Calculating the migration industries: knowing the successful expatriate in the Global Mobility Industry

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.


Additional Information:

- This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/23929

Version: Published

Publisher: © 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Rights: This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Please cite the published version.
Calculating the migration industries: knowing the successful expatriate in the Global Mobility Industry

Sophie Cranston

To cite this article: Sophie Cranston (2018) Calculating the migration industries: knowing the successful expatriate in the Global Mobility Industry, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44:4, 626-643, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1315517

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1315517
Calculating the migration industries: knowing the successful expatriate in the Global Mobility Industry

Sophie Cranston

Department of Geography, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire, UK

ABSTRACT
This paper argues that we need to pay more theoretical attention to the ways in which migration industries come into being, how they produce a need for themselves within the management of migration processes. Using the example of the Global Mobility Industry (GMI), an industry that supports expatriate migration, the paper suggests that we can theorise migration industries as being part of the knowledge economy. It shows how the GMI is produced around the practices of knowing the successful expatriate which work to ‘calculate’ what expatriate migration should look like. In doing so, the paper shows the way in which the calculative practice of compartmentalisation, in producing knowledge about expatriate migration, produces a need for the GMI. This illustrates the importance of widening our understanding of the economy when researching the migration industries.

KEYWORDS
Expatriate; Global Mobility Industry; migration industry; calculative practices

Introduction

Research on the migration industries can be loosely characterised as that which is concerned with the infrastructures that facilitate mobility, what was until recently described as the ‘black box’ in our understanding of migration (Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012). In contributing to our understanding of migration, this type of research has enabled a wider understanding of the hows and whys of migration by looking at the intersections between structure and agency, that ‘migration is determined neither by autonomous markets, policy logic, nor according to individual migrant agency, but is rather constituted by a multitude of activities, practices, and technologies that must be considered in specific contexts’ (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, s143; see also Cranston, Schapendonk, and Spaan, 2018). This means that it has re-imagined how migration is understood, looking at journeys and trajectories as opposed to origins and destinations (Schapendonk and Steel 2014). This reimagining of how migration is understood allows us to explore the intersections between migrant journeys and migration industries, the ‘various public and private agencies and actors [that] provide for such information, products and services relating to migration, thereby promoting, facilitating and organizing the process of migration’ (Spaan and Hillmann 2013, 64).
However, through this paper, I argue that while it is important for us to understand the ways in which migration industries facilitate and control mobility, there remains a need to investigate how these industries produce a market for themselves within migration processes. While existing research on the migration industries highlights the role that infrastructures play in facilitating and controlling migration, arguably a ‘black box’ remains in our understanding of the ways in which migration industries are themselves instituted. This reflects gaps in our understanding of the economy more widely, where ‘the market remains a black box and is simply taken as a pre-given’ (Berndt and Boeckler 2009, 540). When thinking about the economy, the market for a product or service is often assumed, as opposed to being seen as something that is actively produced. Addressing this gap means focusing our attention not on the intersections between migration industries and migration, but interrogating our understanding of ‘industry’. Although what industry is has been the subject of some discussion within the migration industries literature (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg-Sørensen 2013), this debate centres on what the most appropriate lexicon is to cover the wide array of institutions that facilitate or control migration. My question in this paper then is not what industry is per se, but how do these industries produce a need for themselves within migration processes in the contemporary economy. We can see how this type of question has been addressed by scholars looking at the control functions of migration industries, through an exploration of the neoliberal retrenchment of the state and privatisation (Menz 2013; Andersson 2014) –what we can characterise as the political economy of migration industries. However, through this paper I argue that in order to understand the economy of migration industries, we need to expand our understanding of the economy. Specifically, I draw upon research within cultural economy that looks at the sociology of the economic, that markets are ‘bundles of practices and material arrangements always in the making’ (Berndt and Boeckler 2010, 565). That is, I argue that we need to explore the practices of migration industries themselves in order to understand their markets – that these do not only come from neoliberalised logics of state retrenchment.

Drawing upon a wider relational turn in understanding the economic (Jones 2014), the paper looks at how migration industries operate in practice, focusing on the case study of the Global Mobility Industry (hereafter GMI). Through this, I argue that we can understand migration industries as part of the knowledge economy, industries that utilise the production, circulation and reproduction of knowledge as an economic resource (Thrift 2005). This draws upon Spaan and Hillman’s (2013, 64) observation that ‘Information [about migration] has become a commodity that can be capitalized upon for profit’. In this paper, I argue that it is through knowledge, and knowing the migration process, that migration industries produce a need for themselves within migration processes. That is, in exploring how knowledge about migration processes is produced, we can advance our understanding of migration industries, and through this, migration itself. This means we reorient our questioning from how does the state or migration produce industry, to thinking about how does industry produce migration.

The paper looks at this question by exploring how ‘successful expatriate’ migration becomes known within the GMI. Expatriate, as a term, whilst multiple in definition, is commonly used within transnational organisations to describe an employee on an international assignment or secondment. The expatriate in this paper is a temporary, highly
skilled migrant who moves abroad for a period of time with the company that they work for, otherwise described as ‘intra-company transferees’ (Beaverstock 2004, 2012). As such it is a distinct form of highly skilled migration, in that it is both temporary and often led by the organisation as opposed to the individual moving. We can see it as a form of corporate mobility, one that is linked to processes of globalisation as Millar and Salt (2008, 27) highlight: ‘managing the mobility of expertise has become a key element in corporate globalization’. It is also often seen as a form of privileged migration, for example, in terms of the lifestyles that these migrants are able to live (Fechter 2007; Leonard 2010). For example, Knowles and Harper (2009) illustrate the ways in which corporate expatriates in Hong Kong can be seen as the winners in the workings of the global economic system. However, less is understood about the (corporate) mechanisms through which expatriates move, including the industry that works to support this, and how understandings of privilege become entrenched within this (Cranston 2016a).

The move of corporate expatriates is facilitated by their employer organisation – usually involving some input from the human resource department, supported by the GMI who act as an outsourcer for International Human Resource Management (IHRM) processes. The GMI then works to assist with the relocation of the transnational corporation’s employees, describing itself as helping with ‘the movement of your workforce for which you need data, tools and advice’ (Mercer 2010, 2). It provides services in immigration, tax compliance, relocation management, accommodation services, household goods removal and cross-cultural training (Cranston 2014). In assisting with the management of expatriates, its targeted audience is not necessarily the migrants themselves, but helping transnational organisations move their employees globally. It has an estimated worth of $500 billion (event advertising material, November 2011). The ‘data, tools and advice’ are the ways in which the GMI works to assist expatriate mobility, meaning we can clearly see it as a migration industry in that it works to facilitate this type of corporate migration (Nyberg-Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2013). However, I argue that we can see the ‘data, tools and advice’ as calculative practices which work to make expatriate migration known. It is through exploring these calculative practices that we can understand how the GMI operates as part of the knowledge economy.

In this paper, I examine the calculative practices that both make the ‘successful expatriate’ known and produce a need for the GMI within expatriate management. The next section of the paper looks at how we can utilise theoretical insights from cultural economy to explore migration industries. Specifically, it looks at the way in which cultural economists draw upon science and technology studies to theorise and explore ‘calculative practices’ (Callon 1998). After a methods section, the paper will draw upon Callon’s framework to explore the ways in which the GMI makes expatriate migration known. First, through a drawing of a list of world states as producing knowledge on how to manage expatriation. Second, the ranking of states as success and failure of expatriate management. Third, highlighting how their products and services are a part of achieving success – describing the actions to produce the steps. This will illustrate how calculative practices work to produce a need for migration industries within processes of mobility, showing the contribution of cultural economy approaches to understanding the operation of migration industries.
Calculating the migration industries

As highlighted above, within research on the migration industries, there is a need to widen our understanding of their economy. Clearly, the ways in which the economy can be understood and researched is in itself a contested terrain, one that reflects different disciplinary and epistemological traditions. In this paper, I draw upon two interlinked arguments about how we understand the economic. The first of these is conceptual – looking at cultural economy readings of migration industries. The second is empirical – looking at the knowledge economy as part of a shift in how economic value is globally produced.

Cultural economy perspectives speak to a reconceptualization of the economic, where it is not seen as a measurable and distinct entity, but as ‘varied impulses and articulations through which value is formed, added, and circulated’ (Amin and Thrift 2003, xv). A central idea within this is an understanding of the performativity of the economic, where people, objects and ideas work to ‘form’, ‘add’ and ‘circulate’ value. This understanding of the performativity is often utilised to understand the knowledge economy, where economic markets are produced through the production and circulation of knowledge, in so far that knowledge acts as an economic resource in itself. The aspect of this that the paper focuses on is what Thrift (2005) describes as ‘soft capitalism’ – economies based on new ideas and thinking. Thrift argues that the knowledge economy has:

chieflly been conjured into existence by the discursive apparatus of the cultural circuit of capital, which through the continuous production of propositional and prescriptive knowledge, has the power to make its theories and description of the world come alive in built forms, new machines and new bodies. (Thrift 2005, 11)

Within this, producing, circulating and reproducing knowledge become ways in which organisations create their market. Knowledge of the economic can be seen as performative, in that it works to produce itself as being a required part of the practices of the economy – it becomes part of the circuit. For the migration industries, a cultural economy approach involves a re-scaling of thinking about the economy, to looking at its micro-scale articulations. It is through this that I argue we should think about the practices of migration industries. The ‘built forms, new machines and new bodies’ are the everyday performances of people, objects, ideas and spaces in the economy that produce the economic, or what we can describe as being practices of knowing.

Although there are different ways in which we can theorise practice within accounts of the economic (Jones and Murphy 2011) this paper draws upon science and technology studies that see markets as being produced by apparatus, which in turn are produced by people, objects and knowledge: ‘markets are performative effects of complex embodied and concrete socio-material arrangements’ (Barnes 2008, 1436). For example, MacKenzie (2006) illustrates the ways in which people, the computer screen and financial models worked to produce financial markets. This shows that financial theory is not merely descriptive, that it works to produce what it purports to describe. One example he uses is the Black–Scholes model, which in modelling derivative investment, worked to legitimise and thus produce the options market. This practice of knowing is a calculative practice. Calculation is a way through which the social is made known, both quantitatively, for example through numbers and qualitatively, such as in processes like organising.
Hence, calculative practices are practices ‘that make the economy visible and measurable qua economy’ (Miller 2001, 379). Significantly, these practices do not just describe the economy, but act to produce it – what MacKenzie (2006) might describe as an engine not a camera. For example, Larner and Le Heron, in looking at benchmarking in New Zealand universities argue that ‘rather than being neutral measuring tools providing information about “outputs” or “outcomes”, calculative practices govern … The emerging processes have new content, influenced by new imaginings of outcomes, and new strategies for assembling people and resources to achieve new ends’ (2005, 846). Or Miller (2001) illustrates that accounting, as a calculative practice, works to shape social and economic relations, for example, how we understand the nation’s educational successes. This means that calculative practices, in making processes known, work to produce these processes in their image, they: ‘do not merely record a reality independent from themselves; they contribute powerfully to shaping it, simply by measuring it, the reality that they measure’ (Callon 1998, 23). In looking at the ways in which migration industries produce knowledge and information on migration then, we can see this as not merely describing migration, but producing migration in its image. Migration industries in working to make migration known, produce themselves as being part of the migration process – this is the performativity of this knowledge.

In this paper, I focus on one calculative practice of the GMI – compartmentalisation. This is a way through which migration becomes known through calculative practices of knowledge, the breaking down of the migration of the expatriate into smaller steps so that both expatriate migration, and each of these individual steps, become known. Callon argues that for calculated decisions to be taken, the agent must be able to: ‘a) draw up a list of possible world states; b) hierarchize and rank these world states; c) identify and describe the actions required to produce each of the possible world states’ (1998, 260). Hence, we can see how calculative practices are themselves produced through knowledge, as they work to make the ‘incommensurable commensurable’ (Larner and Le Heron 2002, 759). That is, calculative practices turn something unknown, like the process of migration, into something that is known and can be compared. The paper will show that compartmentalisation acts as a way through which expatriate migration is drawn up, compared and how to achieve success in expatriate management identified – an action that is seen as involving using the services offered by the GMI. Therefore, while the services that migration industries like the Global Mobility Industry offers help to facilitate migration, they are produced from practices associated with knowing the migration process that are in turn produced by the industry. The ‘Knowing the successful expatriate’ section will illustrate that this knowledge, rather than merely describing the migration process, plays an active role in shaping the migration process – this after all is its intention – working to shape migration processes in the image through which it purports to describe.

**Methods**

The paper draws upon ethnographic methods carried out with the GMI and IHRM between 2011 and 2012 in the U.K. and Singapore. The focus of this research was to look at the production, dissemination and reproduction of knowledge about the expatriate, the ways in which this type of migration was organised ‘unfolds and is enacted’
This involved utilising three methods: texts, observation and interviews. First, I analysed texts that looked at expatriate management more widely both as an academic discipline through textbooks and journal articles, and as a practice in terms of surveys, management reports and policy documents which were provided to me by organisations that I carried out research with, or were referred to by participants in my research. Second, I carried out participant observation in two ways: at nine global mobility conferences and events (see Cranston 2014) and through participation in activities within the GMI, working both at events and helping a group compile surveys for their annual report. Third, I carried out 15 interviews with global mobility service providers and 8 interviews with individuals who work in international human resource departments of transnational organisations. The data from these methods were analysed through a close discursive reading, looking at the similarities and differences between practices of managing the expatriate as a ‘patchwork of thoughts, words, objects, events, actions, and interactions in discourses’ (Gee 1999 in Dittmer 2009, 275–276).

Knowing the successful expatriate

In this section, I look at compartmentalisation as a calculative practice of the GMI. I draw upon Callon’s (1998) framework of how calculative practices operate as described above. The first subsection explores ways in which expatriate migration becomes compartmentalised, drawing up a list of what expatriate migration should look like. The second subsection looks at the production of two different states of expatriate migration – success and failure, as the ranking of the states of expatriate migration. The third subsection looks at the actions that are identified to produce success and failure, with the GMI both benchmarking knowledge and claiming expertise in knowing successful expatriate management. Therefore, the industry as a collective draws up the ‘state’ of expatriate migration, ranks this as successful and then identifies how this can be achieved – through using their services. Collectively, this section will show how knowing the successful expatriate works to produce a need for the GMI. That is, in commodifying the knowledge of how to successfully manage the expatriate as an economic resource, the GMI creates and legitimises a need for expatriates and their managers to use their services.

Compartmentalisation: identifying expatriate migration

The ‘state’ of corporate expatriate migration is closely tied with IHRM, which as an academic discipline and practice within transnational organisations focuses on the transnational management of people: ‘the way in which international organisations manage their human resources across different national contexts’ (Brewster, Sparrow, and Vernon 2007, 6). Within this, the main way in which the management of the expatriate is expressed is through a compartmentalised ‘life cycle’ of the expatriate, which shows the different stages of the expatriate within the transnational organisation: selection, preparation, relocation, adjustment, performance and repatriation (Figure 1). The utilisation of this expatriate assignment cycle illustrates a way through which we can visualise the journey of this type of migration, from a beginning through the selection of the employee, to an assumed end when they return back to where they started from. Significant research
within expatriate management is directed at producing effective strategies for managing each stage of the cycle, and the cycle as a whole: ‘the complexities of managing this cycle have been the focus of sustained academic research over many years’ (Brewster, Sparrow, and Vernon 2007, 242).

The expatriate assignment cycle is a ‘textbook’ account (Harzing and Christensen 2004, 619) of expatriate migration, where the person relocating is seen to ‘experience a predictable series of stages in transferring from a domestic to a global assignment and back home again’ (Adler 1997, 236). For example, Black et al. write about this in terms of the responsibilities of the organisation, ‘we feel that companies are not only economically wise but, perhaps more importantly, duty-bound to offer sufficient support to expatriate employees throughout the international assignment cycle’ (1999, 275). A consultant in a seminar, displaying the assignment cycle in a figure form, discussed with her participants about ‘creating a no-fail environment expat life-cycle’ (Webinar, September 2011). Or a senior global mobility manager when talking about how her assignees are managed suggested that:

so in terms of the what happens once it is decided, we do follow an international assignment life-cycle and that is fairly typical across the whole of the industry, or the whole of the industries I have ever worked for, from start to being on assignment to repatriation. (Alice, Interview, August 2012)

The use of its cycle in its variant forms can be seen to be a hegemonic interpretation of expatriation, one whose original authorship is no longer acknowledged. It is one that utilises a process-based view of expatriation, focusing on the practices of managing migration rather than the individual moving. This process-based viewed of migration is a crucial way in which migration becomes known through the GMI. It illustrates that corporate expatriate migration is not just visualised as a movement from A to B, but within it there remains

\[ \text{Figure 1. Expatriate assignment cycle.} \]
an expectation of return. It is therefore a key way in which expatriate migration as a ‘state’ is drawn up.

IHRM, in both theory and practice, works to organise and categorise the expatriate through the assignment cycle. It is a way in which expatriate migration becomes known, acting as a calculative practice in itself. However, importantly, the GMI has adapted the expatriate assignment cycle into a further compartmentalised form of how to manage the expatriate. This is the breaking down of, into a step by step format, of all the processes associated with relocation, described as the ‘expatriate assignment flow’, shown in Figure 2. A version of this diagram was used as part of a meeting explaining and selling the role of the GMI to potential IHRM clients. Like the expatriate assignment cycle, this is a further distillation of a process-based view of the ‘state’ of expatriate migration, that turns the management of the expatriates relocation into a set of smaller steps.

The compartmentalisation of how corporate expatriates are moved clearly illustrates a way in which the GMI makes this type of mobility known. Figure 2 then illustrates how...
compartmentalisation works as a qualitative calculative practice, as it works to order expatriate migration. It shows the ways through which migration is visualised as a series of steps that the organisation and the individual relocating move through. It contributes to the ways through which we understand how ‘rather than being a means to an end, the journeys migrants make are their migration projects’ (Burrell 2008, 360); how the ways through which people move, and are moved, are central to the ways in which migration is understood as a practice in itself. While not assuming a linearity in all migrants following this flow, it shows how a conceptualisation of steps becomes important in thinking about how the migration industry intersects with the journey of migrants. Some of these steps can be seen as universal in legal international migration: applying for immigration status, the movement of possessions, school applications and so on. The expatriate assignment process flow therefore provides a way in which migration can be understood as a series of steps as part of a wider process – how migration in itself becomes known.

However, as the next section will show, looking at the component parts of the expatriate assignment flow, works to ‘rank’ different states of expatriate management – success and failure.

**Ranking the successful expatriate**

The discussions on effective expatriate migration are discussions about the success of the transnational organisation. IHRM is intertwined with the strategic success of transnational organisation, in that IHRM becomes a strategy in itself: ‘the effective management of HR is seen as a major determinant of success and failure in international business’ (Tayeb 2005, 8). This strategy then is directed at the end product of IHRM, the success or failure of the expatriate. Success and failure are the two ways in which expatriate migration as a state becomes ranked.

The failure of expatriation is regularly used to frame and support global mobility authors arguments about best practices (Harzing and Christensen 2004). For example, Dowling, Festing, and Engle (2008) describe failure as being:

the premature return of an expatriate (that is, a return home before the period of assignment, or expatriate management cycle, is completed). In such a case, an expatriate failure represented a selection error, often compounded by ineffective expatriate management policies.

(Dowling, Festing, and Engle 2008, 112)

The failure of the expatriate then is seen as not completing the steps from the beginning to the end of the expatriate journey, from relocation to return. This failure is disastrous to the organisation in terms of the significant cost of expatriate assignments, which in terms of direct cost is estimated at 1–3.5 million dollars for a four-year assignment (Black et al. 1999, 15). The financial risks associated with a failed expatriation also becomes a key way through which the GMI operates, with this migration industry constructing themselves as risk managers (c.f. Faulconbridge et al. 2009). This point is discussed in more detail below.

The definition of success is often debated within expatriate management circles without a clear conclusion being reached. Therefore, success becomes understood as not being failure. The successful expatriate is one who is first selected properly and second managed effectively. Selection criteria will obviously vary between roles, sector and organisation, but have a number of common factors – technical ability, cross-cultural suitability,
family requirements, country or cultural requirements, language skills and company requirements (Dowling, Festing, and Engle 2008). In the interviews I carried out with IHRM managers, ‘flexibility’ was identified as an ideal characteristic for success, defined in terms of culture and family: ‘is this person flexible, are they culturally sensitive, do they have a complicated home situation’ (Beth, Senior Global Mobility Manager, Interview, February 2012). While flexibility is hard to define, one of the ways in which Beth suggested it could be defined was by looking at the expatriate’s family situation. This supports the notion that an inability to adjust to a new cultural environment is the most commonly cited reason for the failure of expatriates (Black et al. 1999) – they fail at the adjustment stage and therefore do not complete the assignment. Success therefore becomes understood as the expatriate who is managed effectively round the expatriate assignment cycle, completing all of the steps. This is clearly the desirable state of expatriate management, ranked the highest.

**Identifying actions: the GMI**

Both the failed expatriate migration and the successful expatriate migration become ways in which expatriate migration as a state become ranked. In this section, I look at how the GMI works to produce their services as being part of the way in which ‘success’ can be achieved. This is the identification and description of the actions required to produce the state of the successful expatriate, by utilising the advice provided by the GMI. This happens despite the fact that the GMI’s concern is with the day-to-day management of the expatriate’s move and management – they are not directly involved in discussions about how to manage expatriates effectively. The industry itself argues that it operates as the ‘activity end of the policy’ (Elizabeth, Relocation Management Consultancy, Interview, October 2011), enacting the transnational organisation’s directions and facilitating the expatriate’s move, they are ‘transnational rather than strategic … we are not involved in that debate, just waiting on instruction to move Joe Bloggs from A to B’ (Evan, Relocation Management Company, Interview, October 2011). While this shows the way in which the GMI acts to facilitate the movement of corporate expatriates, it does not illustrate why transnational organisations use their services. However, it is through knowledge that the industry places itself as being part of the strategic success of corporate expatriate migration. This is enacted through three interlinked practices of knowledge – the designation of steps, claiming expertise and benchmarking.

The first practice of knowing that works to identify how successful expatriate migration can be achieved is the designation of each step of managing the expatriate between the transnational organisation, relocation management company and specialist provider (as shown by Figure 2). This compartmentalisation of expatriate migration means the GMI legitimises a need for their services at various stages of the process – it is a way in which successful expatriate migration becomes realised. On the expatriate assignment flow, various stages are claimed as being provided by the GMI. It is through claiming their services as contributing to the success of the steps of expatriate migration that the industry produces themselves as a solution to failure. By telling the client how to achieve a state of success, the industry produces themselves as being strategically involved in successful expatriate management – identifying the actions through which successful expatriate management can be achieved. However, although compartmentalisation
illustrates a division of labour between the transnational organisation and the GMI in managing the processes of expatriate migration, other practices of knowing – claiming expertise and benchmarking – discursively act as a way through which transnational organisations are persuaded to use the GMI services in order to achieve a successful expatriate migration.

The second practice of knowledge that identifies a need for the GMI’s services to produce the state of successful expatriate migration is through the self-portrayal of the industry as being expert. This is another way in which we can see how the industry acts as a form of the knowledge economy, in that it is through the cultural packing of knowledge that the industry produces and sells the need for its services. Drawing on work on the internationalisation of the headhunting industry, we can see how this industry packages business knowledge in order to create an economic need for itself, ‘the discursive strategies in the engineering of an exclusive role of headhunters in elite recruitment processes’ (Faulconbridge et al. 2009, 801). Faulconbridge et al. (2009) look at how companies in the headhunting industry propagate both ideas of the knowledge and skills required to headhunt as being complex, and themselves as risk managers, persuading others to use their services. Following this, I argue that through compartmentalisation as a calculative practice, we can see how the GMI mobilise themselves as being experts in preventing a failed expatriation.

The GMI collectively produces a (self) portrayal of being expert, illustrating the idea that ‘business has to become more knowledgeable in a turbulent and constantly fluctuating world’ (Thrift 1997, 30; emphasis in original). This claim is made through two complementary types of knowledge. First, is that of empathetic knowledge, that the people who work within the industry often have experience of expatriation themselves: ‘Because we’ve walked in their shoes, we have developed the know-how to provide the best service for our clients’ (Advertising Brochure 2012). Second, is the technical know-how of how to manage the different stages of relocation. This is promoted through the idea of the difficulties of managing expatriates: ‘the complexities of international assignments have contributed to the growth of outsourcing, which offers an avenue for the company to best serve the needs of the expatriate’ (Lockhart in Outsourcing International HR 2004). It is the most technically demanding services, immigration and tax, that are two of the most commonly outsourced services (Forum for Expatriate Management 2011) and are designated as being supplied by the GMI in the expatriate assignment process flow (Figure 2). The advertising materials of companies within the GMI promote complexity, with for example ‘transferring employees’ being seen as ‘more challenging than ever before’ (Mercer, Advertising Brochure 2011), or more explicitly with a company saying that they ‘guide our clients through thousands of unique and complex programs’ (Cartus, Advertising Brochure 2011). How this technical know-how is promoted by individual organisations obviously depends on the primary service that they offer. For example, one company, who specialise in providing software, suggest that ‘the expertise is putting the package together, gross to net, so payroll know what to pay’ (Robert, Relocation Management Company, October 2011). Others claim this technical expertise in the number of situations and problems associated with corporate relocation they have encountered, that ‘you name, we have seen it’ (Elizabeth, Relocation Management Consultancy, October 2011). In this way, the GMI is produced as the solution to relocation management problems, because of their know-how and experience. We can see that like the headhunting industry, knowledge of the process of migration acts as a ‘device for
legitimating the expertise and role’ of the industry in migration management (Beaverstock, Faucolnbridge, and Hall 2010, 840). Using the expertise of the industry then becomes a way in which achieving success is identified.

These types of claims to expertise are contrasted with the industry’s portrayal of HR managers as being inexperienced. Again this is based on both tacit and technical knowledge. For example, HR managers are seen to be inexperienced because they themselves have not had international experience. They are seen to be focused on technical rather than emotional elements: ‘HR is more practical – what is my per diem. Often they don’t realise what the issues are, can be an eye opener’ (Betty, Relocation Management Consultancy, January 2012). This is part of the lack of length and breadth of experience HR managers are perceived to have: ‘HR managers are young and without experience, it’s a difficult job … they are qualified as HR without the background and experience’ (Elizabeth, Relocation Management Consultancy, October 2011). Elizabeth is suggesting that the lack of experience that these ‘young’ HR managers have means that they do not have the needed expertise and therefore ‘need to be trained in how the industry works’. This lack of knowledge is a way in which failure is seen to occur. For example, the lack of expertise was attributed as one of the main reasons that companies choose to outsource some functions of expatriate management to the GMI, with Beth when asked why she outsources replying ‘to take advantage of their expertise’ (Global Mobility Manager, February 2012). Hence, whilst using the GMI’s services becomes a way in which how to achieve success is identified, how to achieve failure is also produced – by not using the GMI’s knowledge.

Third, while the compartmentalisation of expatriate management is in itself a calculative practice of how the successful expatriate becomes ordered and known as whole, this is also carried out through the benchmarking of the individual steps of expatriate migration. Benchmarking is the comparison of one company’s international assignment policy to another, where ‘their world states’ become known, measured and comparable into a ‘common language for communication’ (Larner and Le Heron 2002, 760). By looking at how the GMI facilitates benchmarking we can see how the industry produces themselves as being part of how success is ranked. There are different ways in which the GMI facilitates benchmarking, for example, through events (see Cranston 2014 for a discussion of this) and through surveys and reports which will be the focus of the rest of this section.

Benchmarking through surveys is again discursively produced as being a means by which to achieve a successful expatriation. For example, one company suggests that ‘aligning your company’s expatriation practices with best practices in the marketplace is critical to your expatriation program’s success’ (Mercer, Advertising Brochure, 2011). It is a way in which actions are identified to achieve the state of ‘successful’ expatriation. The production, dissemination and circulation of surveys are a way in which the GMI directly sells knowledge. Companies within the GMI, such as Brookfield GRS, Santa Fe Relocation, Cartus, Deloitte, PwC, and Global Mobility groups like the Forum for Expatriate Management and RES, produce a variety of surveys and reports which are a way in which to ‘explore some of the most pertinent questions asked by HR/Global Mobility Directors worldwide for establishing and maintaining their global mobility teams according to global best and next practices’ (Forum for Expatriate Management 2011). The output from these surveys are quantitative which allows for easy comparison between organisations. For example, referring back to the process flow shown in Figure 2, one of the
stages is language or cultural training, whereby the individual, and their family, are taught how to culturally adapt their behaviour in the destination that they are going to, hence improving their cultural ‘flexibility’. The RES annual report in 2011 suggests that 68% of organisations offer some form of ‘cultural training’, the Brookfield 2010 Global Relocation Trends survey highlights that 27% of organisations offer this for all assignments, and 53% for some assignments, depending on where the individual is moving to. These figures are presented through pie charts, bar charts and text, often with quotes from survey respondents. The numbers presented are a material manifestation of benchmarking practices, they allow for the comparison between companies, the production of an industry norm, and the potential adaptation to fit. The production of surveys offers a way through which often confidential expatriate assignment policies can become known to others.

However, although many of the statistics and ‘facts’ are not standard in surveys, as they differ from one another depending on the make-up of their respondents, they do portray themselves as offering a comprehensive picture of expatriate assignment policies. As Wilson suggests in his look at how data was produced for a community project in Seattle, ‘data are products resulting from specific practices, and in the affective sense … data are imaginative, generative and evocative’ (2011, 857). Using the concept of transduction, that is practices that produce space, Wilson shows how indicators about the urban quality of life are made legitimate through standardisation and objectification. Drawing upon this, I argue that surveys work to make certain characteristics of global mobility programmes legitimate, as they become a standard interpretation of what a ‘successful’ global mobility programme should look like. They therefore work to legitimise and objectify in a numerical form the idea of what successful expatriate migration should look like within transnational organisations. This illustrates two practices of knowledge in the GMI that work to identify how success can be achieved. The first of these is through the direct use and commodification of the knowledge of success, with for example, the Forum for Expatriate Management annual report costing £1250 in 2011. The second, is the placing of the services offered by the GMI as part of achieving a successful expatriate migration. For example, cross-cultural training can be seen as the industry norm, especially if the expatriate is being moved to a location that is deemed to be difficult. Offering cross-cultural training then becomes a way through which successful expatriate migration can be achieved, a service, which as Figure 2 illustrates, is one offered by the GMI.

This use of benchmarking is something that is articulated as a common practice for IHR managers, meaning that there is an active take-up of the actions identified by the GMI to achieve success:

… we very much monitor what’s happening within our industry sector and our policy team undertake regular benchmarking processes to ensure that we remain competitive within our own industry and again that is something that I, you know, have experienced as being very typical across the various sectors that I have worked in as well, the whole benchmarking exercise. (Alice, Senior Global Mobility Manager, August 2012)

Alice, in describing benchmarking as a practice that enables her company to remain competitive, highlights its performativity, that they might change their expatriate assignment policies in order to fit the norm. This shows how transnational organisations change their
policies as an action designed to achieve a successful expatriate migration, as Beth also highlighted:

For example we opened an office in [location] recently and I needed to find some information out … and then when the business came back to me and said we have been challenged on x, y, z, then I can respond and say well ‘I’ve reached out to some other, you know, other professionals, who worked at different organisations and [company] who have offices, or, you know, [company] who have offices in [location] also say that we don’t do this, blah, blah, blah’ there is no need to do it and then when assignees are challenging the business on additional help, additional support, we can go back and say ‘well nobody else does this’, or we can go back and say ‘well everybody else does this, we need to start offering this’. (Global Mobility Manager, Finance, February 2012)

Beth is suggesting that benchmarking offers the IHR manager an additional level of knowledge that enables her to offer what she perceives as a suitable level of support. If something is not being offered by her company, that is offered by others in the same location, then she will think about, and have justification to support, changing the policy. This is viewed from every step of the expatriate assignment process flow, shown in Figure 2, where each action taken by the transnational organisation in assisting expatriate migration can be broken down and compared between companies. It is a way that we can directly see how knowledge is performative, how people use what is seen as best practices and change their policies to fit the norm. For our understanding of migration, this acts as a way in which migration processes are produced, working to shape the services that move migrants (Cranston 2016a).

Conclusions

The GMI can be seen as a facilitator of expatriate migration, by providing services which facilitate this type of mobility. This means we can see the ways in which exploring this industry contributes to our understandings of migration more widely. For example, looking at the way in which the GMI facilitates expatriate migration contributes to closing the gap where ‘mainstream migration theory … has been notably reluctant to engage with corporate forms of human mobility’ (Millar and Salt 2008, 28). It tells us ways in which expatriate mobility is theorised from a labour market perspective by thinking through the ways in which the industry assists with relocation, from a mobilities perspective by exploring the ways through which these migrants move and from a social and cultural perspective in looking at how industries contribute towards the production of an ‘expatriate’ identity (Cranston 2016a). In this way, this paper contributes to a growing
body of research that looks at how labour market intermediaries function as part of the migration industry, looking at the mechanisms through which organisations seek employees abroad (van den Broek, Harvey, and Groutsis 2015; McCollum and Findlay 2018). For research on East European recruitment agencies, this has looked at the ways in which they produce the category of the ‘good migrant’, illustrating hiring practices that draw socially constructed boundaries around migrant bodies – those that are deemed “ideal” relative to images of the “good worker” (Findlay 2013, 163). These are practices that are produced and justified through knowledge. The ‘successful expatriate’ similarly is a figure within corporate relocation, where a norm of the expatriate is produced and labelled. It helps us to understand how entrenched understandings of privilege are within this type of mobility, for example, with the discussions over the best housing allowances. It is through understanding these knowledge practices, that we can see how migration industries work to produce migration in particular ways.

However, through this paper, I have argued for a need to explore migration industries more widely, to think about how we understand their economy. In the paper, I have shown how the GMI operates as part of the knowledge economy, how they produce a space for themselves within migration processes. Successful expatriate migration as a state of migration is not self-evident, but becomes known, with the GMI identifying the use of their services and expertise as a way in which this state can be achieved. This knowledge is therefore performative in that it produces a need for the GMI. It orders and categorises expatriate migration into a step-by-step process, ranks success and identifies using its services as the way to achieve success. This is how the GMI legitimises a need for its services, as the organisation are told that they are mitigating the risk of a potential failed assignment (Faulconbridge et al. 2009). Therefore, we can see how the different practices of knowing, compartmentalisation and benchmarking, work to produce the need for the GMI. This exploration of why organisations use the GMI is important for understanding the recent growth in migration industries. While political economy accounts of migration industries highlight our understanding of both industries and migration within a neoliberal context, this does not account for how they operate in practice. The paper has shown that we cannot solely reduce the operation of migration industries to the logics of neoliberal retrenchment from the perspective of states reinforcing their borders by outsourcing their services. Utilising a cultural economy approach means investigating the way in which the practices of knowing migration work to produce migration and migration industries in certain ways. We cannot fully understand the ways in which migration is produced by migration industries, without first understanding the industry itself.

This highlights the importance of asking ‘small questions’ in order to address the ‘big questions’ at hand when researching migration industries (Berndt and Boeckler 2009). The small questions here are the ways in which migration industries operate, and the big questions are those looking at to what end this happens. It does not involve separating ourselves from the political, it involves utilising a different lens to ‘examine the relationship between migration industry and the political, economic and social structures’ (Nyberg–Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2013, 14). It involves thinking about how migration industries, their economy, and the political more widely are produced through practice, giving us the ‘theoretical capacity to better understand how everyday micro-social practices influence and can embody the complexities, contingencies, and meanings that constitute most social-economic and political-economic phenomena’.
Through practices of knowing, we can explore how migration industries function, and through this, develop our understanding and theorisation of the intersections between migration industries and other domains of migration. It shows how we need to ask how industry produces migration, as well as how migration produces industry.

Note

1. Expatriate is also a loaded term, often used to refer exclusively to white, privileged migrants more widely (see, for example Cranston 2017). However, in this paper I refer to ‘expatriate’ in the way that transnational organisations have traditionally utilised this term, although there is evidence to suggest that this is changing (Cranston, 2016b).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dan Swanton and Allan Findlay for all of their advice and assistance when writing an earlier draft of this paper. Also to Matt Baddock for his help with the figures.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the ESRC [grant number ES/I018670/1].

ORCID

Sophie Cranston http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7068-7029

References

Berndt, C., and M. Boeckler. 2010. “Geographies of Markets: Materials, Morals and Monsters in Motion.” 

*Globalizing People Through International Assignments.* Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman.


Burrell, K. 2008. “Materialising the Border: Spaces of Mobility and Material Culture in Migration from Post-Socialist Poland.” 


Cranston, S. 2016a. “Producing Migrant Encounter: Learning to be a British Expatriate in Singapore Through the Global Mobility Industry.” 

*Geoforum* 70: 60–68.

*Population, Space and Place* (Online First).


*International Human Resource Management.* Andover: Centage Learning EMEA.


*Career Development International* 9 (7): 616–626.


*Hong Kong: Migrant Lives, Landscapes, Journeys.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago press.


*Expatriate Identities in Postcolonial Organizations: Working Whiteness.* Farnham: Ashgate.

Lindquist, J., B. Xiang, and B. Yeoh. 2012. “Opening the Black Box of Migration, Brokers, the Organization of Transnational Mobility and the Changing Political Economy in Asia.” 


