears to have been both a means and an ends. He estimates having written to over 500 technical schools, "everywhere around the world" and that he sent just one letter to Finland, to a professor in Helsinki whose name he found among the reference section of a technical book. He received a far more personal response to this inquiry than he had to any of his others, complete with an offer for a research studentship and salary. While the offer itself was the reason why Tahsin went ahead with the move, it also seems that Finland as a destination, along with the "twist" that it had taken for him to have an opportunity there, carried a considerable degree of exotic charm for him.

The "kismet" element is usually quite strong in the stories of those who ended up as students in Sweden or Finland, but Mert's story also covers the major "rational" reasons why the arrangement may become attractive for most foreigners. Mert turned to Nordic universities after his numerous attempts with American universities failed to return funding offers. When he found out that universities in Sweden and Finland did not charge tuition *and* that you could work on a student visa, they emerged as a possibility. The technical expertise in these countries, too, had put them on the map of potential destinations, as schools in Stockholm and Helsinki were famous for their research on magnetic fields, his area of specialization and interest. Mert figures that he could not have gone to Germany, France, or Italy, because there he would have had to not only learn but in fact study *in* the local language. In general, the countries' reputations in the technical fields (which are in fact not to a small degree related to the two MNCs), free higher-education in these countries, and the possibility to conduct studies in English are the major reasons why overseas students may head towards Sweden or Finland.

Some other foreign MNC workers had been more arrivals of the soul than arrivals of the mind. Vincent, from Belgium, had always found the school and work environment in his home country, Belgium, "stifling." He initially developed a liking for Finland and the "Finnish way of life" during anime filmsfestivals that he attended annually as a university student. Not only was he fascinated by the cutting-edge high-tech culture here, but he just really "liked the people; straight-forward, credible" and intensely admired "the combination of their art and math capabilities." He "knew this was the society he was looking for," so he set about looking for a job in Helsinki that would allow him to become part of it. Like Vincent, Scott in Stockholm was first motivated to move because he was attracted to a certain "way of living." He had been an exchange student in Sweden almost 20 years before this actual move, and always enamored by the place. Years later, when his job with his firm in California allowed him to travel in Europe with

his wife, they realized that they liked it well enough in Sweden that they should look for ways to take their lives there.

Still some other high-skilled workers had developed an initial connection to Sweden or Finland through significant others. I met Esra, 33-year-old electronics engineer from Turkey, in Helsinki. Like many others in the study, she had entered the mobile telecommunications sector in the mid-90s, taking up a job with the leading mobile operator in Turkey, whose major consultant was the national operator of Finland, a state enterprise only-then turning private and selling its expertise overseas. Esra met her Finnish partner, in Istanbul with the consultant firm, during a project. Theirs is one of the many illustrations in the workers' career histories of how the global boom in mobile telecommunications brought about a whole series of unprecedented or until-then rare working relationships between a whole range of organizations-- and, thereby, people -- around the world.

For Esra, Scott and Vincent, the location was the first part of the equation to fall into place. Their possibilities of moving to and staying in Sweden or Finland depended largely on their securing employment. For high-skilled workers on solid career paths and favorable working conditions already, finding not just *any* job, but occupationally satisfying ones was the challenge. Those who had first arrived as students, too, were in a similar situation by the completion of their studies. While in school they had been on student visas, renewed annually and on the condition that they return to their countries of origin upon graduation. In order to stay, they needed to find employment, and of a quality that would not require a professional compromise. MNC-employment provided the solution to the predicament of these foreigners. In what ways, though, does the MNC-as- employer make it possible, easier, or more comfortable for foreigners to stay in places that are not generally all that penetrable to them?

### **Life in Cosmopolitan Relief: Working at the Multinational Workplace:**

In formal interviews and informal chats with local and foreign workers alike, certain phrases came up repeatedly, without prompting: References to how there were "people from all over the world," working in one's team or office building, how "this is a really international workplace" or how "things are really different here than they are outside" were almost universal. There is a tangible sense in which foreign high-skilled workers in the MNC headquarters see their work environments as far less parochial—a common complaint about general feelings about Sweden and Finland for most, though not all, interviewees-- than their other everyday surroundings. As the previous discussion of high-skilled migration to Sweden and Finland suggest, they may well have a point. In the workers' accounts, the MNC workplace emerges as life in cosmopolitan relief, not only differentiated from alternative workplaces, but, in fact, disembedded to a certain extent from the surrounding environment at large. Of the various factors that workers identify as the distinguishing features of the MNC workplace, the following were the most salient:

#### ***a-) Language:***

The single most common and immediate answer to the question of why people found it preferable to work for a MNC, was, by a large margin, "Language." *All* of the

interviewees mentioned it as either the top or one of the top reasons that had in fact made it possible for them to get a job in the first place. For the outsiders coming in, being hired without the knowledge of the local languages was simply a necessity. For those who had been students, what had been the advantage had proven, in a sense, to be a disadvantage in preparing for the larger labor market in that they had not been forced to become fluent in Swedish or Finnish. Neither Tahsin nor Mert had learned much Finnish by the time they received their graduate degrees. Likewise, Zahra, from Iran, had enjoyed making many foreign friends in her program, carried out in English, in Gothenburg, but that also meant she had only picked up conversational Swedish by the time she completed her MSc degree there.

Language mattered at several levels. In some cases, the inability to speak the local languages was a concrete obstacle to acquiring otherwise potentially desirable jobs because employers demanded their workers to be able to communicate in Swedish or Finnish. While Finnish is considerably harder than Swedish to master even at the level of everyday proficiency for most foreigners, it also appeared, based on the interviewees' accounts, that more of the large employers in Sweden demanded competence in Swedish, and/or did so more officially. For Scott and Vincent, who lacked any knowledge of the local languages, several applications were stillborn on the language factor alone.

With some potential employers, language was not an official requirement of the job and hence not as clearly a roadblock to getting hired. In both countries, the local populations in general, and the younger, high-skilled, technical workforces in particular, are known to speak English exceptionally well. Still, many MNC workers who initially looked into or interviewed with domestic firms noted that while people there were perfectly capable of speaking English, they did not seem as comfortable with it as locals working in MNCs. This observation was somewhat more common in Finland than in Sweden, but made in both countries. Furthermore, even if the foreign workers could "get their foot in the door," they voiced being self-conscious in settings where speaking English was more the exception than the rule and where others would have to make an effort to switch languages in order to include them in the ordinary business of the day. One interviewee said that it felt as if one would be "professionally marginalized if everyone else had to constantly translate details to you."

What the *official* language of a company was also mattered because this meant that much of the intra-company correspondence may or may not be readily comprehensible to foreign workers. The MNCs in the study had switched to English as their official language in the early/mid 1990s. As Seija, a Finn in the Swedish MNC, pointed out, even if the immediate correspondent had put forth their inquiry in English, as long as the initial communication had been in Swedish, one was not able to follow the exact turns involved. She herself speaks Swedish, but she noted that because she thinks that the e-mail she sends out "is likely to be passed on to someone else, and on again to someone else, and on yet again to someone else...it makes much better sense to write it in English in the first place." Arnaud, who first arrived in Finland from France almost twenty years ago, making use of a clause that allowed him to carry out his military service there, was one of the very first foreign workers in the Finnish MNC's headquarters. At the time,

there used to be "so few foreigners in his building that (he) knew all of them by name." Although he is a rare foreigner who is actually fluent in Finnish, he smiles when he reminisces about the impossibility of deciphering the company correspondence for his other foreign colleagues, whereas now, not only is the written communication in English, but so is "much of the conversations you overhear."

***b-) Global Reputation:***

If one of the things MNCs get out of being global organizations is a competence in managing multinational workforces, another is a global reputation. For the majority of the foreign workers in Finland and Sweden, the two MNCs were often the companies they had the greatest familiarity with even prior to moving to these countries and, they generated a level of implicit trust. Vincent applied to eleven jobs in Finland but chose the MNC because, he says, "a big move is always a plunge in the dark" and "if you're going to do it, you should go with the one that you know best."

In a more minor way, the reputations also figured into the foreign workers' presentations of their self and their professional stability to family and friends in their home countries. Hasan remarked that he was proud to be able to tell his parents, "*This* is the company I work for." Helsinki and Finland had, accordingly, been somewhat obscure for his parents, relatives, friends and colleagues in Turkey, but the MNC itself is a "household name. They all have the phones."

***c-) "Atmosphere":***

Related but not reducible to the issue of language was the somewhat less tangible quality of the MNCs' "overall atmosphere" that made them more comfortable homes for foreigners. In general, foreign workers, for different reasons, voiced their appreciation of the Swedish and Finnish "ways of doing business," often contrasting these with those of home countries as well as the United States, and sometimes even with one another. Nevertheless, both foreign *and* local workers identified a "diverse" workforce and being surrounded by people coming from and going to a whole range of places in the world as one of the biggest attractions of working in the MNC. Some of the local workers who had been exchange students during their university years drew parallels between those experiences and their current worklives, underscoring the value they placed on both.

For the foreign workers, the "cosmopolitan atmosphere" of the MNC headquarters seems to have a still deeper meaning: Despite widespread statements about a fascination with or an appreciation of Sweden or Finland, the homogeneity of these national societies, especially across their middle classes, nevertheless often strains "outsiders" considerably. "Ethnic migrants" (Favell 2003) from the same home countries are either nonexistent or too few and, even when they exist, too different from the high-skilled workers in terms of class and habitus to provide full-fledged communities. Hasan from Turkey said that while he did not "want to sound politically incorrect," there was too much cultural dissonance between his colleagues at the MNC and the "Kebab Turks", the Turkish migrants who, across, Europe, are most visible in the small fast-food joints they own and run and of whom a handful have also made it as far as Finland. Zahra attributed the

greater affinity she feels for her engineer friends, of various nationalities, to the " shared predicament of being foreigners."

Accordingly, not only was the MNC as an organization more "culturally open," but being so, it was also a place for a greater concentration of foreigners and hence where being foreign was less marked and problematic. Complementing and completing the organizational openness and the presence of others sharing a similar status was the final element, discussed by several interviewees, that their local colleagues here, too, "had a more global perspective."

***d-) Organizational Dexterity in Letting People Onboard:***

Specific practices enable and show the MNCs' organizational dexterity in making the workplace hospitable to foreign workers. Esra's career history highlights the advantage MNCs have over domestic firms in this respect. When her partner wanted to return to Finland after two and a half years in Turkey, he asked her to come along. Esra says that she would "not have moved unless she had a job." As a well-paid, fast-rising employee in an extremely dynamic and highly prestigious company, she would have been leaving much behind. She quickly found a job with the Finnish operator, which had previously been the state-owned and run telecommunications monopoly, where her partner was employed. Privatized in the early 90s, the company was making efforts to become more globally active, though it never quite became a multinational like the MNC where Esra now works.

(It) was a typical state company...Not as bad as a state company in Turkey but still, less dynamic, with everything really set in their ways, and everything was in Finnish. And I guess starting the first day they almost expected me to speak Finnish or something.

She felt that neither her department at a more formal level, nor her immediate colleagues, at a more informal level, were all that helpful and attributes this to a lack of experience with accommodating foreign colleagues. She constantly had the sense that she was working inefficiently because she had not received guidance, despite the company's ambitions at the time to become an international player and "looking on foreign workers positively."

There was probably no top-to-down flow. The top may have thought 'This will be good, to hire the foreigners' but to the people I worked with, this idea had not trickled down. They did not help, they did not hinder either, but it was as if I were just a Finnish person. Like you're just there, there is nothing extraordinary about you.

By contrast, the MNCs have more institutionalized forms of dealing with foreign arrivals. Henrik, a middle-level manager in the Human Resources Department of the Swedish MNC, worked in the special division devoted to handling "International Appointments," while Pia, in Helsinki, was a "Diversity Manager." Needless to say the self-proclaimed tasks of organizational units should be taken with a grain of salt and the practical nature of their goals kept in mind. Nevertheless their very existence points at, at the very least, an organizational recognition that the facilitation of worklife for non-mainstream workers merits a structured effort.

Informal practices that develop through experience can be even more crucial in feeling less anomalous at the workplace. The more a company deals with foreign workers, the more it is likely to have standardized ways of dealing with and services to offer them. The greater familiarity the local workforce has with the experience of working with foreign peers, the more likely they are to know how to get and keep people onboard.

***e-) Connectivity to the Global Network:***

The final way in which MNCs make staying in Stockholm or Helsinki not only possible but also more comfortable for the foreign workers has to do with the repeated theme of this piece that, they also help them move. MNCs were more appealing to the foreigners, as they were to many of the local workers, because, unlike, for example, a mobile operator, they promised travel. Esra recalls that after her interview at the MNC headquarters, she was taken to the office where she would be working. There was nobody in the office. All the desks were obviously occupied but, at that time, empty. When she asked where everybody was, she was told that all the engineers had been dispatched on a project, somewhere in the world. "If you come here, it will be like for you, too," her would-be manager commented. "I felt good about that," she says, "It felt nice that I would have an opportunity to travel away from Finland to be honest."

The prospects of travel have a special appeal for outsiders-within. They imply, at one and the same time, being embedded in a location, yet also being freed from it to some extent. MNC-employment gives these foreign workers some roots without tying them down.

Taken together, these distinguishing features of MNC-employment as identified and expressed by the foreign workers describe a work life in cosmopolitan relief. This is a valuable, if rare, opportunity to offer to high-skilled workers whose interests in staying in Helsinki or Stockholm are curtailed largely by the perceived limitations of these cities in making being foreign unproblematic.

**Conclusion:**

If the sight of Sanam going to work in the morning in Helsinki is odd to the occasional town-dweller, it is less so to many others, and much less so than it would have been ten years ago. It is important to keep in mind, in the overheated discussions over globalization, that many of the changes claimed to be afoot are gradual and relative. While much of the hype about the brave new globalized world is not fully merited, caution over the fanfare for its arrival need not mean brushing aside all claims that certain things may, indeed, be changing.

The transformation of contemporary capitalism has important consequences for the role of movement and mobility in high-skilled work. The spatial fragmentation of the production of goods and, increasingly also of services, means that these processes are less and less frequently contained in one geographical location. Multinational corporations are the organizational structures that are most adept at economic activity built around this principle. Much of this activity is outsourced to second or third-parties, rather than being contained within the official structure of the MNCs though, and MNCs are increasingly

the proper organizational domains exclusively of high-value-added work and, hence, employers of high-skilled workers.

MNCs wire the world through their global networks, connecting a number of nodes both literally and figuratively. Admittedly, these networks cluster in certain parts of the globe while largely bypassing others, and are not fully or authentically "global" in the sense that they do not map out the world as we have come to know it in old-fashioned geography. Just how spatially inclusive the global network of a MNC is will depend closely on what sector it is in and, in turn, where the sector's markets are.

The movement of workers across this global network is not in itself a goal for the MNC, the organizational actor, but rather a means to put labor and skills to work where they are needed on the shortest notice and for the lowest possible cost. Corporate appreciation of international experience and exposure in individual careers is mostly because these are taken to indicate an acquired ease at moving about: An accumulated capacity to work and manage in diverse settings and with different workforces is, after all, the greatest insurance against possible friction in transit.

Due to the very nature of the relationship between the MNC headquarters and the local units in their global network, the flow of actual workers inside the MNC is heavily concentrated on the route starting from the center and leading out to the outer nodes. Nevertheless, hosting the headquarters of major MNCs has consequences not only for sending more locals out, more frequently, to a greater number of and more varied destinations around the world, but also for bringing and keeping high-skilled foreigners in.

The case of the mobile telecommunications sector with two of its biggest players based in the homogeneous home turfs of Finland and Sweden underscore many of these points about how MNCs can be instrumental in lubricating the movement of high-skilled workers around the world, including to hitherto unlikely destinations. On the one hand, they establish links between points across space, alongside which real-life itineraries then may take shape. On the other hand, they create niches of employment that make working --and living-- in otherwise quite inaccessible local contexts possible or more rewarding.

While MNC-employment may render high-skilled workers mobile, to variable degrees, in variable ways, across variable routes and for variable durations, however, both the need and the opportunities for such mobility eventually depend on the overall direction, position and ambitions of the company in the global markets. As much as the fate of a sector or of particular MNCs will therefore inform the range of work experiences possible to their high-skilled workforces, however, individual workers are not merely local leaves being thrown around by global winds.

A closer look at the MNC from the bottom-up, through the "thickly described" actual career and life trajectories of real workers, reveals that the value of mobility and the desire for movement are highly contextual. Not more than a tiny fraction of even these purportedly most mobile of workers wish to play musical chairs either ad infinitum, and,

settling down with the MNC at a specific location involves, at least temporarily, "going local." The calculation is then one of whether or not being a "local" while working "in cosmopolitan relief" corresponds to a satisfactory combination of life in and outside of work. That calculation inevitably has to take into consideration how and to what extent national politics and nation-states matter in giving shape and color to the overall life experience in a given place, at a given time. While neither the MNCs nor the welfare-states can really offer a fundamental solution to that one major source of foreigners' hesitation over staying in Stockholm or Helsinki, namely the long, dark winters, opportunities to travel on the job and labor laws with generous sick leaves conceivably help remove it.

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