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Sustainable global careers: the role of career adaptability and cultural difference in expatriate health, happiness, and productivity

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how career adaptability relates to career sustainability among expatriates and whether cultural differences between home and host countries moderate these relationships. Drawing on sustainable career theory, we conceptualise career sustainability through three interrelated indicators: health, happiness, and productivity. Given sustainable career theory's emphasis on agency, we draw on career construction theory to conceptualise career adaptability as a psychosocial self-regulatory resource. Cultural difference is further theorised as a contextual feature of high-density global work that can influence the relationship between career adaptability and career sustainability. Using survey data from 325 expatriates and multiple linear regression analyses, we test direct and moderated relationships. The results show that career adaptability is positively associated with health, happiness, and productivity. Cultural difference moderates the relationship between career adaptability and happiness: larger cultural gaps strengthen this association. Additional analyses suggest that the direction of cultural difference, that is, whether host-country cultural values are higher or lower than those of the home country, may also matter. The study extends sustainable career research to expatriate work by identifying cultural difference as a contextual condition influencing when career adaptability relates most strongly to career sustainability.

KEYWORDS

Career adaptability;
Career sustainability;
Expatriates; Cultural
differences; Global careers

Introduction

Modern career trajectories are increasingly marked by nonlinearity and unpredictability (De Vos et al., 2020). Consequently, scholars investigating them have turned to the concept of the *sustainable career*, which Van

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der Heijden and De Vos (2015, p. 7) defined when laying the foundations of sustainable career theory (SCT) as, ‘the sequence of an individual’s different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, thus providing meaning to the individual’. Later, De Vos et al. (2020) highlight how person-related (e.g. agency), contextual (e.g. global context), and time factors (e.g. career stage) interact to shape long-term career sustainability in terms of health, happiness, and productivity. Subjective person–career fit is the central mechanism that connects these inputs to career sustainability over time (Talluri et al., 2025). Each indicator reflects a distinct but interconnected pillar: *health* denotes the dynamic fit between a person’s career and their physical and mental capacities (e.g. vigour); *happiness* captures the subjective appraisal of a career from a broader life perspective (e.g. career satisfaction/subjective success) as it aligns with personal values and goals; and *productivity* encompasses strong current performance and career progress as well as future employability/career potential (De Vos et al., 2020).

Sustainable career theory provides a broad framework for understanding sustainable careers through the interaction of person, context, and time; however, explaining how person-related resources operate within that framework relies on specific theories. In this study, career construction theory (CCT) provides just such a tailored explanation of career adaptability, conceptualising that concept through concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. The CCT perspective can therefore clarify how individuals anticipate future demands, exercise control, explore unfamiliar environments, and build confidence when managing career challenges (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). This approach is consistent with recent empirical studies on sustainable careers. Talluri et al. (2022), for example, used the career construction model of adaptation to examine how proactive personality, career adaptability, and proactive career behaviours contribute to career sustainability. Nakra et al. (2024) drew on CCT to examine how career adaptability relates to psychological well-being through career sustainability. Ruiz-Castro et al. (2020) demonstrated that career catalysts can enhance career adaptability and facilitate transitions to more sustainable careers. Building on this stream of research, this study uses CCT to examine how career adaptability – a resource already recognised in SCT – relates to health, happiness, and productivity in expatriate careers.

Sustainable career research has attracted increasing scholarly attention, as evidenced by a special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* (Van der Heijden et al., 2020). This growing interest has expanded SCT into several work contexts, including contingent work (Retkowsky et al., 2023), sports careers (Richardson & McKenna, 2020), academic careers (Ruiz-Castro et al., 2020; Ruiz-Castro et al., 2020), AI-enabled work

(Kong et al., 2023), gig work (Müller et al., 2025), and entrepreneurship (Mishra et al., 2024). Nevertheless, empirical research on sustainable careers in global work remains very scarce (Mello et al., 2023a). This is surprising because global work, in which people move across cultures and institutional contexts (Baruch et al., 2013; Dickmann & Baruch, 2011), creates specific challenges and opportunities that can directly affect workers' health, happiness, and productivity (Bader et al., 2019; Kim & Tung, 2013).

Expatriate work, as a prominent form of global work, involves long-term engagement with a foreign culture and places distinctive demands on individuals (Kraimer et al., 2022; Selmer et al., 2025). Such demands have led to expatriation being referred to as high-density (H-D) global work, based on Shaffer et al. (2012) taxonomy of physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and non-work disruption. In this sense, the term *density* captures the concentration and intensity of developmental experiences over time, providing an 'intense developmental punch' (Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998, p. 329). Physical mobility refers to the extent to which employees travel or relocate internationally; cognitive flexibility captures the need to adjust thought patterns and scripts to interact effectively across cultures; non-work disruption reflects the extent to which work requirements disrupt usual activities outside work (Shaffer et al., 2012, p. 1300). Later work built on that conceptual taxonomy to extend the H-D global work characterisation to encompass high levels of autonomy and task diversity (Mello et al., 2023a; 2026).

Such density has been linked to the career outcomes that SCT addresses. For example, relocation and travel may deplete energy (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2001), undermining well-being and health (Biswas et al., 2022; Derksen et al., 2024) and requiring significant cognitive and emotional adaptation (Koveshnikov et al., 2014). In contrast, the intense developmental punch (Quiñones et al., 1995) inherent in managing diverse tasks in a new cultural and organisational context can accelerate the acquisition of competencies (Dickmann et al., 2018; Mello & Suutari, 2023; Pessoa de Queiros Falcão et al., 2026), career progression (Breitenmoser et al., 2018), and employability (Suutari et al., 2018), and may encourage career satisfaction (Peltokorpi, 2023). However, this potential is not always realised, as companies can fail to recognise the value of international experience or offer suitable roles after repatriation (Oleškevičiūtė et al., 2022). This situation may result in unsuitable post-assignment roles or unmet career expectations, leading to lower job and career satisfaction (Chiang et al., 2018). Expatriation thus underscores the importance of individual agency, specifically career adaptability, as a pathway for managing such demands and capitalising on learning opportunities toward career sustainability. In turn, Shaffer et al. (2012)

taxonomy helps clarify the specific demands of the global career context by identifying physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and non-work disruption as core features of H-D global work. These features can influence the health, happiness, and productivity of expatriates. Accordingly, linking SCT with the H-D global work characterisation allows us to theorise expatriation not simply as international relocation, but as a dense career experience that can simultaneously generate resources and demands for career sustainability.

To capture one central contextual demand of H-D global work, we focus on its cognitive flexibility component. This focus is appropriate because cultural difference is most directly connected to the need to revise scripts, expectations, and ways of working across cultural contexts, whereas physical mobility and non-work disruption are treated as broader features of the expatriate context in this study (Shaffer et al., 2012). We examine this aspect by testing whether cultural difference influences the relationship between career adaptability and the three career sustainability indicators. This study follows prior research in using cultural difference to refer to country-level differences in cultural values between home and host countries. The approach encompasses both magnitude and direction, rather than only the absolute distance between them (Minbaeva et al., 2018; Stahl et al., 2016; 2024; Stahl & Tung, 2015). Magnitude refers to how far host-country values deviate from home-country values, whereas direction indicates whether host-country values are higher or lower than those of the home country on the relevant cultural index. Scholars also note that this directionality and asymmetry can influence how personal resources translate into career outcomes (Chiang et al., 2018; Hajro et al., 2023). Accordingly, we still have limited evidence on how the magnitude and direction of cultural difference relate to career sustainability outcomes, especially when health, happiness, and productivity are examined side by side.

The present study aims to (1) examine how career adaptability, as conceptualised in CCT, relates to all three indicators of expatriate career sustainability and (2) investigate whether the magnitude and direction of cultural difference moderate those relationships. The study makes two main contributions. First, it provides a quantitative examination of how career adaptability, an agency resource already recognised in SCT and explained more specifically through CCT, relates to health, happiness, and productivity within the same expatriate sample. This extends sustainable career research into the underexplored context of H-D global work and responds to calls to examine the three indicators together rather than in isolation (De Vos et al., 2020). Second, it introduces the context dimension by testing cultural difference as a moderator that captures variation in the cognitive flexibility demands of H-D global work.

By considering both magnitude and direction, the study assesses precisely when career adaptability more or less strongly relates to expatriate career sustainability. Our findings also offer actionable insights for organisations and expatriates seeking to foster health, happiness, and productivity under the intense demands of H-D global work.

Theory

This study develops an integrated framework grounded in SCT and CCT. We draw on SCT (De Vos et al., 2020) to specify health, happiness, and productivity as three indicators of career sustainability and to understand careers as unfolding through the interplay of person, context, and time. Within the person dimension, SCT emphasises individual agency, that is, workers' capacity to make choices and take action to shape their careers, particularly when coping with demanding and changing work contexts. Sustainable career theory also recognises career adaptability as a relevant person-related resource linked to agency and to individuals' responses to career tasks, transitions, and disruptions (De Vos et al., 2020). This study draws on CCT (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), which conceptualises careers as self-constructed through individuals' agentic regulation of work and life experiences to strengthen the theoretical foundation for studying this agency resource. Career construction theory positions career adaptability as a central psychosocial resource for navigating career tasks, transitions, and traumas through concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Finally, we examine cultural differences (Stahl et al., 2024) to capture variation in the cognitive flexibility demands that characterise H-D global work (Shaffer et al., 2012) and investigate whether cultural differences influence the relationships between career adaptability and the three indicators of career sustainability.

Sustainable careers and high-density global work

Sustainable career theory holds that career sustainability is influenced by the dynamic interaction of three dimensions: person, context, and time (De Vos et al., 2020). The person dimension refers to individual characteristics such as agency and the search for meaning, which shape how individuals navigate and construct their careers. The context dimension captures opportunities and constraints in the work environment and broader societal conditions. The time dimension highlights that career sustainability unfolds over time, encompassing both anticipated stages and unplanned events such as transitions or career shocks. These dimensions are reflected in three key outcome areas: health, happiness, and productivity. Health encompasses physical and psychological well-being

(e.g. engagement, vigour), happiness relates to personal fulfilment and alignment with career goals (e.g. career and job satisfaction), and productivity refers to one's ability to perform effectively and sustain career progress (e.g. employability, career advancement, performance). These elements combine to offer a holistic lens on how individuals sustain their careers across changing life and work circumstances (De Vos et al., 2020).

Because SCT defines health, happiness, and productivity as broad indicator domains of career sustainability rather than as specific constructs with fixed measures, each domain can be assessed in several ways depending on research interests and study context. As a result, studies on career sustainability typically specify the concepts and measures used to assess each indicator (see, e.g. Wu et al., 2026). Table 1 summarises key conceptualisations of each SCT indicator, specifies the choices made in the present study, and briefly explains why these measures were selected.

We followed two principles when choosing how to assess career sustainability across its indicators. First, the selected concepts had to align with SCT's definitions of health, happiness, and productivity, and with the core contents of those indicators, as discussed within SCT. Second, they had to capture outcomes that are especially salient in expatriate careers, where international mobility can simultaneously create developmental opportunities and strain.

For health, we use vigour to capture mental health because it reflects the energy, resilience, and mental persistence needed to function effectively across borders and under conditions of change (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). While SCT also emphasises physical health as an aspect of health, mental health was considered especially relevant in this study because our sample consists of highly educated professionals whose work tends to require more mental than physical effort.

For happiness, we use career satisfaction because it captures the broader career perspective emphasised in SCT. Career satisfaction is particularly relevant in the context of expatriation because expatriation can have extensive and long-term career implications due to the H-D nature of global work (Suutari et al., 2018).

For productivity, we use two indicators: job responsibility development and perceived internal marketability. This is because SCT conceptualises productivity as including both current performance/career progress and future employability or career potential (De Vos et al., 2020). Job responsibility development captures career progress in terms of both vertical advancement, such as promotion to higher-level roles, and horizontal development, such as broader responsibilities (Mello et al., 2024). Perceived internal marketability captures future career potential within the organisation (De Vos et al., 2020). Together, these indicators provide a contextually relevant assessment of productivity in expatriate careers, as

Table 1. Sustainable career indicators, their key aspects and choices of the present study.

SCT indicator	Meaning in SCT	Key aspects	Aspect selected in this study	Rationale for selection
<i>Health</i>	Dynamic fit between the career and the person's physical and mental capacities.	Physical health (e.g., physical well-being, physical functioning) Mental health: (psychological well-being; burnout/exhaustion; strain; work engagement; vigour)	Vigour	Vigour is commonly understood as reflecting work-related energy, mental resilience, and persistence. In this study, the UWES vigour scale captures this indicator mainly through expatriates' reported energy and vitality at work. It is relevant in the expatriation context because H-D global work involves physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and non-work disruption, which can increase demands on sustained energy and recovery.
<i>Happiness</i>	Subjective evaluation of the career from a broader life perspective, including fit with values, goals, and personal meaning.	Career satisfaction Job satisfaction Life satisfaction	Career satisfaction	Career satisfaction captures a reflective evaluation of overall career progress and success and best captures the career view of SCT. It is highly relevant for expatriates as expatriation has long-term career implications due to the H-D nature of global work.
<i>Productivity</i>	Dynamic fit between the career and organisational/labour-market human capital needs, including current performance and future career potential.	Job performance / Career progress Employability / Marketability	Job responsibility development Perceived internal marketability	Productivity includes both current contributions/career progress and future marketability. We therefore use two indicators: job responsibility development captures career progress, while perceived internal marketability captures future career potential within the organisation.

Note. SCT=sustainable career theory; H-D=high-density. The table summarises theoretically plausible operationalisations of SCT's broad indicator domains based on De Vos et al. (2020), and the measures selected for the present study in the context of H-D global work (Mello et al., 2023a; Shaffer et al., 2012).

expatriation has the potential to enhance individuals' career progress (Suutari et al., 2018) as well as their marketability (Mello et al., 2023b) through developmental experiences abroad.

Notably, SCT underscores the role of context – including cultural, economic, and institutional factors – in shaping career sustainability (Donald et al., 2024). The global work context therefore warrants particular attention because it exposes expatriates to distinctive contextual demands. This study adopts the H-D global work characterisation to specify the context dimension of SCT in expatriate careers. Shaffer et al. (2012) taxonomy identifies three core characteristics of global work: physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and non-work disruption, each of which has implications for career sustainability.

Physical mobility refers to relocation and travel across national borders. This can generate developmental opportunities by exposing expatriates to new roles, markets, and networks, but it can also create strain through relocation demands, travel fatigue, and disruption of established routines. Physical mobility can therefore affect health through energy depletion and recovery demands, happiness through changes in life and career satisfaction, and productivity through exposure to new learning and career opportunities.

Cognitive flexibility captures the need to adjust thought patterns, behavioural scripts, and ways of working across cultural and institutional contexts. This feature is particularly relevant for expatriates because they must interpret unfamiliar norms, expectations, and communication patterns while continuing to perform effectively. Cognitive flexibility can affect health by increasing cognitive and emotional effort, happiness by shaping adjustment, meaning, and career satisfaction, and productivity by influencing learning, role performance, and employability. In the present study, cultural difference is used as an indicator of variation in these cognitive flexibility demands.

Non-work disruption refers to the extent to which global work interferes with everyday life outside work, including family routines, social life, and recovery opportunities (Martel et al., 2022; Shaffer et al., 2012). Such disruption can affect health by limiting recovery and increasing stress, happiness by influencing work–life balance, broader life satisfaction, and productivity by shaping the personal resources available for sustained performance and career development. Accordingly, this study positions expatriation as H-D global work and examines how one central feature of this context, cultural difference, influences the relationship between career adaptability and expatriates' health, happiness, and productivity.

Career construction theory: career adaptability and sustainable careers

Within CCT, career adaptability is the central psychosocial resource through which individuals proactively construct their careers over time by

adjusting strategies, perspectives, and behaviours in response to changing work and life contexts (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Guided by this perspective, we conceptualise career adaptability as a proximal self-regulatory resource through which workers sustain the three career sustainability indicators identified in SCT, namely health, happiness, and productivity (De Vos et al., 2020). This resource should be especially consequential in H-D global work, where ongoing transitions, high stress, and shifting cultural and organisational norms intensify the need for continuous adjustment (Shaffer et al., 2012).

Recent empirical research supports the use of CCT to explain the role of agency in career sustainability. Talluri et al. (2022), for example, used the career construction model of adaptation to examine how proactive personality, career adaptability, and proactive career behaviours contribute to career sustainability among professionals. Nakra et al. (2024) similarly drew on CCT to examine how career adaptability relates to career sustainability, while also considering sustainable career climate as a contextual factor. In addition, Ruiz-Castro et al. (2020) showed how career catalysts can enhance career adaptability and support transitions into more sustainable careers in a specific occupational context. These studies support the view that CCT offers a useful theoretical approach when assessing the role of agency in career sustainability. However, they do not assess career adaptability and its connections with career sustainability in the context of H-D global work. We therefore use CCT to theorise how career adaptability functions as an SCT-recognised agency resource that enhances career sustainability among expatriates.

Career adaptability comprises four interrelated competencies that influence workers' ability to remain healthy, happy, and productive (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The first competency, concern, reflects a future-oriented focus and preparation for potential changes. By fostering proactive career planning, concern helps expatriates sustain their vigour and influences happiness through the reduction of uncertainty and anxiety about future career pathways (Auvinen et al., 2020). The second competency, control, involves self-regulation to influence one's career trajectory. Expatriates with high control can make autonomous, informed decisions, aligning their career direction with personal and professional goals (Kumar et al., 2019). This alignment is closely linked to career satisfaction (e.g. Smale et al., 2019), well-being (e.g. Biswas et al., 2022), and career progress (e.g. Mello et al., 2024). The third competency, curiosity, emphasises the exploration of diverse opportunities and learning from new experiences. In unfamiliar cultural settings, curiosity stimulates openness to alternative working and living methods, contributing to job responsibility development and improved perceived marketability (Jannesari & Sullivan, 2019). Finally, confidence refers to the belief in one's ability to tackle

career-related tasks and overcome obstacles. Confidence is particularly critical in H-D global work, as it strengthens resilience against stress and enables expatriates to assume greater responsibilities, thereby enhancing long-term productivity (Davies et al., 2019).

A growing body of research links career adaptability to outcomes associated with health, happiness, and productivity (Rudolph et al., 2017). For example, adaptable individuals are better equipped to manage cross-cultural challenges and work demands, helping them sustain vigour, understood as energy, resilience, and motivation at work (Kwon et al., 2016). They are also more likely to experience career satisfaction through proactive navigation across career transitions (Chan & Mai, 2015) and to develop themselves professionally *via* greater job responsibility and employability (Breitenmoser et al., 2018). However, existing studies often examine these outcomes separately, and empirical research remains limited in global work contexts, where careers unfold under heightened complexity and disruption. Although recent CCT-informed studies have examined career adaptability and career sustainability in general employee and transition contexts, we still know little about how career adaptability relates to health, happiness, and productivity among expatriates. We therefore investigate how career adaptability functions as a personal resource that supports these distinct yet complementary outcomes in H-D global work.

Building on this CCT-SCT logic, we expect career adaptability to be positively associated with expatriates' health, happiness, and productivity. Career construction theory specifies why career adaptability should help expatriates regulate career demands. At the same time, SCT clarifies why these effects should be assessed across vigour, career satisfaction, job responsibility development, and perceived internal marketability as complementary indicators of career sustainability. From this framework, we derive the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Career adaptability will be positively associated with career sustainability in terms of (a) vigour, (b) career satisfaction, (c) job responsibility development, and (d) perceived internal marketability among expatriates.

The moderating role of cultural difference

Sustainable career theory holds that career sustainability results from person-context interactions; accordingly, this study focuses on cultural difference as one contextual feature of H-D global work. Expatriates engage in H-D global work, involving physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and non-work disruption (Shaffer et al., 2012), and additional job demands made onerous by task challenge and autonomy due to reduced support structures abroad (Mello et al., 2023a). In global roles, such density is evident in the breadth of cross-border responsibilities, depth of cultural

immersion, and complexity of relational demands in cross-cultural contexts (Akkan et al., 2022). Cultural difference therefore captures a theoretically relevant aspect of the SCT context dimension: the extent to which expatriates must revise their scripts, expectations, and ways of working to sustain health, happiness, and productivity abroad (Shaffer et al., 2012). While all expatriates work across cultures and therefore encounter differences between cultural contexts, cross-cultural operations become more challenging as the cultural difference between the home and host country widens (Lei et al., 2025; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2014; Song et al., 2023). Within our model, cultural difference specifies when the CCT resource of career adaptability is more or less strongly translated into the SCT outcomes of health, happiness, and productivity.

Traditionally, cultural distance has been used to gauge the difference between home and host countries (Kogut & Singh, 1988). However, recent critiques note that asymmetric aspects, or the direction of movement, have been overlooked (Stahl et al., 2024; Stahl & Tung, 2015). For instance, moving from a country with a lower-score cultural index to a higher-score host country can present qualitatively different challenges and opportunities than moving in the reverse direction (Stahl et al., 2016). Consequently, we adopt the concept of cultural difference, which captures the magnitude (the extent of cultural divergence) and the direction (whether the host country's cultural index score is higher or lower than that of the home country) of expatriate movements (Stahl et al., 2016; 2024). The magnitude dimension can amplify the need for career adaptability by increasing the difficulty of navigating unfamiliar norms and values (Baruch & Quick, 2007). The direction adds a qualitative layer because moving into contexts with different expectations regarding hierarchy, relational obligations, autonomy, or social support may alter how strongly adaptability influences career outcomes (Chiang et al., 2018; Hajro et al., 2023; Stahl et al., 2024). This is consistent with Shaffer et al. (2012) taxonomy, in which physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and non-work disruption co-occur in H-D global work, and where roles may be more complex and autonomous due to distance from home-country networks (Mello et al., 2023a).

In this study, cultural differences are considered country-level differences in cultural values between Finland and the host country. This approach is grounded in World Values Survey (WVS) research, which conceptualises culture in terms of broad societal value orientations and shows that values reflect both modernisation-related change and the persistence of distinctive cultural traditions (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). It is also consistent with cross-national distance research, which treats cultural distance as one dimension of a broader construct and has used WVS data to capture differences in cultural values and norms across countries

(Berry et al., 2010; Spolaore & Wacziarg, 2016). The WVS-based index is therefore used here as an empirical proxy for cultural value differences. We recognise culture as a multidimensional concept that can also be reflected in language, religion, institutions, organisational practices, social norms, and everyday interaction patterns (Shenkar, 2001; Tung & Verbeke, 2010). For this study, the proxy remains valid because our moderation argument concerns whether differences in cultural values between Finland and host countries moderate the relationship between career adaptability and career sustainability.

Cultural difference, encompassing both magnitude and direction, may therefore moderate the relationship between career adaptability and sustainable career outcomes. Larger cultural gaps can amplify cognitive, emotional, and relational demands by requiring expatriates to navigate unfamiliar norms, social expectations, work practices, and performance standards (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2014; Stahl et al., 2016). At the same time, direction matters because moving from Finland to a host country with higher or lower cultural value scores may involve qualitatively different adaptation demands rather than simply more or less difference (Chiang et al., 2018; Hajro et al., 2023; Stahl et al., 2024). For vigour, the magnitude of cultural difference may increase stress and energy demands, while its direction may influence the type of uncertainty expatriates face in everyday work and non-work adjustment (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2014; Shaffer et al., 2012; Stahl et al., 2024). For career satisfaction, larger cultural gaps may make relational and value alignment more difficult, while directional shifts may affect the type of social support, recognition, and belonging available in the host context (Chiang et al., 2018; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2011; Hajro et al., 2023). For productivity, larger cultural gaps may increase the learning required to understand local work practices and performance expectations, while direction may influence whether expatriates need to adapt more strongly to hierarchy, autonomy, communication norms, or relational obligations (Haslberger, 2013; Stahl et al., 2016). Career adaptability may become especially relevant in such a context because it supports future orientation, control, exploration, and confidence when individuals face unfamiliar career and work environments (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Consequently, cultural difference serves as a contextual indicator of H-D global work, helping specify when career adaptability may be more or less strongly related to key indicators of sustainable careers. Accordingly, we hypothesise:

Hypothesis 2. The cultural difference between the home country and the host country moderates the relationship between career adaptability and sustainable career outcomes, specifically: a) vigour, b) career satisfaction, c) job responsibility development, and d) perceived marketability. We expect that as the host-country's cultural index score increases relative to the score of Finland, the relevance of

career adaptability in achieving these career outcomes will decrease¹, due to reduced cultural challenges faced by expatriates.

Our conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

Methods

Sample

The data were obtained *via* an online survey administered to expatriate members of two Finnish unions: The Association of Business School Graduates and the Union of Academic Engineers and Architects. Since union membership figures in the Nordic countries are particularly high, the selected group would be likely to represent nearly all Finnish graduates working abroad in these fields (Suutari et al., 2018). The unions were able to provide access to expatriates who were abroad in 2020.

The survey was initially distributed to 422 individuals. After a series of reminders, we received 219 responses, a response rate of 51.9%. An additional open call was subsequently issued *via* the union's online communication platform, targeting members with international work experience. That extension resulted in 106 additional responses. A comparison between the initial sample and the open-call respondents revealed no significant differences in expatriates' career outcomes, supporting the decision to merge the two datasets. The final sample thus comprised 325 respondents.

The composition of the respondent sample aligned with observed trends (Bader et al., 2024); most respondents were men (62%), and the

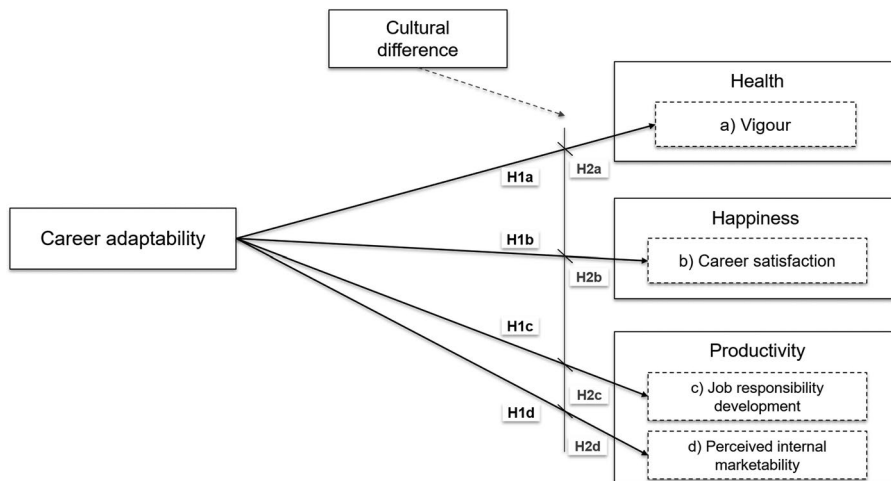


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the study.

Note. Solid arrows represent hypothesised direct relationships (H1a–H1d); the dashed arrow and interaction marker indicate moderation by cultural difference (H2a–H2d).

mean age was 46.24 years ($SD = 10.32$). This gender distribution likely reflects the recruitment channels and occupational mix, as TEK's full membership is male-skewed (women comprise 26% of full members; Salminen, 2024) and global mobility samples also tend to be male-dominated, particularly in technical and managerial pipelines (Bader et al., 2024). The majority (65%) were self-initiated expatriates (SIEs; moved abroad on their own initiative), while the remaining 35% were assigned expatriates (AEs; relocated by their employer). The average length of stay abroad was 2.99 years ($SD = 2.51$). We asked the respondents to assess their hierarchical work position on a scale anchored with *entry-level* (1) and *top-level* (10). The average rating reported was 6.71 ($SD = 1.83$). Most expatriates worked in Europe (65%), followed by Asia (21%), North America (10%), Oceania (2%), South America (1%), and Africa (1%) (see [Appendix A, Table A1](#) for country distribution). Most were in a relationship (85%) and had children (59%). Nearly half had already repatriated (43%), while the majority (57%) still lived abroad.

Ethical considerations

The study followed the ethical principles for research with human participants issued by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, 2019). Under these guidelines, prior ethical review by a human sciences ethics committee is required only under specific conditions, such as deviation from informed consent, intervention in participants' physical integrity, research involving minors, exceptionally strong stimuli, risk of mental harm beyond everyday life, or safety risks to participants or researchers. The present study was based on a voluntary online survey of adult professionals, did not involve such conditions, and was therefore not deemed to require prior ethical review in Finland. Respondents were informed about the study, participation was voluntary, and anonymity was guaranteed.

Measures

The present study relies on validated multi-item scales. We structured the questionnaire by separating the predictor and outcome variables sections to mitigate the effects of common method variance. This approach helps ensure respondents do not apply the same mindset or response style when answering questions on predictors and outcomes, thereby reducing potential biases. Furthermore, we guaranteed respondents' anonymity and encouraged them to be honest and spontaneous when replying (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Outcome variables

Building on the work of De Vos et al. (2020), indicating that health, happiness, and productivity are key indicators of career sustainability, we selected and operationalised specific, validated measures that capture these outcomes in the context of global careers. In the theory section above, productivity was captured in terms of two complementary indicators because SCT defines productivity as encompassing both current performance/career progress and future employability/career potential (De Vos et al., 2020). Job responsibility development captures the former, while perceived internal marketability captures the latter.

Health (vigour). To measure vigour, we employed the three-item subscale from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Each item was rated on a 7-point frequency scale anchored with *never* (1) and *every day* (7). A sample item is: ‘At work, I feel that I am bursting with energy’. The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.90$). Prior validation studies confirm its reliability among Finnish white-collar employees across various occupational groups (Seppälä et al., 2009).

Happiness (career satisfaction). We employed the five-item career satisfaction scale developed by Greenhaus et al. (1990), utilising a 5-point Likert scale anchored with *strongly disagree* (1) and *strongly agree* (5). A sample item is: ‘I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career’. This scale demonstrated excellent reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.89$) and has been widely used to gauge subjective career well-being (Spurk et al., 2019).

Productivity (job responsibility development and perceived internal marketability). Given the dual nature of productivity, comprising objective career progression and subjective employability perceptions, we used two complementary measures:

1. Job responsibility development (Breitenmoser et al., 2018): This measure captures objective career growth, reflecting the extent to which expatriates acquire increased responsibilities or are promoted following their assignment. Our adaptation of the measure included two items comparing the participant’s current role to their pre-assignment position. A sample item is: ‘Compared to your project responsibility before your job abroad, are the projects you are currently responsible for a (1) reduction in responsibility ... (5) increase in responsibility?’ This measure exhibited strong reliability (Spearman-Brown reliability statistic = .87; Eisinga et al., 2013).

2. Perceived internal marketability (Eby et al., 2003): Beyond promotions, employability reflects an individual's perceived career mobility within their organisation (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). We assessed this construct using Eby et al. (2003) three-item scale, rated on a 5-point Likert scale anchored with *strongly disagree* (1) and *strongly agree* (5). A sample item is: 'I have many opportunities in my company'. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$).

Antecedent variables

This study measured career adaptability using the short form of the Career Adapt-Ability Scale or CAAS-SF (Maggiori et al., 2017; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The short form is the result of Maggiori et al. reducing the original 24-item CAAS of Savickas and Porfeli (2012) to 12 items. They found a strong association between the 12- and 24-item versions. The items combined yielded a total score indicating career adaptability (Maggiori et al., 2017; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). When replying, participants were provided with the following description and related question: 'Different people use different strengths to build their careers. No one is good at everything; everyone emphasises some strengths more than others. Please rate how strongly you have developed each of the following abilities using the scale below'. Sample items included 'Thinking what my future will be like' (Concern) 'Making decisions by myself' (Control), 'Observing different ways of doing things' (Curiosity), and 'Overcoming obstacles' (Confidence). All items were measured on 5-point Likert scales. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.76.

Moderation

Prior cross-national distance research has used WVS data to capture value differences (Berry et al., 2010; Spolaore & Wacziarg, 2016). We built on that approach and employed a cultural difference index, based on WVS sections B–F, to quantify cultural differences between respondents' host countries and Finland. Instead of computing the absolute distance between countries, this study computes the directional difference between the cultural index of the host country and Finland, consistent with research emphasising the relevance of directional and asymmetric cultural differences in expatriation (Chiang et al., 2018; Hajro et al., 2023; Stahl et al., 2024). Therefore, an increase in the cultural difference score corresponds to a rise in the host-country's cultural index relative to Finland. According to this cultural index, in our sample, the states most different from Finland were the United Kingdom (cultural difference score below Finland: -11.22) and Indonesia (cultural difference

score above Finland: 17.77). The countries least different from Finland were the United States (cultural difference score below Finland: -3.69) and Hungary (cultural difference score above Finland: 1.06). Those expatriates who had repatriated to Finland were assigned the value zero in the cultural difference score.

Control variables

Age was controlled for because prior research has established that age negatively affects promotions and perceived external employability (Suutari et al., 2018). We also controlled for gender, as prior research has demonstrated its influence on expatriate career outcomes; for example, women managers report lower levels of career satisfaction following expatriation than men (Ren et al., 2013). Gender was operationalised as a binary variable, with men assigned the code 0 and women the code 1. We also controlled for expatriate type, differentiating between SIEs, who independently choose to work abroad, and AEs, who are sent overseas by their employers (Suutari et al., 2018). Prior research has identified differences in career outcomes between these groups (Suutari et al., 2018). Respondents were asked whether they had been sent abroad by their employer and were therefore AEs (to whom we assigned the code 1) or had found a job abroad independently, making them SIEs, to whom we assigned the code 0. Finally, we controlled for repatriation status, using a binary code for those still living abroad (expatriates) of 0 and for those who had returned to their home country (repatriates) of 1, as repatriation may involve specific career challenges, such as readjustment and reintegration, which could influence perceptions of career success and employability (Chiang et al., 2018).

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed using R (version 4.4.1; R Core Team, 2024), and we conducted multiple linear regression analysis to test the research hypotheses. The investigation utilised all available cases to mitigate the small sample size, and missing data were addressed through a pairwise deletion process. The proportion of missing data was 7.6% of all data points. Standardised scores were used for all continuous variables to mitigate multicollinearity and enhance the comparability of coefficients (Aiken & West, 1991). As the main interest was to test the total association of adaptability to the outcomes, and as there was no clear theoretical consensus about the causal structure between the indicators of sustainable career (De Vos et al., 2020), the models for different outcomes were tested separately to avoid misspecifications in the joint model between the outcomes. We used MPlus (version 8.6; Muthén & Muthén,

1998–2017) to perform confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to confirm that the measurement model fitted the data and that there were no serious issues with the discriminant validity of measures.

We also conducted Harman's single-factor test as a post-hoc measure to evaluate common method variance; the results showed that only 23% of the variance was attributable to a single factor. The finding suggests that common method variance is not a significant concern in our data, as it falls well below the 50% threshold often cited as problematic (Eichhorn, 2014). Additionally, we tested for common method variance with the latent marker variable approach (Williams et al., 2010). General remote work satisfaction was used as the marker variable, as it is likely to exhibit response biases similar to those of the other variables in the model. The model comparison revealed that the model with marker variable associations to the indicators of other variables was not significantly different ($\Delta\chi^2=21.24$, $\Delta df = 20$, $p=0.38$) from the model without associations from the marker variable to the indicators. Therefore, no significant common method bias was detected.

Results

Table 2 provides descriptive information on the variables, and a country-level breakdown of host locations is provided in Appendix A. Observed correlations between variables seemed to support the theorised associations. Adaptability was positively correlated with job responsibility development, career satisfaction, vigour, and perceived internal marketability. The CFA showed that the factor model had an acceptable fit ($\chi^2=482.32$, $df = 258$, $p<0.001$, CFI =0.92, TLI =0.91, RMSEA =0.052 (90% CI [0.045,0.059]), and SRMR =0.065). The scale measuring adaptability had three moderate residual covariances between its items, which were allowed to covary, as similar residual covariances were observed in the original validation study (Maggiori et al., 2017). As none of the 95% confidence interval upper limits of the correlations between factors was above 0.80, there were no serious problems with discriminant validity (Rönkkö & Cho, 2022). Additionally, the convergent validity of the factors was also good, as the average variance extracted (AVE) was above 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) for all constructs (career satisfaction:0.68, job responsibility development:0.79, vigour:0.79, perceived internal marketability:0.70, and career adaptability:0.51).

Regarding Hypothesis 1, we expected that expatriates' career adaptability would be positively related to a) vigour, b) career satisfaction, c) job responsibility development, and d) perceived internal marketability. The results indicated that career adaptability was positively associated with a) vigour ($\beta =0.460$, $p<0.001$), b) career satisfaction ($\beta =0.400$, $p<0.001$),

Table 2. Means, SDs, and correlations between study variables.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender ^a	0.37	0.48	–								
2. Age	46.24	10.32	–.193***	–							
3. Expatriate type ^b	0.35	0.48	.042	.119*	–						
4. Repatriated ^c	0.43	0.50	–.257***	.077	–.197***	–					
5. Career adaptability	3.96	0.44	.212***	.002	.022	–.047	–				
6. Cultural difference score	–2.43	4.47	.103	.011	.332***	–.662***	.084	–			
7. Job responsibility devt.	4.00	1.05	.024	–.327***	–.075	.030	.174**	–.100	–		
8. Career satisfaction	3.75	0.81	.028	.029	.062	.024	.382***	–.017	.326***	–	
9. Vigour	4.54	0.80	.038	.047	–.001	.018	.448***	.014	.129*	.332***	–
10. Perceived marketability	3.37	1.04	–.074	–.037	–.056	.206***	.232***	–.193**	.335***	.402***	.295***

^a0 = men and 1 = women. ^b0 = SIEs and 1 = AEs. ^c0 = still living abroad and 1 = repatriated. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

c) job responsibility development ($\beta = 0.182$, $p = 0.002$), and d) perceived internal marketability ($\beta = 0.282$, $p < 0.001$) (see Table 3). Accordingly, the results supported Hypotheses 1a, 1b, 1c, and 1d.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that cultural differences between the home country and the host country would moderate the relationship between career adaptability and a) vigour, b) career satisfaction, c) job responsibility development, and d) perceived internal marketability. Our findings indicated that the cultural differences significantly moderated only the relationship between career adaptability and career satisfaction ($\beta = -0.255$, $p = 0.037$). No moderating effects of cultural differences were observed for vigour, job responsibility development, and perceived internal marketability (see Table 4). Accordingly, Hypothesis 2b was supported, and 2a, 2c, and 2d were not.

Further, the interaction plot (see Figure 2) highlights the dynamic between adaptability at various levels of cultural differences. The plot, which depicts career satisfaction as a function of career adaptability across different magnitudes of the cultural difference between the home and host

Table 3. Standardised regression coefficients, standard errors, and p-values for the unconditional multiple linear regression models.

Variable	Model A (JRD)			Model B (GCS)			Model C (VIG)			Model D (PMKT)		
	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p
Intercept	-.013	.122	.916	-.121	.121	.319	.060	.100	.551	-.186	.126	.140
Gender ^a	-.155	.128	.225	-.117	.129	.365	-.098	.115	.394	-.206	.132	.122
Age	-.360	.065	<.001	-.019	.065	.765	.063	.055	.260	-.086	.068	.209
Expatriate type ^b	-.001	.132	.955	.194	.133	.145	-.030	.116	.798	.097	.139	.486
Repatriated ^c	.125	.127	.326	.097	.128	.447	-.016	.113	.890	.432	.132	.001
Career adaptability	.182	.059	.002	.400	.059	<.001	.460	.054	<.001	.282	.062	<.001
CDS	-.184	.124	.139	-.129	.126	.304	.013	.120	.911	-.193	.128	.134

Note. ^a0=men and 1=women. ^b0=SEs and 1=AEs. ^c0=still living abroad and 1=repatriated. JRD=job responsibility development, GCS=General career satisfaction, VIG=vigour, CDS=Cultural difference score, PMKT=Perceived Marketability. β = Standardised regression coefficient, SE=standard error.

Table 4. Standardised regression coefficients, standard errors, and p-values for the conditional multiple linear regression models.

Variable	Model A (JRD)			Model B (GCS)			Model C (VIG)			Model D (PMKT)		
	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p
Intercept	-.012	.122	.920	-.116	.120	.334	.059	.100	.555	-.184	.125	.143
Gender ^a	-.154	.128	.231	-.110	.128	.390	-.096	.115	.404	-.201	.132	.129
Age	-.360	.066	<.001	-.018	.064	.775	.063	.055	.259	-.087	.068	.205
Expatriate type ^b	-.001	.132	.949	.189	.132	.155	-.030	.116	.798	.094	.138	.499
Repatriated ^c	.127	.127	.320	.104	.127	.415	-.010	.113	.931	.435	.132	.001
Career adaptability	.173	.061	.005	.367	.061	<.001	.446	.055	<.001	.262	.064	<.001
CDS	-.192	.125	.125	-.160	.126	.203	-.000	.121	.999	-.212	.129	.101
Adaptability*CDS	-.075	.123	.541	-.255	.122	.037	-.122	.117	.298	-.180	.127	.156

Note. ^a0=men and 1=women. ^b0=SEs and 1=AEs. ^c0=still living abroad and 1=repatriated. JRD=job responsibility development, GCS=General career satisfaction, VIG=vigour, CDS=Cultural difference score, PMKT=Perceived Marketability. β = Standardised regression coefficient, SE=standard error.

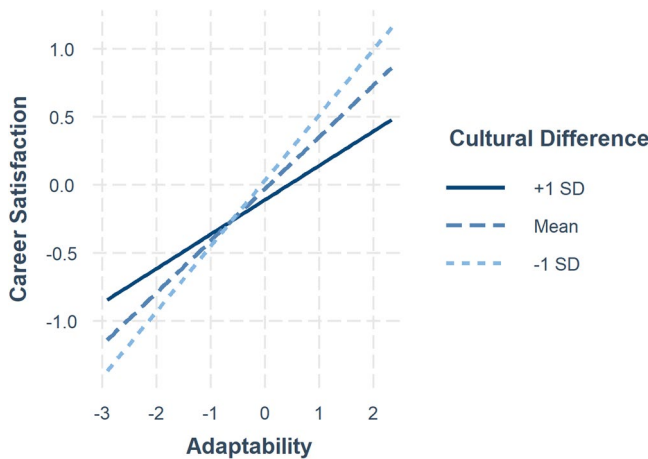


Figure 2. Moderation of cultural differences between career adaptability and career satisfaction.

country (-1 SD, mean, and $+1$ SD), revealed an intriguing pattern. Specifically, when the cultural difference was extensive in the negative direction (-1 SD) – meaning that the host-country’s cultural index score was lower than that of Finland – there was a pronounced positive association with career adaptability and career satisfaction ($\beta = 0.508$, $p < 0.001$). When the cultural difference was of a smaller magnitude, the association between career adaptability and career satisfaction was less pronounced ($\beta = 0.383$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, the association diminished even further ($\beta = 0.259$, $p = 0.004$) when the cultural difference score was reduced, meaning that the host-country’s cultural index score increased relative to Finland. Owing to respondents who were working in countries with cultural index scores lower than Finland outnumbering those working in countries with cultural index scores higher than Finland (38%, $n = 122$ vs 5%, $n = 17$), the interaction effect reflects the association between adaptability and career satisfaction for the larger group of expatriates.

We addressed potential nonlinear effects arising from the noted group imbalance by testing separate models for expatriates in host countries with cultural index scores lower than Finland’s and those in countries with higher cultural index scores. Results indicated that the relationship between adaptability and career satisfaction differed. Specifically, expatriates in countries with lower cultural index scores than Finland (e.g. the United Kingdom) demonstrated a lower association between adaptability and career satisfaction ($\beta = 0.431$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, expatriates in countries with higher cultural index scores than Finland (e.g. Indonesia) exhibited a stronger association ($\beta = 0.648$, $p = 0.045$). However, due to the small sample size in the group with higher cultural index scores, this difference could not be statistically confirmed as applicable to the broader

population ($Z=0.734$, $p=0.463$). Consequently, when interpreting the results, we focused on the group with lower cultural index scores and the more robust findings.

Regarding the control variables, the results indicated that age was significantly associated with the job responsibility development of expatriates. Specifically, the older the expatriates, the lower their job responsibility development ($\beta = -0.360$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, the results showed that repatriation was associated with perceived internal marketability. Specifically, repatriates demonstrated higher perceived internal marketability than those still abroad ($\beta = 0.432$, $p = 0.001$). The control variables were not significantly related to other outcomes.

Discussion

The findings present a clear story about expatriate career sustainability: career adaptability matters across the full set of SCT indicators, but its relevance is context-dependent. Expatriates with higher career adaptability scores reported greater vigour, more career satisfaction, stronger job responsibility development, and greater perceived internal marketability. This pattern supports SCT's emphasis on agency, while CCT helps explain how career adaptability operates as a self-regulatory resource through concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). In H-D global work, this resource becomes particularly relevant because expatriates face career experiences involving mobility, cultural difference, and repeated transitions. These experiences require cognitive flexibility, as expatriates must revise scripts, interpret unfamiliar expectations, and adjust their ways of working across contexts (Shaffer et al., 2012).

The moderation finding adds a second message. Cultural difference, used in our model to capture variation in cognitive flexibility demands in H-D global work, strengthened only the relationship between career adaptability and career satisfaction. This suggests that cultural difference may matter most for the happiness dimension of career sustainability, where expatriates must interpret unfamiliar expectations, revise assumptions about success, and realign career goals (Mello et al., 2023a). The absence of moderation for vigour, job responsibility development, and perceived internal marketability suggests that these indicators may depend more strongly on recovery conditions, organisational career structures, and supervisor discretion than on cultural difference alone (Breitenmoser et al., 2018; Eby et al., 2003; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). We develop this interpretation below by discussing productivity, happiness, and health. Subsequently, we address the contextual role of cultural difference.

Examining each domain helps to situate the findings in relation to previous research. Regarding productivity, prior research has often linked

career adaptability to subjective evaluations, such as job satisfaction (Rudolph et al., 2017). In contrast, our results extend this perspective by showing an association with job responsibility development, an indicator of career progress. This relationship is consistent with CCT because career adaptability supports future-oriented career self-management and exploration, which may encourage individuals to pursue broader responsibilities and career development opportunities (Spurk et al., 2020). This process may be particularly relevant in expatriate work, where global transitions increase the need for self-regulation and create valuable learning opportunities (Dickmann et al., 2018).

For happiness, we move beyond job satisfaction to longer-term career satisfaction, aligning with CCT's account that planfulness and exploration support more positive long-term career evaluations (Rudolph et al., 2017; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). In expatriate work, repeated and intense international experiences can prompt expatriates to reconsider and adjust their career orientations and criteria for success over time (Suutari et al., 2018). Dickmann and Cerdin (2018) outline why expatriates reassess their careers, and the current research adds nuance: Career adaptability enables expatriates to periodically re-evaluate and realign their career paths with those evolving preferences, which helps sustain higher levels of career satisfaction despite ongoing transitions.

For health, our results suggest that career adaptability functions as a self-regulatory buffer, consistent with the CCT view of career adaptability as a psychosocial resource that supports proactive self-management of career demands (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). In expatriate work, where frequent transitions and blurred boundaries between work and non-work place particularly strong demands on individuals' internal resources (Shaffer et al., 2012), behaviours such as recovery planning and resource seeking help sustain vigour (Schaufeli et al., 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Career adaptability may help expatriates engage in such self-regulatory behaviours, thereby supporting more sustainable health outcomes over time.

With regard to context, the magnitude of cultural differences moderated the association between career adaptability and career satisfaction. Simple-slope tests indicated that the career adaptability–satisfaction link was stronger when cultural differences were larger. One interpretation is the presence of a context-activation pattern, whereby stronger contextual demands make self-regulatory resources more consequential (Tett & Burnett, 2003). When cultural differences are small, expatriates can rely on familiar role scripts and expectations, so career adaptability adds less incremental value to sustaining career satisfaction. When cultural differences are greater, cultural novelty increases ambiguity about what works and what constitutes success. This intensifies demands for cognitive flexibility and makes career satisfaction more contingent on sensemaking

and ongoing script revision, which are central functions of career adaptability (Shaffer et al., 2012; Stoermer et al., 2022). Working from Froese and Peltokorpi (2011) insights, our research indicates that larger cultural differences may strengthen the extent to which adaptability helps expatriates maintain positive career evaluations despite heightened adjustment demands.

Looking beyond magnitude, we also explored the directionality of cultural differences as an asymmetrical aspect. Here, the evidence was indicative rather than conclusive. The subsample of expatriates moving into the higher cultural index host environments was small, limiting statistical power to test directional asymmetry. Nevertheless, the pattern of coefficients suggests that career adaptability could become increasingly significant for sustaining career satisfaction when expatriates move into culturally more demanding environments. This indicates that cultural directionality would be a useful boundary condition for future research (Stahl et al., 2024). This tentative pattern is broadly consistent with prior work showing that cultural differences are associated with reduced expatriate job satisfaction (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2011) and with evidence that perceived cultural novelty influences how expatriates form satisfaction judgements at work (Stoermer et al., 2022). It also aligns with the H-D global work view that larger cultural gaps intensify cognitive flexibility demands and require continuous adjustment (Shaffer et al., 2012).

The moderating effect of cultural difference did not emerge for health or productivity. We interpret this pattern through an outcome-anchoring logic. Career satisfaction is internally anchored in the sense that it reflects meaning-making and evaluative judgements that are closely tied to psychosocial resources and culturally informed expectations (Briscoe et al., 2021; Spurk et al., 2019). By contrast, health and the productivity indicators may be more externally anchored in work structures and career opportunities, so cultural differences may matter less for how career adaptability translates into these outcomes. For instance, productivity in terms of job responsibility development and perceived internal marketability depends strongly on organisational career structures (Eby et al., 2003), HR systems, and supervisor discretion (Breitenmoser et al., 2018), which can constrain or buffer cross-cultural variation in how adaptability is rewarded. Health in terms of vigour is likewise influenced by job demands and recovery opportunities embedded in the work environment (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Overall, this anchoring logic helps explain why cultural differences conditioned the career adaptability–career satisfaction association, but not the associations involving health or productivity.

From a global work perspective, this pattern suggests that cultural difference does not operate as a uniformly negative risk factor but can amplify the meaning-making benefits of career adaptability in expatriate

careers. For highly adaptable expatriates, moving into culturally more distant contexts may trigger deeper reflection, learning, and redefinition of what constitutes a good career, thereby strengthening career satisfaction. In contrast, less adaptable individuals may experience the same contexts primarily as sources of strain and uncertainty (Mello et al., 2024). The tentative, non-significant indications of asymmetry in our data, with moves from the Finnish home context into more culturally distant host countries showing stronger slopes, should therefore be treated as exploratory, but they point to a promising avenue for future research on when and how cultural differences enhance, rather than undermine, sustainable careers.

Overall, when expatriate careers are viewed through a transition-informed lens (Louis, 1980; Nicholson, 1984), the H-D nature of expatriate work (Shaffer et al., 2012) implies frequent transitions across work and non-work domains and contexts. These transitions can disrupt established routines and expectations, triggering cycles of sensemaking and adjustment. They can also amplify both risks and opportunities, with effects ranging from higher recovery demands (Kraimer et al., 2022) to accelerated competence development and subsequent career benefits (Chudzikowski et al., 2009; Dickmann et al., 2018; Takeuchi, 2010). From a sustainable career perspective, these transition cycles require individuals to manage productivity, happiness, and health in parallel over time (De Vos et al., 2020). From a CCT perspective, career adaptability helps individuals regulate these transitions through planning and self-regulation, and capture opportunities through exploration, which is consistent with the observed associations across vigour, career satisfaction, job responsibility development, and perceived internal marketability. The fact that cultural difference moderated only the career adaptability to career satisfaction association also fits this view, insofar as greater cultural novelty can intensify meaning-making demands that are central to the happiness dimension of career sustainability.

Conclusion and future research directions

Theoretical contributions

This study's main theoretical contribution is to show how career adaptability and cultural difference combine to influence career sustainability in H-D global work. Sustainable career theory already recognises career adaptability as a person-related agency resource; however, it offers only a broad framework to help understand how careers unfold through person, context, and time. We use CCT to explain more specifically how career adaptability operates through concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. By empirically examining this logic in a quantitative sample of expatriates, we extend

sustainable career research from a broad conceptual model in the direction of a contextually grounded test of health, happiness, and productivity in H-D global work. This context is important for theory development because expatriate careers are influenced by the core features of H-D global work: physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and non-work disruption (Shaffer et al., 2012). In our study, cultural difference captures variation in one of these features, namely the cognitive flexibility demands expatriates face when moving across home and host-country contexts.

Second, we contribute to career adaptability research grounded in CCT by broadening the outcome space associated with career adaptability beyond subjective evaluations. Prior research has often linked career adaptability to subjective outcomes such as job satisfaction (Rudolph et al., 2017). Our findings also connect career adaptability to job responsibility development, showing how this resource may relate to observable career progress in expatriation. This shift responds to calls to examine objective or externally anchored outcomes of career adaptability (Rudolph et al., 2017).

Third, we contribute to SCT in the global work context by clarifying how contextual demands influence the relationship between agency and career sustainability. Drawing on the H-D global work characterisation, based on Shaffer et al. (2012) taxonomy of physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and non-work disruption, we conceptualise cultural difference as a contextual feature that captures variation in cognitive flexibility demands. H-D global work can involve repeated transitions across countries, organisations, work roles, and private life domains (Baruch et al., 2016). These transitions can create development opportunities, such as the accumulation of career capital (Mello et al., 2026) and overall career success (Mello et al., 2023a). However, they can also amplify risks, including stress (Kraimer et al., 2022) and adjustment challenges (Haslberger et al., 2014), as well as threats to performance (Dickmann & Baruch, 2011), well-being (Biswas et al., 2022), and satisfaction (Mello et al., 2024). While global work generally involves cross-cultural interaction, larger cultural differences can intensify adjustment demands and make it more challenging to sustain positive career evaluations (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2011). By incorporating cultural difference as a contextual condition, we show that the relationship between career adaptability and career sustainability is not independent of context. In our model, this contextual sensitivity is most evident for the happiness indicator, suggesting that cultural difference may be especially relevant for the evaluative and meaning-making aspects of sustainable careers.

Limitations and future directions

As with all research, this study has limitations that warrant consideration when interpreting the results. First, the use of cross-sectional, single-source

data limits our ability to infer causality between career adaptability and career sustainability. Expatriates may also report different perceptions depending on the stage in the assignment cycle they are in Black et al. (1991). Future studies would therefore benefit from longitudinal, multi-wave designs that follow expatriates across key transition points (e.g. pre-departure, on-assignment, repatriation, or onward moves) and from multi-source data (e.g. supervisor ratings of responsibility development or performance, health indicators, and family perspectives) to clarify the temporal ordering of effects and reduce common method concerns.

Second, our sample consists of university-educated engineers and business professionals, which will limit generalizability. Haak-Saheem et al. (2019) note that the career benefits and risks of expatriation may differ for less-educated or low-skilled workers and for other occupational groups. Our relatively modest sample size and the concentration of respondents in host countries with cultural index scores lower than Finland further constrain generalizability. The findings are most applicable to populations with similar characteristics and host-country configurations. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, encompassing different home countries, occupations, education levels, and both higher and lower cultural distance index scores, to examine whether the associations observed here hold across a broader range of international workers and global mobility patterns. It would also be valuable to compare careers characterised by different levels of global work intensity (Shaffer et al., 2012); for example, long-term expatriation, frequent international business travel, predominantly domestic careers, and global virtual work. Any such comparison should seek to ascertain whether the role of career adaptability in sustaining health, happiness, and productivity varies with the density of cross-border transitions.

A third limitation concerns the way we assessed the three indicators of career sustainability. Although vigour, career satisfaction, job responsibility development, and perceived internal marketability are theoretically aligned with SCT and relevant to expatriate careers, health, happiness, and productivity can also be captured in other ways (De Vos et al., 2020). Health, for example, could be assessed through burnout, psychological distress, physical health, or recovery; happiness through life satisfaction, job satisfaction, meaningful work, or subjective career success; and productivity through work performance, external employability, objective promotions, or career capital.

Fourth, all participants being Finnish raises questions about cultural specificity in how career adaptability and sustainable career indicators are experienced and reported. Cultures differ in how they value expatriation and define career success (Mello et al., 2023a), and there is some evidence that certain subjective indicators (such as career satisfaction) can

function differently across demographic groups (Briscoe et al., 2021). Although we controlled for gender and did not compare parameters between groups, future research should assess whether the key constructs used in this study are understood and measured in the same way across gender and cultural groups. Establishing such measurement equivalence is essential before meaningful comparisons can be made. In addition, future studies should examine whether the strength and character of the relationships identified here remain stable across different national, organisational, and demographic contexts.

Fifth, a related limitation concerns our operationalisation of culture through a country-level index derived from the WVS. Although this approach was effective for capturing broad cross-national value differences and for modelling directional cultural differences between home and host countries (Berry et al., 2010; Spolaore & Wacziarg, 2016), it provides a narrow representation of culture. For example, it does not capture perceived cultural novelty or more specific cultural dimensions. The findings should thus be interpreted as evidence based on broad country-level value differences rather than culture in its wider multidimensional sense (Shenkar, 2001; Stahl et al., 2024; Tung & Verbeke, 2010).

Beyond these limitation-specific suggestions, three broader avenues for future research are especially relevant. SCT emphasises that health, happiness, and productivity should be studied together and dynamically, rather than as isolated, static outcomes. Person-centred approaches such as latent profile analysis (e.g. Wu et al., 2026) could be used, especially in H-D global work, to identify typical configurations of vigour, career satisfaction, and productivity (for example, high productivity–low health or balanced-high profiles) and to track movements between those profiles over time. Longitudinal and transition-focused designs could examine how vigour, career satisfaction, and productivity-related indicators not only function as outcomes of career adaptability, but also become antecedents for subsequent adaptability, career decisions, and career sustainability in the next phase of the career cycle (Spurk et al., 2019). Such designs would allow researchers to test whether, and under what conditions, earlier gains in one area (e.g. productivity) spill over to support or undermine others (e.g. health or happiness). Consistent with Spurk et al. (2019), such work could also address tensions between subjective and objective career success, for instance, when increased responsibilities and advancement coincide with declines in well-being, and examine how individuals use resources such as career adaptability to manage these trade-offs.

Future research should also seek to refine the contextual lens. Our study captured one important contextual layer through home-host cultural difference; however, SCT highlights that careers are shaped by

multiple, nested contexts, including organisational HR practices, leadership, work design, labour market conditions, and systems supporting workers' personal life (De Vos et al., 2020). Cross-level and comparative designs could therefore examine how career adaptability interacts with specific organisational and institutional features to shape sustainable career outcomes in global work. In addition, our findings related to the asymmetry of cultural differences (Stahl et al., 2024) suggest that future studies could examine more systematically whether moves into more culturally distant or institutionally demanding contexts increase the extent to which expatriates must draw on career adaptability to maintain health, happiness, and productivity, and how such effects differ across home- and host-country environments.

Finally, future work could broaden the resource perspective beyond career adaptability alone. SCT and related resource-based perspectives imply that sustainable careers are supported by bundles of resources rather than single constructs. Drawing on CCT, which conceptualises proactive career behaviours (such as career planning, networking, and skill development) as a core behavioural manifestation of career self-management, future research could examine how career adaptability and proactive career behaviours jointly relate to sustainable career outcomes in global work. For example, proactive career behaviours may function as behavioural pathways through which adaptable expatriates convert challenging international experiences into healthier, happier, and more productive career trajectories.

Practical implications

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for individuals, organisations, and public authorities. Individuals who foster career adaptability can significantly enhance their career sustainability in H-D global work contexts. That is particularly true for those considering or currently engaged in expatriate roles. Older expatriates report that managing the challenges of working and living abroad gives them greater vigour. That suggests that sustainability can evolve, underscoring the importance of career strategies that maintain vigour and engagement throughout a global career. Organisations deploying expatriates can use these insights to strengthen global talent management, particularly in expatriate selection and development. Because career adaptability was associated with expatriates' career progress, satisfaction, and vigour, organisations should consider its role in both structured support programmes fostering such adaptive capacities over time and in their selection processes. Doing so would help ensure candidates are well-equipped for challenging global roles. That foresight could prove particularly productive during periods of global disruption, such as pandemics, wars, or

social polarisation, when employees' health and overall career sustainability are impacted (Cooke et al., 2024). For SIEs, whose approach to managing their careers is typically more proactive and self-directed, adaptability is especially important for sustaining satisfaction and progress in global contexts. Given their limited organisational support compared to AEs, fostering adaptability through targeted development and recruitment practices may be particularly beneficial. This highlights the value of using career adaptability as a selection criterion for AEs, who may benefit from additional support to ease cultural and organisational adjustment. Programmes incorporating targeted adaptability training, mentorship, and ongoing development support could help expatriates build the flexibility needed to support a sustainable career trajectory.

Finally, national public authorities seeking to attract and retain skilled global talent must address expatriates' career sustainability concerns. Policymakers should consider expatriate-friendly policies supporting long-term career development, including career adaptability, language, and cultural integration training. Such initiatives can ease adaptation and secure sustainable careers.

Note

1. Our study investigates the sustainability of global careers among Finnish expatriates. Finland has one of the highest cultural index scores globally. As the host country's cultural index score increases relative to Finland, it indicates greater similarity to Finland, which may reduce the challenges posed by cultural differences. Conversely, as the host country's cultural index score decreases relative to Finland, cultural dissimilarity increases, amplifying the demands on expatriates.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Country distribution of the sample.

Country	n	%	Country	n	%
Germany	47	14	Canada	4	1
Switzerland	29	9	Hong Kong	4	1
United States of America	26	8	United Arab Emirates	4	1
China	21	6	Malaysia	3	1
Sweden	21	6	Vietnam	3	1
United Kingdom	19	6	Brazil	2	1
Belgium	13	4	Chile	2	1
Luxembourg	13	4	Czech Republic	2	1
Denmark	10	3	Hungary	2	1
France	9	3	India	2	1
The Netherlands	9	3	Italy	2	1
Austria	8	2	Japan	2	1
Poland	8	2	Mongolia	2	1
Russia	8	2	Nepal	2	1
Spain	8	2	New Zealand	2	1
Singapore	7	2	Thailand	2	1
Australia	5	2	Others*	19	6
Norway	5	2			

Note. *All other countries have one respondent per country. These countries are Bangladesh, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Indonesia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Laos, Liechtenstein, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Panama, Romania, South Korea, Tanzania, Turkey, Ukraine, and Zambia.