

ANALYSIS OF INDONESIAN MID-CAREER DIPLOMATS' PERCEPTIONS OF INTERNATIONAL MUTATION THROUGH THE LENS OF PROTEAN CAREER ORIENTATION

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Abstract

This study explores how Indonesian mid-career diplomats perceive international mutations to diplomatic missions abroad, using a protean career orientation lens. Interviews with nine mid-career diplomats reveal that internal factors, such as financial need, personal development, and family, are the main drivers of international mutation decisions. The thematic analysis highlights the dissonance between their career orientation and the traditional career management approach of the ministry, which lacks in considering the diplomats' aspirations. Additionally, it uncovers dissatisfaction with the current mutation system due to perceived unfairness and a lack of clear measurement categories. Our findings suggest that, while ensuring organizational needs are met, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could benefit from incorporating diplomats' and their families' aspirations and promoting more transparency in the mutation system. A more employee-centric approach could lead to increased job satisfaction, improved employee retention, and a more effective international mutation system. This research contributes to understanding career management and the international mutation system in diplomatic services and serves as a catalyst for further research on these under-addressed topics.

Keywords: International Mutation, International Assignment, Job Transfer, Diplomatic Career Management, Protean Career Orientation

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According to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961), there are five main functions of a Diplomat: i) representing the sending state in the host country; ii) protecting its national and the nation's interest; iii) negotiating with the receiving state; iv) reporting the condition and development of receiving state; and v) promoting friendly relation and develop cooperation between the two countries. Additionally, diplomats are expected to juggle multiple social roles, acting as knowledge producers, representatives of a government, and bureaucrats (Cornut, 2015). However, people rarely know the complex array of duties and challenges that diplomats navigate during their assignments. They immediately associate diplomats with their privileges, living abroad and engaging in high-stakes negotiations. While the profession seems to be prestigious, it also comes with risks including implications for their health-related quality of life (HRQL) caused by the demanding nature of the job (Fliege et al., 2016).

The human resource management literature is rich as research in this area is abundant. However, the management aspect of a diplomat's career often remains overlooked. While traditional human resource management topics such as motivation, job satisfaction and recruitment are extensively studied, career management, especially within diplomatic services, is relatively neglected. Addressing the gap, researchers began exploring several aspects of career management, such as the relationship between career development and individual success (Bagdadli & Gianecchini, 2019) and the effect of such management over some individual outcomes: organizational commitment, turnover intention, and burnout (Soares & Mosquera, 2021).

As diplomats are frequently relocated, they face unique challenges compared to other professions. As they move from their home country to another and vice versa, the diplomats and their families need to adapt to different cultures, and social and political situations quickly (Gudmundsdottir et al., 2023). These shifts often impact various aspects of life, including take-home pay, lifestyle, interpersonal relationships, access to education, and even basic necessities. Research found that working partner of diplomats' show high level of stress upon international relocation (Rosenbaum-Feldbrügge et al., 2022). It is not uncommon that the notion of a permanent home is elusive for diplomats.

Furthermore, career progression for diplomats involves continuous changes in job positions, responsibilities, and roles as they move between headquarters and missions abroad. This constant movement produce burnout which affects their career satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2022). Effective career management for this profession must address the constant balancing act between personal and professional lives. Traditional HRM practices, while valuable, may not fully address the unique needs of diplomats. Hence, a study into the career management of Diplomat is interesting, especially with the emerging trends of protean career orientation.

The concept of a protean career was first introduced in 1976 and described as a career view in which the person is the one in charge, with the core values of freedom and growth and psychological success as the main success criteria. A previous study on protean career shows fascinating dynamics between protean career orientation and subjective career success (Haenggli et al., 2021) and the indirect impact on turnover intentions and goal progress (Holtschlag et al., 2020). Moreover, protean career orientation was found to be positively associated with career decisions using self-efficacy as the mediator variable (Li et al., 2019).

As the home for Indonesian diplomats, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia is the center of international relations and foreign policy of the nation, in which since the country's independence adhered to a "free and active" foreign policy. In carrying out the nation's mandate, the ministry has extensions of 132 diplomatic and consular missions abroad. The 1.856 Indonesian diplomats, which comprise 51% of the ministry's total employees, are assigned to the headquarters office and those 132 missions. The assignments abroad usually last for 3-4 years of service and are closely tied to a diplomat's career progression, which are their diplomatic ranks as well as their ranks and grades as civil servants. To progress to a certain diplomatic rank, a diplomat must first finish certain numbers of international mutations.

Traditionally, a core aspect of a diplomat's career journey, the job mutation, is often taken for granted. The career path of the diplomats, i.e., job promotion or transfer, is mostly decided by the organization to serve the organization's needs and rarely considering the diplomats' individual interests. Job rotation and job transfer often play a significant role in career development (Shahiri et al., 2023), and usually, an employee takes different job roles before getting a promotion (Takii et al., 2020). Interestingly, job rotation and job transfer usually come without significant changes in financial compensation (Kampkötter et al., 2018). In contrast, it is not the case with what Indonesian diplomats receive during their assignments abroad compared to domestic assignments.

This explorative research aims to study the perception of Indonesian diplomats regarding international transfer, focusing on its implications for career development from their unique perspective. We conducted a case study and interviewed nine diplomats, Research findings show three main themes, i.e., i) how the diplomats perceived the international mutation; ii) factors that affected their decision or perception of the international mutation; and iii) how the diplomats feel on the current international mutation system in the ministry. This study contributes valuable insights to both academic discourse and practical policymaking within diplomatic services, mainly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia.

LITERATURE STUDY

Protean Career

Career management is defined as a process that enables the employee to understand better and develop their ability and career interests and use them more effectively (Dessler, 2018). It is built by the organization to provide the opportunity and identify who deserves to get the opportunity (Orpen, 1994). In contrast to this traditional perspective, the emerging view of protean career orientation believes that an individual is the one in charge of and responsible for their career trajectory with psychological success as the main criterion (Hall, 2004; Noe et al., 2021). However, it is to be noted that organizations still hold important roles in individual careers (Gubler et al., 2014).

To translate this career attitude into career actions, there are three processes identified: i) identity awareness which constitutes the person's sense of personal identity and values; ii) adaptability which is the ability to respond and cope with disruptions in the environment; and iii) agency, the capacity of a person to take control of their career (Hall et al., 2018). This orientation does not necessarily conflict with the organizational goals, as there is a phenomenon called the Protean paradox in which the self-driven and intrinsic success focus, contributes to organizational citizenship (Hall et al., 2018).

In the case of Indonesian diplomats, they often need to maintain their personal identity and value while representing their country in the receiving state, which in many cases is different from the sending country's political, economic, and cultural conditions. These frequent transitions require the diplomats to be adaptive and flexible. Lastly, the nature of the job and the diplomatic service often give the diplomats some degree of autonomy to manage their careers through diverse international assignments.

However, while some of these assumptions apply to diplomats, the structured and hierarchical nature of the profession (Fliege et al., 2016) might limit the applicability of the protean career orientation model. The limitation might expand as the foreign service officers are civil servants, which by nature are bureaucratic. Hence, this model might conflict with the collective goals of the organization.

Furthermore, as most diplomatic assignments are tied with facilities which are mostly exclusive to their period of assignment abroad, the emergence of extrinsic motivators is almost certain. Often, diplomats are equipped with better take-home pay, health insurance, and housing facilities as they need to properly represent their home country. In this case, although intrinsic motivators might be the dominant driving force, the existence of extrinsic drivers might limit the effectiveness of the protean career model application.

From an organization's perspective, to retain employees with protean career development, organizations should consider the career needs of their employees. Organizations should also monitor the changes in career needs and take action by presenting positive future career growth expectations (Zhu et al., 2024). In the context of diplomats' careers, this might be challenging due to the constant change from international job mutations.

Job Mutation, Rotation, Transfer, and International Assignment

As mentioned in the previous section, Indonesia's system favours the term "mutation", which is defined as the horizontal or vertical change in position, title, place, or job through certain considerations, including employee's appointment, transfer, dismissal, retirement, etc. (Hasibuan, 2013; Manalu, 2021). Due to this broad definition, the use of mutation terms in Indonesia's literature varies greatly, as some researchers tried to both include and separate mutation from rotation and promotion (Firman et al., 2022; Judas, 2013; Purba, 2020; Sabar et al., 2017; Ulfah, 2013).

In contrast, international literature uses the terms job rotation and job transfer more specifically. Rotation is more focused on the movement of an employee from one task to a different task periodically to develop an employee's experience, skill, and conceptual ability (Dessler, 2018; Kreitner & Kinicki, 2010; Lussier & Hendon, 2019). However, Noe et al. (2021), also highlight the risk of job rotation such as the employee's tendency to choose a short-term approach to problem-solving and the effect of rotation on employee motivation and satisfaction.

On the other hand, job transfer is more concerned with filling or vacating a job position due to various reasons, including career development opportunities (Dessler, 2018). Interestingly, a job transfer can also be viewed as a punishment rather than a development opportunity (Noe et al., 2021), although the organization is not advised to use transfer as a tool to move problematic staff (Lussier & Hendon, 2019).

International assignments can be viewed as a form of job transfer. International assignments are often used by organizations to i) fill job positions that are hard to fill by local talents; ii) develop internal talents for positions with significant amounts of international business; or iii) sustain the organization structure and decision processes (Edström & Galbraith, 1977). While international assignment plays a significant role for the organizations (Tahvanainen et al., 2005) and employee's global mindset development (Lovvorn, 2011), it poses a challenge to the employees as they might be anxious about the condition of the target country (Konopaske et al., 2009) as well as the impact for their family (Caligiuri & Joshi, 1998; Collings et al., 2011). This holds true for Indonesian diplomats.

On this background, the author viewed that the mutation in the context of this study will be closer to the job transfer concept, specifically in the form of an international assignment. However, for the sake of simplicity and consistency, the author will use the term international mutation throughout the paper.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We conducted a qualitative study to explore the Indonesian diplomat’s perception of international transfer. Specifically, we conducted a case study that was appropriate to answer the research question. This approach tried to explore and understand the significance that an individual or group attaches to a social problem from narrative information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). We proposed to get a deeper understanding of the perception of Indonesian diplomats on international mutation and its process. Hence, the design of this case study was specific and contextual to this contemporary phenomenon (Yin, 2003).

Data Collection and Sample

The data used in this study was primary data obtained through semi-structured interviews, to enable the authors to obtain the views and opinions of the participants more openly (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). We interviewed nine diplomats who meet our criteria, i.e., active mid-career diplomats holding the status of a civil servant, and not under disciplinary action. The interviews were conducted between December 2023 to March 2024, and each interview lasted for 45-60 minutes.

We followed theoretical sampling (Creswell, 2012; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) to capture the similarity and variability of the participants. In doing so, we interviewed participants with various demographic backgrounds in terms of gender, age, and marital status.

The demography of the respondents is as follows:

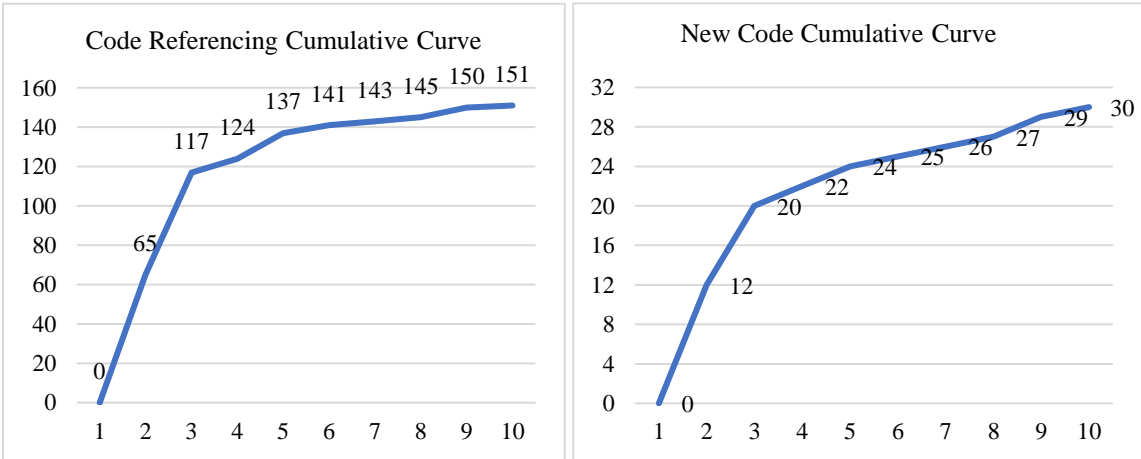
Table 1.
Respondent
Demography

Code	Gender	Marital Status	Age (year)	Formal Education
D1	Male	Single	32	Undergraduate
D2	Male	Single	35	Undergraduate
D3	Male	Married (1 child)	34	Undergraduate
D4	Male	Married (no children)	33	Undergraduate
D5	Female	Single	33	Undergraduate
D6	Female	Single	33	Postgraduate
D7	Female	Single	35	Postgraduate
D8	Male	Married (1 child)	35	Postgraduate
D9	Female	Married (2 children)	41	Postgraduate

Figure 1.
New Code
Cumulative Curve

Figure 2.
Code Referencing
Cumulative Code

After interviewing the nine respondents, the author found that data saturation had already been reached. As we can see from Figure 1 and Figure 2, 90% of code creation and 96% of cumulative code referencing were achieved after 7 respondents. Although the author still found new code on the 8th and 9th respondents, the significance was relatively marginal as the code was only a variation of previous codes and the referencing was minuscule.



Data Analysis

This study used thematic analysis to interpret the findings from the interviews. Thematic analysis is a method to develop, analyze and interpret patterns from qualitative datasets, not only counting explicit words or phrases but also identifying and describing explicit and implicit ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Guest et al., 2012). We used NVivo and Microsoft Excel to assist in developing and sorting codes and themes from the analysis. The first author started coding after the interviews were transcribed, and then discussed it with the second author. Both authors then reviewed the coding and looked at the data back and forward until we arrived at the final coding.

Upon completing the interviews, the author meticulously adhered to the steps outlined in the thematic analysis process by familiarizing himself with the dataset and starting the data coding. In the next steps, the author generated initial themes based on the coding, further develops the themes and reviews. Lastly, the author defined and refined the themes and code, and reviewed the newer themes and code with the initial respondents to see further relevance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Theme	Code	Numbers of Related Respondents	Numbers Code Referenced
Mutation as punishment	Punishment	2	2
Mutation as financial need	Financial need	7	17
	No other option	2	2
Mutation as personal development and privilege	Personal development	6	10
	Privilege	3	3
Mutation as assignment and filling a role	Assignment	5	8
	Filling a role	5	6
Mutation affected by target country's condition and label	Mission's workload	2	4
	Target country's condition	6	9
	Target country's label	2	2
Mutation affected by employee's internal factors	Family	5	13
	Economic needs	2	2
	Employee's capability	1	2
	Entitled to	1	1
	Individual preferences	4	7
Mutation affected by employee's external factors	Headquarter's workload	4	5
	Unit/division leadership	5	5
	Co-workers	1	1
	No work life balance in headquarter	2	2
	Specialization	2	3
Disatisfaction with the current mutation process	Need individual and organizational balance	5	7
	Subjectivity and leadership's reference	2	4
	No strategy	7	15
	Unfair	5	8
Mutation as an individual proposal	Individual proposal	1	1
Mutation decisions using competency and performance as criteria	Years of service	1	1
	Meritocracy	1	1
	Language expertise	5	5
	Employee's skill	5	6

Perceptions of International Mutation

As we can observe from the codebook in Table 2, among the ten identified themes we can further categorize the themes into 3 main ideas, which are i) how the diplomats perceived the international mutation; ii) factors that affected their decision or perception of the international mutation; and iii) how the diplomats feel on the current international mutation system in the ministry. Based on the findings, Indonesian mid-career diplomats perceived international mutation more heavily as a financial need, as well as personal development and a privilege, rather than solely as an assignment. This phenomenon might be attributed to the significant change in financial assignments when they were assigned to the missions abroad, compared to assignments in the headquarters in Jakarta. It also might be affected by the financial security tied to the career level of the diplomats, which in this

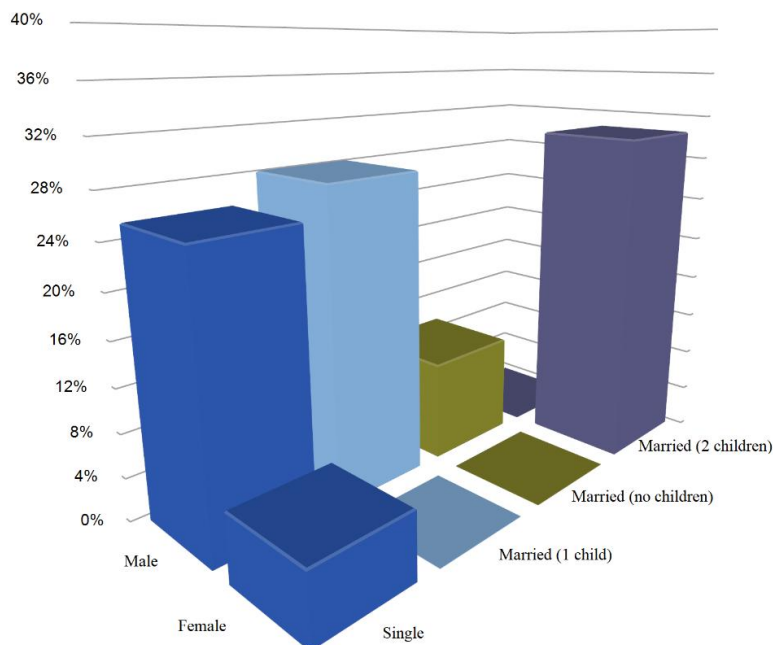
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Table 2.
Codebook of interviews analysis

study only focused on mid-career diplomats. The results may vary when we observe senior-level diplomats with more robust financial security and financial maturity.

This theme also highlights that male mid-career diplomats put more emphasis on financial needs regardless of marital status, compared to females which is more apparent to the married respondents as shown in Figure 3. However, some new questions arose such as what drives these gender discrepancies? How significant is the role of Indonesia's patriarchal culture in the findings? This fascinating outcome will surely be interesting to dig deeper into, especially with a larger sample and a variety degree of career levels.

Figure 3.
Percentage Coverage
of "Mutation as
financial need"
Theme base on
Gender and Marital
Status



Another interesting finding is that some mid-career diplomats viewed international mutation as a form of punishment. The view is attached to assignments on missions abroad which are labeled as "unpopular posts", such as the Africa and Latin America regions due to the distance from Indonesia, and the region's perceived security and health aspects.

Factors Affecting Decisions

Next, although both internal and external factors are visible in the theme, internal factors are more evident as variables that affect and drive a mid-career diplomat's decision on an international mutation. Family is the most pronounced factor followed by individual preferences, such as personal convenience, facilities and chance for self-actualization. This finding is in line with the protean career orientation concept, in which the drive for a career is self-driven, in this case, family and personal values. It further enhances the assumption that the three metacompetencies are found among diplomats. On the other hand, if we take a glance at the external factors, the most prominent driving forces for mid-career diplomat to their international mutation decision are the heavy workload during their assignment in the headquarters and the expectation, influence, and reference of their direct leadership in their respective unit or division. Both internal and external factors surely shaped the mid-career diplomats' international mutation decisions, though however, internal factors put more weight on them.

Satisfaction with the System

Lastly, on the international mutation process itself. It is evident that the mid-career diplomats are dissatisfied with the current system in the ministry. The most pronounced is that the ministry is perceived as not having a clear and transparent strategy for sending diplomats to missions abroad. The system is deemed to be failing in balancing the organization's needs with the diplomats' aspirations. The mid-career diplomats even feel that the process is unfair and heavily relied on the leadership's subjectivity. If we look back at the motivation of an organization to conduct international assignments, the ministry's international mutation system is focused on the sustainability of the organization structure and decision processes (Edström & Galbraith, 1977). In this case, to preserve the core business process of the ministry, which connects the policy-making activities in the headquarters with the diplomatic missions' function as described in the Vienna Convention. On this note, the ministry simply needs to maintain the international mutation process that revolves around filling vacancies in the headquarters and missions based on the terms of the assignments period. With this type of motivation, the ministry does not necessarily need to heavily consider the diplomats' aspirations.

Mid-Career Diplomats' Protean Career Orientation vs Organization's Traditional View

By bringing together the main ideas from the findings, we can see that the self-driven international mutation preferences and decisions reflect Indonesian mid-career diplomats' protean career orientation. However, we have to note that extrinsic factors, such as financial compensation, are also a major motivator for mid-career diplomats. As highlighted before, during the period of international mutation the take-home pay total values of the diplomats are significantly increased compared to domestic assignments. The huge gap as well as the high living cost in the capital of the nation might be the driving factor for the occurrence of extrinsic motivation among mid-career diplomats.

On the other note, the perception that the system is unfair and has no clear strategy might stem from the organization's traditional view of career, in which the organization is the one in charge of the career path and does not need to promote transparency on the process, vis-à-vis the protean career orientation of its diplomats. This dissonance of the two values leads to the dissatisfaction of the mid-career diplomats with the current international mutation system. Traditionally, employee dissatisfaction often leads to higher turnover intentions (Faeq & Ismael, 2022). However, in line with the adaptability and agency metacompetencies of protean career theory as well as a research finding that millennials with high protean career orientation experience lesser turnover intentions (Holtschlag et al., 2020). The finding was reflected through the codebook that no one from the nine respondents, which are millennials, mentioned or led the discussion into the topic of turnover intention, and the focus of the mid-career diplomats to chase their next international mutation. However, further study is necessary to solidify the findings and broaden the scope with the entry-level and senior-level diplomats, which are dominated by different generations. Nevertheless, these findings do not imply that the organization should leave the system unchanged without considering further satisfaction factors of their employee. The neglect of this issue might lead to turnover intention itself, or other performance-related issues.

It is also worth noting that mid-career diplomats showed a high degree of self-efficacy. We can see from the codebook, that mid-career diplomats feel that international assignments also affected by their skills, language expertise, and personal capabilities. Some even felt that they were entitled to fill a certain post in international assignment. In line with the recent findings, that found self-efficacy as a mediating variable between protean career orientation and career decidedness (Li et al., 2019), mid-career diplomats' decisions on international mutation are also affected by their self-efficacy. However, reflecting on the traditional view of the organization as well as the motive of the organization on international mutation, mid-career diplomats might find the organization's decisions are not in line with their perceived capabilities. This might explain the view of some mid-career diplomats who perceive the international mutation to unpopular posts as a punishment, as they perceive they cannot fully utilize their capabilities in such posts. Also, it is to be underlined that mid-career diplomats not only view international mutations as assignments from the ministry but also as a form of personal development.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to identify and understand Indonesian mid-career diplomats' perception of international mutation, which is the core activity of their career but so far remains largely under-researched. Based on a thematic analysis of nine semi-structured interviews, this study found that mid-career diplomats mainly viewed the international mutation to achieve financial security as well as to cater to their personal development and viewed it as a privilege. Furthermore, the study showed that internal factors, such as personal values and family are more dominant in affecting mid-career diplomats' decisions on their international mutations, compared to external factors. However, mid-career diplomats have a negative perception of the current system governing the international mutation in the organization. The negative perception revolves around the feeling of unfairness when the system decides which diplomat is assigned to a mission abroad in a specific country, as there are no clear categories of measurement whether the diplomat is assigned based on their skill and language mastery, meritocracy, or even subjectivity.

We believe that the ministry will find our research findings insightful should they decide to improve their system and approach. Mid-career diplomats are moving towards the protean career orientation, and they already possess the meta-competencies of the orientation to some degree. The ministry might want to consider more on their diplomats' aspirations while retaining the core business to enhance the positive perception of the diplomats on their career progression through international mutation. The ministry could promote more transparency and clear indicators on how a diplomat is assigned to a certain post and employ a dialogue system with their diplomats to get a better understanding of their personal goals and perceived success criteria. Additionally, the system can integrate and involve not only the diplomats but also their families, since their opinions play a great role in making the final decision. Our study also contributes to the HR literature, specifically to career management, i.e., job rotation or transfer that are rarely addressed by other scholars.

Limitations

Although the study offers theoretical and practical implications, we realized this study has several limitations. The data collection was conducted only through semi-structured interviews and was not triangulated with other data, such as questionnaires or interviews with another party such as the HR Department or supervisors. Moreover, we are aware of potential bias as the first author himself is a mid-career diplomat and might be impacted by the same HR/career system. We mitigated this risk through several efforts, such as thoroughly coding the data, making sure of representation in the sample and conducting reflections at every step of this study.

Reflecting on the limitations, we suggest further research to elevate this research into a more comprehensive exploration by incorporating a larger number of the sample with a wider variety of criteria such as including entry and senior level of Indonesian diplomats, variety in age and years of service, education background, gender, marital status, and other relevant criteria. Future research might also touch on the connection of the perception of international mutation with employee motivation, performance and retention issues. The authors also hope this study will trigger a broader examination of the relation with gender issues, culture shock and even cultural changes in the ministry as the diplomats are exposed to different cultures throughout their careers.

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