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Sustainable careers of self-initiated expatriates

School of Management
Master's thesis in International Business

Vaasa 2025

UNIVERSITY OF VAASA
School of Management
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Title of the Thesis: Sustainable careers of self-initiated expatriates
Degree: Master of Science in Business Administration
Programme: International Business
Supervisor: Vesa Suutari
Year: 2025 **Pages:** 111

ABSTRACT:

The concept of a career has evolved significantly over time and maintaining a single long-term employment relationship throughout one's working life has become increasingly uncommon. Sustainable careers have gained greater recognition in recent years as a framework for understanding how individuals can build long-lasting careers in a complex and unpredictable labor market. However, the sustainable careers of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) have not been studied extensively, despite their unique, global career trajectories that differ substantially from those who build their careers in their home country. SIEs offer an important perspective on sustainable careers because they are driven by strong personal agency, experience multiple contextual influences and face new distinct challenges. The lack of prior studies in the area reveals a significant gap in the literature, which this thesis seeks to address. This study explores how career sustainability is shaped by self-initiated expatriation and, using the sustainable career theory, examines the influence of personal, contextual, and time factors on SIEs' careers.

This study was conducted as qualitative research using semi-structured interviews to collect data from self-initiated expatriates who had undergone one or more expatriations. In total, nine participants were interviewed, focusing on their past, present and future experiences and goals. The analysis was done based on the indicators (health, happiness and productivity) and dimensions (person, context and time) of sustainable career theory. The findings suggest that the experiences of self-initiated expatriates provide valuable insights into sustainable careers by illustrating how they actively manage their careers through personal resilience, adaptability and meaningful career motivations, which contribute to their health, happiness, and productivity over time. Career sustainability among SIEs was positively influenced by the expatriation experience, as many participants expressed gratitude for the challenges they encountered, reporting that these experiences strengthened their careers. Managing the time sequences of changing contexts helped the SIEs establish meaningful and satisfying careers that aligned with their personal needs and skill set.

Overall, the study deepens the theoretical and practical understanding of sustainable careers in the context of self-initiated expatriation. Additionally, this study provides suggestions for further research based on limitations this research had as well as suggesting further perspectives to study more to gain an even deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

KEYWORDS: Self-initiated expatriate, Sustainable career, Health, Happiness, Productivity, Person, Context, Time

VAASAN YLIOPISTO
Johtamisen akateeminen yksikkö
Tekijä: Sonja Lindgren
Tutkielman nimi: Sustainable careers of self-initiated expatriates
Tutkinto: Kauppatieteiden maisteri
Opintosuunta: Kansainvälinen liiketoiminta
Työn ohjaaja: Vesa Suutari
Valmistumisvuosi: 2025 **Sivumäärä:** 111

TIIVISTELMÄ:

Ura-käsitys on muuttunut merkittävästi ajan myötä ja yhden pitkäaikaisen työsuhteen ylläpitäminen koko työuran ajan on nykyään yhä harvinaisempaa. Kestävät urat ovat viime vuosina saaneet kasvavaa tunnustusta viitekehyksenä, jonka avulla voidaan ymmärtää, miten yksilöt voivat rakentaa pitkäkestoisia uria monimutkaisilla ja ennakoimattomilla työmarkkinoilla. Oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattien kestävien urien tutkimusta ei kuitenkaan ole tehty laajasti, vaikka heidän ainutlaatuiset, globaalit urapolkunsa eroavat merkittävästi niistä, jotka rakentavat uransa kotimaassaan. Oma-aloitteiset ekspatriaatit tarjoavat tärkeän näkökulman kestävien urien tarkasteluun, sillä heitä ohjaa vahva henkilökohtainen toimijuus, he kokevat erilaisia kontekstuaalisia vaikutuksia ja kohtaavat uudenlaisia haasteita. Aihetta koskevan tutkimuksen puute osoittaa merkittävän aukon kirjallisuudessa, jota tämä tutkimus pyrkii osittain täyttämään. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää, miten oma-aloitteinen ekspatriaattisuus vaikuttaa uran kestävyyteen ja miten henkilökohtaiset, kontekstuaaliset ja ajalliset tekijät muokkaavat oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattien urakehitystä käyttäen kestävän uran teoriaa viitekehyksenä.

Tutkimus toteutettiin kvalitatiivisena tutkimuksena käyttäen puolistrukturoituja haastatteluja, joissa kerättiin tietoa oma-aloitteisilta ekspatriaateilta, jotka olivat kokeneet yhden tai useamman ulkomaanjakson. Haastatteluissa keskityttiin osallistujien menneisiin, nykyisiin ja tuleviin urakokemuksiin ja tavoitteisiin. Analyysi tehtiin kestävän uran teorian indikaattoreiden (terveys, onnellisuus ja tuottavuus) ja ulottuvuuksien (henkilö, konteksti ja aika) pohjalta. Tulokset osoittavat, että oma-aloitteisten ekspatriaattien kokemukset tarjoavat arvokasta tietoa kestävistä urista havainnollistamalla, miten he aktiivisesti hallitsevat uraansa henkilökohtaisen joustavuuden, sopeutumiskyvyn ja merkityksellisten uramotivaatioiden avulla, mikä tukee heidän terveyttään, onnellisuuttaan ja tuottavuuttaan ajan myötä. Oma-aloitteisien ekspatriaattien uran kestävyys vahvistui usein ulkomaanjaksojen kautta koettujen haasteiden ansiosta. Muuttuvien kontekstien ajallinen hallinta auttoi oma-aloitteisia ekspatriaatteja rakentamaan merkityksellisiä ja tyydyttäviä uria, jotka vastasivat heidän henkilökohtaisia tarpeitaan ja osaamistaan.

Yleisesti, tämä tutkimus syventää kestävien urien teoreettista ja käytännön ymmärrystä oma-aloitteisen ekspatriaattisuuden kontekstissa. Lisäksi tutkimus tarjoaa ehdotuksia jatkotutkimukselle tutkimuksen rajoitusten pohjalta ja ehdottaa näkökulmia, joiden avulla ilmiötä voidaan tarkastella entistä syvällisemmin.

KEYWORDS: Self-initiated expatriate, Sustainable career, Health, Happiness, Productivity, Person, Context, Time

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Relocating to foreign countries for work is not a new phenomenon. It has been part of human history for decades, particularly during times when national boundaries were more fluid (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). In recent decades, globalization has significantly transformed job mobility, facilitated by the increased mobility of capital and the removal of trade barriers (Ratnam, 2014). These developments have intensified competition in job markets, particularly in major metropolitan areas, which have become attractive destinations for expatriates seeking to broaden their knowledge and advance their careers (Ratnam, 2014). To address the shortage of skilled labor in host nations, self-initiated expatriates are recognized as a vital source of knowledge for enterprises (Hussain et al., 2024). Some countries, such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, rely on foreign labor to sustain their economies, highlighting the critical role of expatriates in global workforce dynamics (Rodriguez & Scurry, 2014). As a result, the experiences of expatriates have become a central focus in discussions about global mobility and career development (e.g. Cerdin and Pargneux, 2010; Andresen et al., 2023; Suutari et al., 2017).

On the other hand, many countries seem to be tightening restrictions on immigration and foreign labor. The people are not satisfied with the current state of the job market and this not only affects the immigrants but also the expatriates looking for job opportunities in these foreign countries. For example, Canada, which has been welcoming foreign workers for decades, is taking a step back and reducing intake starting in 2025 (Yousif, 2024). The same trend is happening in Europe, where the UK is planning to reduce immigration to boost the skills of British workers (Heffer, 2024) and in Germany, where the recently passed immigration motion is tightening its rules (The Guardian, 2025). Even though these actions are primarily targeted at immigrants, they reflect a broader shift in attitudes towards foreign workers, making it more difficult for expatriates to secure job opportunities and integrate into these labor markets.

In addition, surging international mobility has led to misalignment between job market needs and the available workforce. Underemployment of skilled self-initiated expatriates has already raised a concern (Chwialkowska, 2020) and finding a job that fits their skills has become difficult. This, together with technological advancements that have reduced the number of available jobs, presents a challenge for expatriates seeking sustainable international careers. Economic factors, closely tied to technological advancements, are reshaping careers as organizations increasingly prioritize flexibility and profitability by transitioning from permanent to temporary and part-time employment in the current competitive economic climate (McDonald & Hite, 2018). Achieving a career that not only aligns with expatriates' skills and needs but also supports a fulfilling personal life is essential. Moreover, the adjustment process for expatriates is often challenged by a lack of an existing network (Pustovit, 2020), requiring a careful balance between professional efforts and personal life. This balance is further challenged by language barriers, cultural differences and legal issues that expatriates face in new countries (Atay et al., 2024; Selmer & Lauring, 2015; Samarsky, 2023). Self-initiated expatriates, therefore, face unique challenges that affect the sustainability of their careers.

More expatriates are choosing a career approach to expatriation, stringing reassignments into meaningful sequences that fulfill their long-term professional and personal goals for accumulating career capital, rather than sticking with just one assignment (McNulty & Vance, 2017). Career development has evolved significantly in recent years, with fewer people staying on the same career path throughout their lives. While globalization continues to reshape life, work and education structures worldwide (Ratnam, 2014), expatriates need to learn how to adjust and maintain a sustainable career. The challenge now lies in helping individuals navigate transitions between unstable job positions, incorporating periods of employment and unemployment (Ratnam, 2014).

The concept of sustainability has garnered significant attention in recent years, driven by the political, economic and social challenges facing the world. Similarly, the notion of

sustainable careers has emerged as a growing area of scholarly interest. Theoretical and conceptual definitions of career sustainability and related indicators have advanced in research (Tordera et al., 2020). The sustainable career viewpoint differs from other career perspectives in that it emphasizes the contextual and individual aspects of career management (Van der Hejden et al., 2020). De Vos et al. (2020) created a framework for a sustainable career linked to the dimensions of person, time and context and the indicators of health, happiness and productivity. Sustainable careers have also been researched in terms of individual and organizational perspectives (McDonald & Hite, 2018) and HR point of view (Tordera et al., 2020), through the lens of collaborative crafting and work redesign (Kossek & Ollier-Malaterre, 2020) and nonwork orientations (Hirschi et al., 2020).

Expatriate literature is vast and expatriates have been researched from many points of view, although they are not specifically about their career sustainability, they are strongly linked to it. For example, the well-being and happiness of expatriates have been studied (Wang & Kanungo, 2004; Merchant et al., 2023; Bastida et al., 2023) and those can be seen as partial indicators of a sustainable career (Tordera et al., 2020; De Vos et al., 2020). Also, Informal networks with expatriates have been researched regarding expatriate adjustment (Horak & Yang, 2016) and the impact of decent work has been studied regarding career sustainability (Su & Chan, 2023). Zhang et al. (2022) studied the impact of career competencies on the sustainable career of expatriates. This emphasizes the need for a better understanding of self-initiated expatriates and their career sustainability.

Given the current dynamics of the global job market and the challenges of international mobility, the sustainable career development of expatriates is a critical and timely area of study. The increasing interconnectedness of economies, combined with the competitive pressures of the global workforce, has underscored the importance of international experience as a key component of professional growth. However, the challenges faced by expatriates in maintaining a sustainable career, such as cultural adaptation, career continuity and organizational support, necessitate further investigation into sustainable

career development in this context. This thesis will focus on self-initiated expatriates. Self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) are individuals who choose to move abroad for employment on their own initiative, rather than being assigned by an employer (Bienmann & Andersen, 2010).

A deeper understanding of this phenomenon is not only valuable for expatriates in managing their career sustainability but also for organizations aiming to support their globally mobile workforce. By examining how expatriates navigate career challenges and leverage international opportunities, organizations can gain insights into practical strategies, e.g., talent management and professional development. Ultimately, fostering sustainable career practices for expatriates benefits both individuals by enhancing their career satisfaction and marketability and the organization by building a globally competent workforce, which is why it is a relevant and important phenomenon to research.

1.2 Research questions

This thesis explores the factors influencing expatriates' career sustainability and how they achieve sustainable careers in their host countries. The focus is on self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) and the challenges they face.

The research questions of this study are:

1. How is career sustainability affected by self-initiated expatriation?
2. In what way do personal, contextual and time factors influence the career sustainability of SIEs?

1.3 Definitions of key concepts

Self-initiated expatriate

Vance (2005) defines an expatriate as someone who has relocated to another country, typically for an extended period, to live and work. Self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) are those who decide to relocate independently for work (Bienmann & Andersen, 2010).

Doherty et al. (2013) emphasize that since the focus is on an individual with SIEs, the initiative for such mobility must originate with the individual themself.

Career

Arthur et al. (1989) define a career as “the evolving sequence of a person’s working experience over time”.

Sustainable career

A sustainable career can be defined 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, herewith providing meaning to the individual” (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015, p. 7).

Person

A person refers to the active agent who steers their own career, shaping its sustainability through deliberate choices, initiative and continuous adjustment to evolving circumstances in both work and life (De Vos et al., 2020).

Context

Context refers to the surrounding conditions, including organizational and personal life circumstances, that shape an individual’s career decisions and influence the sustainability of their career (De Vos et al., 2020).

Time

Time is the ongoing progression in which a person’s work experiences and career positions change over time (De Vos et al., 2020)

1.4 Delimitations

This study has certain limitations. The study focused only on SIEs and excluded assigned expatriates. It was done as a qualitative study, and a quantitative study was not

conducted, so numerical data on the findings were omitted. All the participants in the thesis were interviewed only once. As a cross-sectional study, the data were collected at a single point in time (Saunders, 2007), limiting insights into long-term developments. Furthermore, the analysis was based on a small sample of nine participants, which may affect the generalizability and reliability of the findings. Not all of the participants had multiple expatriation experiences and some of them were still early in their careers. The participants had jobs in different fields, but none were manual labor jobs.

1.5 Structure of the study

The thesis is divided into five main chapters. The first chapter introduces the study, presents the research questions and objectives. In addition, definitions of the key terms used are provided, along with the study's delimitations. The second chapter presents the theoretical background for the study. The main framework is explained and information about self-initiated expatriates is discussed. Moreover, the existing knowledge about the sustainability of SIE's careers is presented. In the third chapter, the study's methodology is presented. It includes the research approach, method and data collection and analysis. The study's reliability and validity are also discussed. The fourth chapter analyzes the data collected from the interviews and in the fifth chapter, the conclusion and recommendations for future research are presented.

2 Literature review

This chapter reviews the existing literature on the topic. The first part discusses the meaning of expatriates and sustainable careers. Additionally, the study's main framework, sustainable career theory, is presented. The next part further analyzes what is known about the sustainable careers of self-initiated expatriates through the dimensions of the sustainable career theory. Lastly, the study's theoretical framework is presented.

2.1 Expatriates

An expatriate, as defined by McNulty and Brewster (2017), is an individual employed by an organization who is temporarily deployed overseas. Expatriates do not hold citizenship in the host nation but have the legal right to work there due to an arrangement between their employer and the host nation. Importantly, being an expatriate involves crossing a national boundary (Doherty et al., 2013). Similarly, Vance (2005) characterizes an expatriate as someone who has relocated to another country, typically for an extended period, to live and work. This distinction separates expatriates from those leaving their place of origin permanently, such as immigrants, which is a related but distinct group (Doherty et al., 2013).

The concept of expatriates is closely linked to time. The basic idea is that an expatriate assignment is temporary. It can be short-term (1 to 12 months) or long-term (1-5 years) (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). In some cases, mostly self-initiated expatriates, the period will be indefinite (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). Over time, an individual's status may evolve in response to changing circumstances, potentially shifting from expatriate to permanent citizen or migrant (Doherty et al., 2013). Many self-initiated expatriates transition to permanent resident status, ultimately becoming long-term immigrants (Al Ariss & Özbilgin, 2010). Although expatriate assignments may sometimes lead to permanent residency, the individuals retain expatriate status until that transition occurs (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). Compared to immigrants, who generally intend to settle permanently in their host country, expatriates are primarily temporary residents (Selmer et al., 2022).

This temporal aspect highlights the key difference between expatriates and immigrants while acknowledging the fluid nature of these categories.

Being an expatriate offers numerous benefits, particularly for career advancement and personal growth. One of the most significant advantages is the international experience gained through overseas job assignments, which is highly valuable for an individual's career sustainability. Research indicates that the long-term outcomes of global mobility are positive, providing expatriates with a competitive advantage in the job market (Dickmann et al., 2018). For instance, individuals who ascend to higher-level job positions, such as managers or CEOs, often have prior international experience, underscoring its importance for leadership roles (Suutari et al., 2018). Additionally, expatriates experience career capital growth across various dimensions, such as skills, knowledge, and networks, directly as a result of their time abroad (Dickmann et al., 2018). Former expatriates frequently report strong positive effects on their career capital, particularly in areas such as self-awareness and the development of valuable professional networks. This suggests that the benefits of expatriation extend beyond immediate job performance, fostering long-term career growth and personal development (Dickmann et al., 2018).

An international assignment usually ends with repatriation. Repatriation means the individual returns to their home country and, for company-assigned expatriates, often to their home organization (Black et al., 1997). Sometimes an expatriate assignment ends sooner than originally planned, which might negatively affect the sustainability of the career abroad. This can happen as a result of many things and the reasons vary based on different demographics such as sex, age, the type of expatriate and length of the assignment (Chiang et al., 2019). Understanding the dynamics of expatriate transitions is essential for assessing how international work experiences contribute to sustainable career development over time.

2.1.1 Different types of expatriates

Expatriates can generally be categorized into two main types: those assigned to their roles by an organization (assigned expatriates, AEs) and those who relocate independently for work (self-initiated expatriates, SIEs) (Bienmann & Andersen, 2010). However, expatriates as a group include a broad spectrum of individuals pursuing international careers within global labor markets (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). The definitions of AE and SIE indicate an expatriate's professional orientation and position at a given time, rather than dividing them into completely separate groups (McNulty & Vance, 2017). Depending on their placement on this continuum, individuals may exhibit varying degrees of AE and SIE characteristics (McNulty & Vance, 2017). SIEs, in particular, choose to relocate abroad for work based on diverse personal motivations (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). The personal motivations and unique status of SIEs provide a more nuanced and dynamic perspective on the sustainable career development of expatriates, which is why this thesis explicitly emphasizes SIEs' experiences to address these complexities.

To provide a clearer understanding of expatriation as a concept, it is important first to define company-assigned expatriates (AEs), whose roles and characteristics differ significantly from those of SIEs. AEs are sent abroad by a company they already work for, usually a multinational corporation (MNC) or a global organization (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). AEs usually fill managerial positions in the host country, as the cost of expatriates is high for the organization (Mello et al., 2023). Therefore, organizations aim to maximize their return on investment by assigning expatriates to roles that require advanced skills or the ability to transfer knowledge and corporate culture effectively. Most AEs are parent country nationals leaving the parent company's headquarters, where expatriates usually return (McNulty & Vance, 2017). However, they can also be third-country nationals, inpatriates or even expatriates of host country origin (McNulty & Brewster, 2017).

2.1.2 Self-initiated expatriates

SIEs are a group within the broader expatriate term and the focus of this thesis. Firstly, the term “self-initiated” distinguishes between people sent by their employers and those who choose to move abroad on their own (Doherty et al., 2013). Since the focus is on an individual with SIEs, the initiative for such mobility must originate with the individual themself (Doherty et al., 2013). Adventure and a desire to learn about different cultures are the main drivers of mobility for SIEs rather than professional advancement in and of itself (Doherty et al., 2013). However, the reason may also be to find a job or pursue professional growth (Atay & Chew, 2024).

SIEs share certain common characteristics. They tend to be younger, often female and in most cases they do not have a family moving with them (Selmer et al., 2022). They usually relocate to the host country alone or with a partner (Selmer et al., 2022), who often either is moving with the expatriate or a host country national. SIEs tend to have more international experience and a better understanding of the host country's language due to their personal interest in internationality (Dickmann et al., 2018). Because SIEs take more initiative in deciding to relocate to another country, they have already given considerable thought to their motivations, interests and reasons for moving abroad, engaging in proactive reflection throughout the decision-making process compared to AEs (Dickmann et al., 2018). SIEs start their international career with high expectations from the experiences they gain from international mobility in their careers (Bienmann & Andersen, 2010). Additionally, career orientation tends to remain consistent across SIEs across age groups, whereas it declines with advancing age among assigned expatriate AEs (Bienmann & Andersen, 2010).

While company-assigned expatriates (AEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) share standard career drivers, such as lifestyle, internationalism and the pursuit of challenges, they differ in key priorities. SIEs often emphasize security, commitment to a cause and lifestyle anchoring, whereas AEs are more focused on internationalism and management proficiency (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2010). Recognizing these distinctions is essential to

fostering sustainable career development pathways that align with expatriates' unique motivations and needs. There has been debate over whether SIEs have a lower status as expatriates and whether they gain as much from the experience as AEs. However, in terms of career success, there is no significant difference between AEs and SIEs. Both groups perceive themselves as highly marketable and report high levels of career satisfaction several years after completing their international assignments (Suutari et al., 2018).

Because of their status, SIEs have no additional support from the company. AEs have support from their organization, where they have most often already acquired a higher position (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). SIEs usually work for smaller organizations than AEs, which often have smaller HRM departments to support career development (Dickmann et al., 2018). For AEs, cross-cultural training is often offered, which smoothens the adjustment process. Cross-cultural training offers expatriates important guidance on settling into a new host country and adjusting to the new work culture. The training can be in different forms in conventional and experimental (Okbara & Kabongo, 2017). In general, it is considered an important factor in cross-cultural adjustment (Xiang et al., 2023; Koo Moon et al., 2012). However, this is something SIEs have no access to and they have to learn about the culture on their own.

However, SIEs tend to have more cross-cultural competencies than AEs (Chen et al., 2024). Cross-cultural competence refers to an individual’s ability to interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Li, 2020). In overseas assignments, personality traits and abilities significantly impact job performance (Tung, 1981). It encompasses more than just cultural awareness by including the ability to engage and communicate successfully within the host environment (Wang et al., 2014). Johnson et al. (2006) argue that cultural competence plays a vital role in fostering a productive work atmosphere in cross-cultural contexts. They conceptualize cultural competence in terms of outcomes, highlighting an individual’s proficiency in adapting to specific cultural situations. This proficiency requires effectively applying relevant knowledge, skills and

personal attributes while responding appropriately to situational demands. Additionally, Johnson et al. (2006) emphasize that cross-cultural competence entails the integrated use of skills, knowledge and attitudes to meet the expectations of diverse cultural contexts.

Due to the more developed cross-cultural competences and readiness for the abroad assignment, SIEs often experience a relatively seamless adjustment process in the host country. According to Doherty et al. (2011), SIEs generally demonstrate a better capacity for adjusting into the community, a more profound comprehension of the local way of life and a preparedness to live and work independently in a foreign setting. The ability of a SIE to adjust to this country setting determines whether the expatriation is successful or not (Samarsky, 2022).

Job security poses a challenge for SIEs. The subjective expectations of individuals regarding employment stability and continuity within the company are reflected in job security (Probst, 2003). Compared to AEs, SIEs acquire their work opportunities independently, which can create instability in some cases. The job market in many big cities that attract expatriates is difficult and finding a job that matches an expatriate's skills and needs is highly insecure. However, since SIEs are more inclined to work for smaller, local businesses with fewer career options, they are more likely to seek new jobs than AEs (Mello et al., 2023). It also affects the legal side because the ability of SIEs to secure work permits, visas and professional recognition is essential to their success and is often linked to employment (Samarsky, 2022).

2.2 Sustainable career theory

2.2.1 Defining a sustainable career

Career sustainability has gained attention in recent years from researchers however, the lack of a scale makes it challenging to measure (Chin et al., 2022). In order to address

contemporary trends and contextual elements (such as political and economic ones) that increasingly have the potential to jeopardize professions and the individuals who pursue them, the term sustainability has lately been introduced to careers (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Maintaining working professionals' well-being, satisfaction, productivity and employability throughout their careers has emerged as a crucial topic of concern (Talluri et al., 2022). People must be future-oriented and make sure that their career resources are continuously improved, maintained and replenished because the right fit is not static (Schweitzer er al., 2023).

The concept of sustainability is multifaceted and has many different definitions. It is most often considered from three aspects: social, economic and environmental objectives (Soubottina, 2003). In the business context this means incorporating viable economic, environmental and social growth opportunities into business strategies (Griep et al., 2023). Jabareen (2008) conceptualized sustainable development as equitable and balanced, emphasizing that for development to continue over time, it must balance the needs of various groups within the same generation and across future generations. This requires addressing the three interconnected areas mentioned previously. Thus, sustainable development focuses on fairness, ensuring equal opportunities for well-being, while also considering a broad range of goals. On one hand, sustainability refers to a process or state that can be sustained indefinitely. However, development involves altering the environment, often through significant intervention in nature and the consumption of natural resources (Jabareen, 2008). This is reflected in career sustainability by individuals trying to maintain long-term employability in changing environments. In terms of career, there are valuable resources, such as health, happiness, skills and relationships that need to be managed and preserved.

A career can be understood as a dynamic journey that unfolds over time, shaped by a series of experiences, choices and circumstances. Arthur et al. (1989) define a career as “the evolving sequence of a person’s working experience over time,” emphasizing its continuous and adaptive nature. By considering a career as the progression of work

experiences throughout one's life, one rejects the excessively restrictive limitations that have traditionally been associated with a career, such as a high degree of work commitment, professional status, rapid upward mobility or stability in an occupation (Greenhaus et al. 2010). This implies that everyone involved in work-related activities has a career.

There are several perspectives on careers as a sequence of occupations, as an accumulation of experiences, as a means of expressing oneself and as an adult development process (Newman, 2011). Organizational and managerial professionals tend to combine "career" with "work career," that is, what occurs to a person during their working life as opposed to their private life, including their friends, family, volunteer work and other pursuits (Gunz, 2023). It can be viewed that an individual has multiple careers throughout their life, depending on the work or position (Gunz, 2023). However, in this thesis, career is defined as the overall duration of work life as a single entity. This perspective highlights that careers are not static paths but rather fluid narratives influenced by individual desires, labor markets and societal changes. As individuals navigate their careers, they accumulate skills, knowledge and connections that contribute to their professional growth. Understanding careers as evolving experiences encourages individuals to adopt flexible and sustainable approaches to career planning and development.

In terms of a sustainable career, the idea centers on career-related topics and how to make choices that make it long-lasting. A sustainable career is demonstrated through the alignment between individuals' career expectations and the outcomes they achieve over time (Ruiz Castro et al., 2020). It is the range of paid and unpaid job experiences that offer ongoing development and renewal and that cross many life settings, giving people long-term meaning and wellbeing (McDonald & Hite, 2018). According to Newman (2011), sustainable careers require three essential characteristics. Firstly, they must offer opportunities for renewal, allowing individuals to take brief pauses to recharge and reenergize. Secondly, they need to be adaptable and flexible, as a significant portion of today's knowledge will likely become outdated in the near future. Both individuals and organizations must embrace continuous learning and adaptability to navigate evolving

circumstances. Lastly, sustainable careers should enable the integration of various life domains, fostering a sense of fulfillment and purpose.

Moreover, in the context of sustainable careers, sustainability refers to individuals' capacity to adapt to changing environments and effectively use available resources to achieve shared, long-term outcomes that can be sustained over time (Donald et al., 2024). As mentioned by Russo et al. (2023) modern society disrupts traditional linear career paths with the rise of the sustainable career concept. This approach unfolds across various societal domains over time, requiring individuals to actively shape their careers through their actions and interpretation of experiences. Changing socioeconomic conditions shape career development, underscoring the need to explore individual perspectives on what defines a sustainable career.

According to Hirschi et al. (2020), a big part of sustainable careers is linked to nonwork roles. Nonwork orientations are closely associated with sustainable careers as they enable individuals to exercise agency and find significance in their jobs by reflecting on the connectiveness between different life roles and their work roles. Furthermore, nonwork orientations reflect individual beliefs and preferences that guide career progression. Nonwork positions can aid in the preservation and enhancement of resources across several life domains, significantly contributing to a sustainable career that fosters long-term health, happiness, and productivity, as outlined in the career sustainability model presented by De Vos et al. (2020).

2.2.2 Career sustainability model

De Vos et al. (2020) developed a model to better understand the concept of a sustainable career. It describes and defines a sustainable career and distinguishes it from an unsustainable career. Moreover, it brings light to the concept of how to navigate careers in the context of workplace relationships, globalization and technology breakthroughs. This

career sustainability model serves as the basic framework for this thesis to understand the concept in the context of SIEs.

De Vos et al. (2020) present a career sustainability model that conceptualizes the dimensions and indicators of sustainable careers. Although the individual is the primary focus of the theoretical framework, it adopts a systemic approach to comprehend the various elements influencing career sustainability and a dynamic approach to demonstrate how changes over time affect it. Sustainable careers are defined by outcomes that benefit both the individual and their broader environment, underscoring the importance of adopting a long-term perspective. In the model, a sustainable career is defined 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, herewith providing meaning to the individual” (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015, p. 7). Career sustainability is a complicated issue that necessitates a comprehensive and dynamic approach that considers the individual, their environment and their progress over time (Van der Hejden et al., 2020).

De Vos et al. (2020) describe the sustainability career model as a dynamic, individual-focused process. An individual is the central factor in determining the sustainability of their career, with external factors considered. This approach is referred to as agency in the model. They believe that other stakeholders and contexts also influence an individual's decisions. They conceptualize their model in terms of person, time and context. All dimensions are evolving and happen simultaneously. It is how individuals and other stakeholders handle changes that may impact a career's sustainability, both internally and externally, over time. This is combined with the indicators of happiness, health and productivity. Thus, understanding sustainable careers may require more than a single moment-in-time perspective. The model is shown in Figure 1.

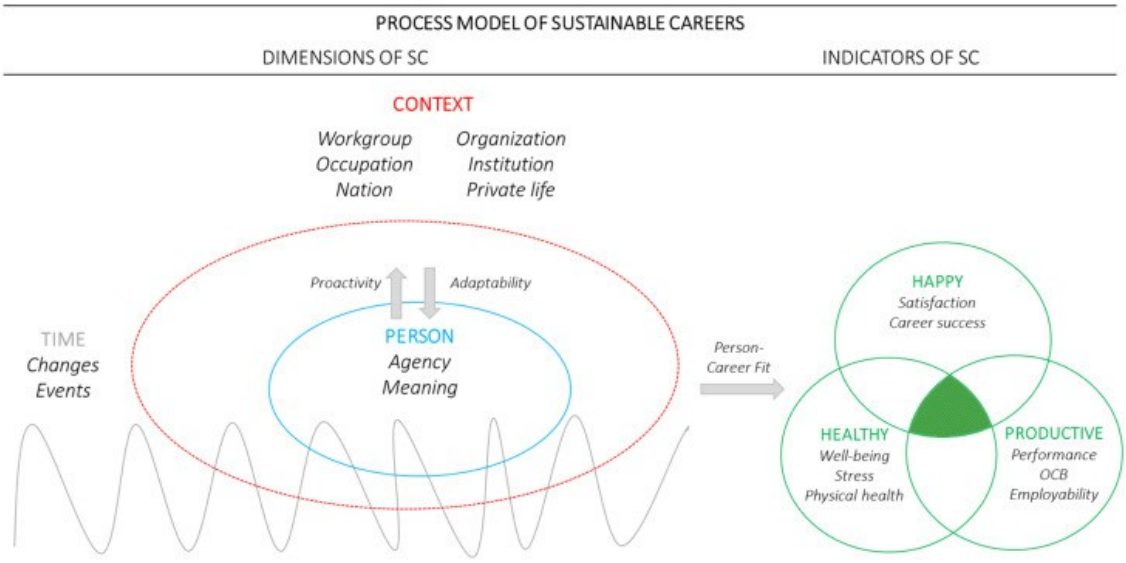

Figure 1 Career sustainability model (De Vos et al., 2020)

2.2.2.1 Health, happiness and productivity

Health, happiness and productivity are seen as indicators that indicate whether the decisions made are sustainable or not (De Vos et al., 2020). They serve as foundational elements for an individual's well-being and the better the health, happiness, and productivity, the greater the sustainability is. These are indicators of whether the career will remain long-lasting. Lack of these indicators will result in dissatisfaction in many cases and will not act as an incentive for the individual to continue in that career path.

The impact a career has on an individual's physical and mental health directly influences its sustainability (De Vos et al., 2020). Although the physical demands of jobs may not significantly affect an individual's condition in the early stages of their career, their impact could become more noticeable with age, especially if proactive measures to address these problems have not been put in place. Health is also about maintaining the energy to cope with the demands that the job asserts (De Vos et al., 2020).

Tordera et al. (2020) emphasized well-being in their research because they sought to prevent a situation in which psychosomatic health issues, such as workaholism, are linked to positive workplace welfare, i.e., job satisfaction. Because life satisfaction is

negatively correlated with healthcare use and expenses and positively correlated with health, longevity and healthy behaviours, it was incorporated into the composite well-being measure. Individuals who perceive their careers as sustainable report higher levels of psychological well-being (Chin et al., 2022). The correlation between career sustainability and psychological well-being will be influenced by the sort of worker, namely, whether they are a temporary worker or engaged in a typical employment relationship (Chin et al., 2022).

In the model, happiness is defined as subjective feelings of success or fulfillment in one's career, while also considering a broader perspective on life (De Vos et al., 2020). It is their subjective experience of satisfaction that varies from individual to individual. It often stems from the positive emotions when their personal goals and values align with their career (De Vos et al., 2020). People strive for happiness, and it is one of the main goals they pursue through their actions. Since these needs and what contribute to feelings of career success or satisfaction are likely to evolve throughout a person's career, this aspect of sustainable careers cannot be fully understood by considering only a single moment in time (De Vos et al., 2020). Individuals who recognize professional sustainability are less prone to feelings of stagnation and have more work happiness (Chin et al., 2022).

According to De Vos et al. (2020), productivity also encompasses engagement and extra-role behaviours that contribute to the sustainability of one’s career. The competencies that make someone employable and contribute to short-term productivity may not necessarily ensure success in the future or in different roles. Individuals who achieve success and receive recognition for their strong performance at a particular point in their career cannot assume that this will persist if job demands evolve. The continuous movement of individuals across various employment types, such as contract, part-time and full-time, creates a dynamic work environment that can significantly affect productivity (Gyansah & Guantai, 2018). Navigating these uncertainties requires deliberate and strategic actions to achieve success and stability in one's professional life (Gyansah & Guantai, 2018).

Productivity is often linked to performance and high employability (Hejde & Heijden, 2006). Sustainable careers look into a long-term trajectory and as job demands evolve, skills that ensure success now may not be sufficient in the future (De Vos et al., 2020). Competencies that used to support employability and strong performance can lose relevance as the world changes and technology advances (De Vos et al., 2020). Therefore, staying productive during these shifts is an indicator that the individual is transferring their strong performance across all stages of their career.

2.2.2.2 Person

The first step to achieving a sustainable career is for individuals to understand what sustainability means to them personally (Schweitzer et al., 2023). By improving their self-awareness, knowledge of their organizational and personal context and understanding of the larger labor market, individuals can better adjust to and impact their surroundings as their careers progress (De Vos et al., 2020). This self-awareness allows them to tailor their careers on an individual level, enhancing their functionality. It involves defining what productivity, happiness and health mean to them personally and being prepared to adjust to address any shortcomings (Schweitzer et al., 2023).

Sustainable careers are an active process requiring ongoing decision-making by individuals and those around them. Individuals significantly influence the sustainability of their careers by demonstrating proactivity and control. This includes aligning choices with personal interests, negotiating for promotions and pursuing additional training opportunities. Sustainability also depends on the ability to adapt and respond to career developments, such as adjusting to changes in job roles due to digitization or modifying ambitions to accommodate family responsibilities (De Vos et al., 2020). Over time, personal needs and values related to career and private life outcomes may evolve. However, they remain critical reference points for decision-making that support a strong person-career fit (De Vos et al., 2020).

Career sustainability is closely tied to an individual's professional identity and how they perceive their skills and capabilities. It involves both proactive and reactive actions by employees and employers (Van der Hejden et al., 2020). In addition to personal initiative, sustainable careers require developing long-term career resources through activities outside of work and negotiating individualized arrangements to support work-life balance (Van der Hejden et al., 2020). Career competencies and adaptability are essential components of assessing and achieving career sustainability. These attributes enable individuals to interpret their surroundings and manage them to their benefit. By focusing on their competencies and adaptability, individuals can position themselves as the central figures in shaping the sustainability of their careers, emphasizing the importance of agency and meaning in this process (De Vos et al., 2020).

2.2.2.3 Context

In addition to individuality, careers must be understood within the context in which they develop (De Vos et al., 2020). Various stakeholders within an individual's broader social environment, such as employers, colleagues and family members, play a vital role in supporting and enhancing sustainable careers throughout different stages of life (De Vos et al., 2020). The context can be either a positive or a negative influence on the sustainability of one’s career.

In the organizational context, De Vos et al. (2020) state that a strong alignment between rising job demands and supportive social systems, such as encouragement from close colleagues and direct supervisors, significantly contributes to the development of a sustainable career. In an increasingly unpredictable environment, the strategies organizations employ to manage employee careers can significantly impact their sustainability. For instance, prioritizing external hiring over internal development may limit employees' opportunities for growth and advancement. Children, parents and friends can influence an individual's career sustainability by offering support or exerting social influence on their career decisions. These organizational and family contexts are a major part of one’s career and cannot be overlooked.

Both organizations and individuals are influenced by the occupational sector and institutional context in which they operate (De Vos et al., 2020). For instance, depending on the nature of the occupation, technological advancements such as digital transformation can have a more profound impact on the sustainability of a career. Kilic and Kitapci (2024) hypothesized that, to some extent, contextual demands may serve as a motivating factor for proactive actions, despite some viewpoints that stated that increased contextual demands compromise personal health, productivity and behavioural outcomes in many living circumstances.

2.2.2.4 Time

Sustainability and career are strongly linked to the dimension of time. In general, sustainability, by its definition, requires taking time into account (Van der Hejden et al., 2020). The time dimension includes the past, the present and the future. A sustainable career perspective goes beyond a static, momentary view of individuals' work-related positions and experiences (De Vos et al., 2020). It focuses on how these positions and experiences change or remain constant over time (De Vos et al., 2020).

Schweitzer et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of time in their research. They suggest that in order to assess the current status of their careers, they consider whether their current behaviours and trajectory are sustainable and make necessary adjustments to bridge the gap between where they are now and where they would eventually like to be. Individuals who are interested in career sustainability follow a frequentative process that involves framing the past, imagining the future, and adapting in the present.

Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015) imply that continuity in time means that current requirements are met without sacrificing future requirements. Since a career is a dynamic concept, people's work, job shifts and transitions between paid employment and other statuses are all determined by a cycle of events and decisions. Sustainability being linked to time also means that periods of employment can be interspersed with periods of part-

time job, volunteering, unemployment and caregiving in the sequence of various professional experiences due to varying patterns of continuity throughout time (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Regarding the time dimension, a career is fluid (Donald et al., 2024). It involves a series of events and choices that shape the work individuals engage in, the adjustments they undertake when shifting from one position to another, whether within the same organization or across different organizations or when transitioning between paid employment and other statuses (Donald et al., 2024).

2.3 Sustainable career in the expatriation context

As discussed in the previous chapter, the concept of a sustainable career has been extensively studied and a corresponding framework has been developed. However, the sustainable careers of expatriates have received comparatively less attention, despite their significance in the context of temporary international mobility. For SIEs, achieving a sustainable career represents a desirable outcome that enhances their global work experience. Furthermore, it provides insight into the factors influencing their career sustainability and the unique challenges they face in pursuing long-term careers in foreign countries.

Sustainable career theory created by De Vos et al. (2020) emphasizes the dimensions of person, time and context. The sustainability of SIE's career is affected by these dimensions, making it important to study them from these perspectives. Additionally, health, happiness and productivity are shown in their everyday lives and give valuable insights into the sustainability of their career.

2.3.1.1 Health, happiness and productivity for SIEs

In sustainable career theory, health is seen as the physical and mental capacity to perform well even in changing environments (De Vos et al., 2020). For SIEs, this is essential

when they navigate through additional challenges, cultural adjustment and uncertainty, which can be difficult to manage mentally. Due to the nature of SIEs, they tend to have a better balance with their wellbeing and work-life balance in terms of job exhaustion because they choose to expatriate on their own and they choose their job (Mäkelä et al., 2022). Since a lighter workload can lead to more sustainable careers (Kossek & Ollier-Malaterre, 2020), SIEs who can maintain a manageable pace and preserve their well-being are more likely to sustain their health and continue performing effectively in the long term.

Especially, stress coping skills are important for SIEs. According to Wurtz (2022) expatriates have different stress coping mechanisms depending on their demographics and the expatriate type. He mentions that SIEs often draw on emotional support from their social networks to cope with challenges. Moreover, SIEs' tendency to pursue longer or multiple international assignments may stem from their effective coping mechanisms. By actively rebuilding networks and securing diverse sources of support, they often minimize isolation and loneliness, thereby enhancing their enjoyment of life abroad. This is also supported by Hussain and Deery (2025), who argue that SIEs with a collectivist mindset, rather than an individualist one, tend to make better use of support from their social networks and are less likely to react negatively when their psychological expectations at work are not met.

In addition, when SIEs handle challenging situations positively and see them as chances to learn and grow, their emotional resilience tends to strengthen (Jannesari & Sullivan, 2022). However, when they encounter obstacles that block their progress, they may need to draw on more of their personal resources to manage the stress and negative feelings, which can weaken their emotional resilience (Jannesari & Sullivan, 2022). SIEs face unique challenges during their international career, therefore, it is up to the strength of the individual whether they will stay resilient. Thus, the mental health of SIEs is heavily influenced by their personal contributions, ability to make a change and the social network they have around them.

Happiness in sustainable career theory concerns positive emotions and the satisfaction individuals experience in their careers (De Vos et al., 2020). It is also looked at from the perspective of having a meaningful career that serves their personal purpose (De Vos et al., 2020). An individual's subjective assessment of their professional growth in all individually relevant areas is referred to as career satisfaction (Heslin, 2005). Happiness among SIEs has not been widely studied and mainly the existing literature focuses on their job satisfaction.

Job satisfaction has been studied from different perspectives. Cao et al. (2014) examined SIEs' job satisfaction in relation to organizational support. In the study, they conceptualized that satisfied and well-developed SIEs accumulate valuable career capital, making them more confident to pursue new international opportunities. Chen et al. (2024) investigated the impact of cultural intelligence on SIEs' job embeddedness, which is linked to career satisfaction. However, SIEs tend to report lower job satisfaction than AEs, despite their interaction adjustment being higher (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013).

In terms of productivity, SIEs often demonstrate higher productivity than local employees, as they must establish their value and secure their position within the organization as foreign professionals. Therefore, the relationship between productivity as an indicator of a sustainable career and productivity as a driving force for the continuation of a foreign job assignment may be ambiguous, as the productivity can be seen as a cause and a consequence. For example, Erumban and Al-Mejren (2024) suggest that foreign workers exhibit higher productivity compared to their local counterparts. This is shaped by individual factors, including their career aspirations and the need to develop an international career. On the other hand, SIEs' productivity can be influenced by cultural adjustment as suggested by Maharjan et al. (2022). They explain how SIEs might become more productive at their jobs if they have not adjusted to the host country's culture.

Performance is one part of productivity and has been studied in terms of SIEs. They often possess high career adaptability that leads to better job performance (Jannesari & Sullivan, 2019). Lauring and Selmer (2013) found that SIEs perceived their performance to be higher in the private sector than in the public sector. This, however, did not affect job satisfaction, which remained the same across sectors. Well-being has a positive impact on job performance (Hamza & Farah, 2025), thus health, happiness and productivity are all interconnected and finding a balance between all of them is crucial in terms of all the internal and external factors affecting SIE's career sustainability.

2.3.1.2 Person in expatriation

Because SIEs initiate relocation themselves, they are being pushed more toward self-managed, dynamic global careers, as they cannot rely on MNCs' linear career progression models to guarantee so-called lifetime employability or to provide international skills and expertise (McNulty & Vance, 2017). This offers a challenge to sustainable career development and strongly emphasizes the individual aspect in the process. Moreover, SIEs often settle for occupations that are not a good fit for them and do not maximize the knowledge they have gained from their degrees (Chwialkowska, 2020). The lack of jobs in the job market has caused even individuals with degrees from the host nation to be shut out of job openings and forced into blue-collar labor (Chwialkowska, 2020).

Although the primary motivation for SIE often stems from a desire for adventure and an interest in exploring different cultures, career considerations remain a significant aspect of the experience. According to Doherty et al. (2013), career-related skills, abilities and experiences are vital for facilitating and supporting the expatriation process. Securing employment is frequently one of the key advantages of SIE. While career progression may not always be the primary driver for SIE, it often serves as the mechanism through which expatriates achieve their broader objectives. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge the role of career development in SIE and approach it from a sustainable perspective.

Compared to AEs, SIEs have more emphasis on individuality, considering their own impact on their careers. When AEs are tied to one company and most often one position (McNulty & Brewster, 2017), SIEs are driven by their personal initiative that can lead to better career benefits (Bharadwaj and Buchanan, 2023). SIE's intrinsic motivation can help them achieve a more sustainable career. In addition to self-awareness and knowledge of their professional identity, SIEs are aware of their skills and the goals they are trying to achieve in their careers. This will help look for better job opportunities or change employers if the position at the time seems unsustainable. Combined with extrinsic motivation (e.g., a visa or a work permit), SIEs step out of their comfort zone a lot. Based on Schweitzer et al. (2023), individuals need to stay engaged, proactive, open to learning and self-assured to build or maintain long-term career sustainability. These are qualities that SIEs generally have due to the nature of their situation.

A series of opportunities taken and then turned down leads to either linearity or non-linearity in the development of expatriate careers (McNulty & Vance, 2017). It is known that personal and relational factors influence the career decisions of expatriates (Crowley-Henry, 2012). SIEs personally affect the sustainability of their careers with the level of self-awareness and professional identity, their career competencies and adaptability and their mobility between jobs is more flexible than compared to AEs. This is because a career sustainability lens requires individuals to be self-aware, understand their career's personal significance and assess the alignment between these elements (Schweitzer et al., 2023). Expatriates with high cultural intelligence can devote more time and effort to work-related tasks and social integration, leading to improved performance outcomes (Sambasivan et al., 2017). The extent to which an expatriate successfully adapts to the host country's culture and work environment directly influences their productivity, which, in turn, is associated with the sustainability of their career abroad.

Identity is an important factor when considering the person dimension of the sustainable career theory by De Vos et al. (2020). In this context, professional identity will be described according to Fitzgerald (2020) to mean possessing the skills, knowledge, values

and self-recognition of a profession, shaped by education, social environment and interdisciplinary interactions. It evolves over time, influenced by formal training, support systems and alignment between professional ideals and real-world experiences. In general, SIEs tend to have a good sense of self, belonging and position in the world because they are more aware of things and this leads to a stronger, sustainable existence (Myers & Thorn, 2023). They are more self-assured, strong and content with who they are (Myers & Thorn, 2023). This creates an excellent foundation for a career that will keep them happy, healthy and productive.

Moulaï et al. (2022) studied SIEs' self-identity prior to relocation and according to their research, SIEs cultivate a strong drive for personal development and fulfillment, but the conflict between their own perception of their own potential and how their employers see it frequently shaped their professional identities. As part of a larger institutional and cultural context that limits their potential, SIEs may initially repress their self-concept in response to assessments by their home-country employer. However, interactions with other professionals in the same field but not affiliated with the SIEs' organization, social group or nation of origin result in significant identity alterations. By reaffirming their identification as gifted professionals and encouraging them to seek external recognition, these discussions help SIEs validate their repressed self-concept. SIEs consequently start to link their improved self-concept to prospects overseas, viewing foreign workplaces as settings where they can fully realize their potential. Their decision to expatriate is greatly influenced by this identity work, which is backed by reliable outsiders and helps them bridge the gap between their perceived promise of professional fulfillment overseas and their discontent at home.

It is well known that personal and relational factors influence expatriates' career decisions (Crowley-Henry, 2012). These factors inevitably differ from those of those who build their careers in their home country, surrounded by their own culture and social network. Additionally, biases and heuristics play a significant role in career decisions, often happening quickly and subconsciously (Lent & Brown, 2020). While these intuitive

processes make decision-making faster and require less mental effort, they can be risky as a sole guide for important life choices (Lent & Brown, 2020). In the context of expatriate career sustainability, these quick judgments may unintentionally limit an individual's range of career options, narrowing possibilities without realizing it, potentially leading to the overlooking of long-term sustainability or adaptability needed for expatriation (Lent & Brown, 2020).

According to Talluri et al. (2022)'s study, career adaptability, proactive career habits and personality and career sustainability were all found to be positively correlated. The findings demonstrated that proactive personality and proactive professional practices are indirectly related through career adaptability. Additionally, they discovered that proactive career practices have an indirect relationship between career adaptability and career durability. Professional flexibility and proactive career actions carried the influence of proactive personality on career sustainability, supporting the serial indirect effect concept. The study by Kilic and Kitapci (2024) on contextual factors for sustainable careers demonstrated that career crafting was correlated with work-family needs and resources and that proactive career actions were linked to improved employability and work engagement through a greater person-career fit. In career crafting, contextual predictors were highly correlated with career sustainability indicators, despite the lack of a significant serial indirect effect between contextual determinants and the career sustainability indicators for work-family balance and work strain.

2.3.1.3 Context in expatriation

Careers are shaped by both organizational and broader societal contexts, both of which have undergone significant transformations (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Factors such as globalization, technological advancements, shifting work dynamics and demographic trends, e.g., an aging workforce, have all contributed to these changes (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). For SIEs, these challenges include technological advancements and increasing international mobility, tightening competition in the job market, having to possibly choose between more flexible but less secure employment opportunities due

to the change in work dynamics and navigating the political changes happening in the world. Additionally, contexts such as educational level, home country and host country affect the outcome of the expatriate mission (Andresen et al., 2021, p. 1)

Reaching their full potential professionally in the host countries is a challenge for SIEs due to exclusion, limited social networks and structural barriers in the labor market. The absence of informal and personal networks makes it difficult to manage an expatriate's career (Ren et al., 2020). Individuals who experience exclusion often struggle to establish social networks with host-country nationals, instead relying primarily on interactions with fellow expatriates (Chwialkowska, 2020). Big cultural differences make it difficult to adjust to the new culture and making new connections is not easy when there is not a social circle they are part of by default, for example, an office. Making connections often leads to referrals and without referrals from host-country nationals, they may find themselves limited to blue-collar employment opportunities (Chwialkowska, 2020). Furthermore, insufficient language skills contribute to their continued exclusion, as they limit their ability to engage with host-country nationals (Chwialkowska, 2020). The study of Al Ariss and Özbilgin (2010) on Lebanese SIEs revealed that their skills, education and training alone were not enough to overcome the structural barriers limiting their full integration into the French labor market. Thus, despite possessing valuable qualifications and expertise, SIEs often remain underemployed or confined to roles that do not fully utilize their potential due to the context of their careers.

According to a study on Spanish SIE nurses in Germany by González et al. (2021) they fit the "refugee" SIE archetype because of the severe lack of employment opportunities in their native country. The host country language barrier posed a serious threat to their professional identity and self-concept, impacting social integration, workplace relationships and perceptions of competence. Due to their initial lack of competency, many nurses experienced communication anxiety, misinterpreted their skills and relied on expatriate social circles, which strengthened their cultural identity but prevented them from integrating fully into their home nation. Although complete absorption remained

challenging, over time, increased language proficiency aided in confidence and career progression. The impact of self-awareness and adaptation on the establishment of a professional identity in expatriation was demonstrated by the easier transitions experienced by those with a cultural learning mentality.

In the national context, it is evident that cultural adaptation has to be part of an expatriate's overseas assignment for it to be successful (Firth et al., 2014). However, rather than fully embracing the host country's culture or not adapting at all, the research by Ai et al. (2019) suggests that expatriates must progressively develop a hybrid identity while living abroad. This will help with cultural adaptation to the host country, easing the career process and helping keep it sustainable by not entirely giving up on traditions and the sense of home in a foreign country. The cultural adjustment is heavily country-specific. The outcome of an SIE's international assignment is powerfully shaped by how well they manage to fit into the national context (Samarsky, 2023). For example, in the study by Atay et al. (2024), Eurasian SIEs faced challenges balancing work and life, as well as engaging in social networks, due to the significant influence of Korean culture in the work environment. In comparison, SIEs in the UAE were able to adjust to the country's sociocultural environment well due to the international environment and the limited need for the local language (A. Isakovic & Forseth Whitman, 2013).

Expatriates must manage the demands of multiple roles to understand the local cultural context (Ren et al., 2020). Moreover, given the cultural context in which SIEs develop their careers, societal pressures and cultural norms can create obstacles to career progression, such as the expectation that women prioritize their partners' careers (Crowley-Henry, 2012). Women may also encounter societal expectations regarding family formation, which can lead to less emphasis on career advancement. However, expatriation might offer SIE women an opportunity to escape the cultural norms in their home countries, especially for those from Asia and Middle Eastern countries and develop their careers away from the pressure that the home country culture sets on them (Haak-Saheem, 2022).

Moving across national borders also comes with legal challenges. It is well known that laws and policies in the host country also influence expatriates' career choices and opportunities (Crowley-Henry, 2012). On a broader level, SIEs have to find the best possible way to work legally in the host country and comply with visa and residency requirements, which may restrict or expand their professional opportunities. SIEs might also face tax and salary issues when working in a host country as SIEs often have multiple residences (Andresen et al., 2013, p. 149). These legal administrative constraints can significantly shape the scope of SIEs' career possibilities, often adding a layer of complexity to their sustainable career development.

One key social contextual factor is the networks that SIEs can create before departure and during their time abroad. A study by Richardson and McKenna (2014) concluded that the development and use of connections and networks play a vital role for SIEs in several ways. Firstly, these networks enable their aspirations to work abroad, whether driven by a sense of adventure, career advancement, personal growth or the broader goal of gaining international experience. SIEs recognize the importance of maintaining strong networks abroad, as these connections are key to relocating to a specific destination and facilitating future expatriation opportunities. A study by Agbanyo et al. (2024) on African students at a Chinese university found that expatriate acculturation, including communication and social networks, positively affects career sustainability.

According to Merchant et al. (2023), at a social level, both peer acceptance and societal inclusion appear to influence SIEs' perceived happiness positively. Moreover, their findings indicate that personal influences on SIEs' happiness span financial stability, family well-being, and individual balance, highlighting that well-being is shaped by more than the individual alone. This is also supported by Bastida et al. (2023), who emphasize how interaction adjustment plays a key role in shaping expatriates' happiness, serving as a valuable resource that not only enhances their well-being but also supports greater job satisfaction. All of it is connected to the level of expatriate adjustment in the host country,

which seems to be a major factor in creating happiness among expatriates and, therefore, also provides a stronger foundation for a sustainable career.

SIE's social network is often non-traditional, and technology appears to be a valuable source of informational and instrumental support. Nevertheless, it is unclear to what degree it can still facilitate adjustment when it completely substitutes for all other forms of in-person engagement. Especially expatriate women require social interaction (Schreuders & van Aswegen, 2023). Some individuals have the privilege of having parents who are both financially and emotionally supportive, who support decisions that may be viewed as unconventional for their gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, or who encourage the exploration of a broad variety of career options (Lent & Brown, 2020). Others encounter varying degrees of social, financial or educational obstacles while pursuing potential careers abroad.

One of the major networks for SIEs is their family and it has an influence on their careers. Most SIEs are young and unmarried, without families of their own. However, they will most likely start a family at some point in their careers. A family and a partner can be strong sources of emotional support for the SIE as they navigate the challenges of expatriation. For individuals who already have a family before expatriation, family can be a motive for relocation to ensure a better future for their children (Selmer & Lauring, 2011). If the SIE's family adjusts well to the host country, it can help the SIE adapt more effectively and work more effectively (Froese, 2012). So, family can have a positive impact on career sustainability. On the other hand, family can limit the options and choices SIEs have because they cannot relocate freely. It can also be a significant reason to repatriate to the home country rather than continue a career abroad.

In the organizational context, SIEs do not always have a fixed organization they work in and they have more freedom in choosing the context they will work in (Cao et al., 2014). This benefits the sustainability of their careers, as they can have more opportunities to find a better professional fit. However, this might also cause a problem with the lack of

quality the open positions offer, thus, the career sustainability will not be as positive as hoped. Due to the lack of established ties between the employer and employee and the fact that the company is in a foreign nation, SIEs may experience a high degree of uncertainty and anxiety about their new host organization. This can hinder their ability to integrate into the organization and catch up at work (Fu et al., 2017).

Organizational support often leads to career satisfaction that can be seen as a contextual factor in SIEs' careers. Organizations can assist SIE employees by addressing their unique needs in a foreign culture and facilitating their career development. Strong career and adjustment-related perceived organizational support may help SIEs achieve their career objectives abroad and is likely to correlate positively with their career satisfaction (Cao et al., 2014).

According to the study of Cao et al. (2014), one reliable indicator of SIEs' present behaviours is their intention to remain in the host nation or move there in the future. This is strongly enhanced or weakened by the support the organization the SIE is working at is giving to the individual. SIEs' social interactions with the employing organization would improve if they felt that the organizational support they needed to handle the job and life transition in the host nation was available. In the context of sustainable careers for SIEs, Fu et al. (2017) note that organizational socialization plays a crucial role in facilitating their career sustainability and long-term success. Rather than viewing socialization purely as adjustment, it can be understood as a process through which social integration and learning speed at work contribute to broader career-related outcomes. Effective organizational socialization helps SIEs navigate workplace dynamics, acquire necessary skills and integrate into the foreign work environment, ultimately supporting their overall adjustment and professional performance. These factors are essential in ensuring that SIEs can build sustainable careers in international settings.

2.3.1.4 Time in expatriation

Time influences SIEs' expatriation experience (Andresen et al., 2021, p. 2), which can therefore be considered as a significant factor in the context of a sustainable career. Length of time in the host country, more specifically, predicted length of the assignment, is one of the primary definitional elements of SIE (Doherty et al., 2013). The main issue is the presumption that the time spent outside of one's home country will be temporary rather than permanent. Therefore, even though the person is temporarily staying outside their home country, it can be considered self-initiated (Doherty et al., 2013). Because sustainability has the underlying sense of something being long-term, SIEs must navigate their sustainable careers in a slightly different way than other traditional career takers.

Due to the nature of SIEs, a key challenge in achieving a sustainable career is the prevailing sense of temporality. Temporality is a fundamental factor shaping the boundaries of the SIE construct (Doherty et al., 2013). For example, an SIE who has resided in their host country for several years may demonstrate an intention to remain permanently. If this intention is realized, they would be reclassified as an immigrant rather than SIEs (Doherty et al., 2013). The distinction between an SIE and an immigrant, particularly in the context of sustainable career development over time, remains ambiguous. While sustainability implies longevity, a prolonged SIE experience may, in some cases, ultimately lead to immigration. However, this should not be conflated with career continuity, as sustainable career development continues beyond the international experience.

Since sustainable careers are considered evolving rather than static (De Vos et al., 2020), they require continuous adaptation, skill development in different career stages and the ability to navigate changing personal and professional circumstances which are all related to time. According to Andresen et al. (2021, p. 3), the time dimension of SIEs consists of three main factors: career success, life and career stages and adjustment. These sequences evolve over time, shaping the extent to which SIEs achieve success and adapt

to their environments. The aspects, therefore, encompass long-term development and contribute to a sustainable career trajectory.

Many SIEs experience their careers as a series of mobility cycles, often relocating to new countries multiple times rather than following a linear path that ends with repatriation. New international assignments may emerge as SIEs reassess their goals, resources, and life situations, prompting them to pursue opportunities that better support their long-term career sustainability. However, repeated mobility also introduces temporal challenges. Merchant et al. (2023) found that more extended periods spent in the same employment context can reduce subjective well-being among SIEs, suggesting that timing and duration play significant roles in maintaining career health. Similarly, the ability to relocate or repatriate at the right moment is crucial for sustaining career continuity and success, as noted by Andresen et al. (2021, p. 97). Little is known about whether multiple international assignments increase career sustainability. However, for those long-term SIEs who change host countries often, even after learning to adjust in one country, this does not mean they will automatically adjust in the new one (Selmer et al., 2025). As adjustment is a significant part of career sustainability for SIEs, this can therefore oppose another challenge to overcome.

As mentioned regarding the person dimension, adaptation is an important factor in an expatriate's career (Firth et al., 2014) and in achieving a sustainable career (De Vos et al., 2020). This includes work and cultural adaptation to the host country. It happens over time, which needs to be considered when developing a sustainable career. According to Zhu et al. (2016), the average expatriate experiences a gradual increase in work adjustment from the beginning of their cross-cultural shift until roughly the sixth month. Adjustment takes time, which is why it is important to consider in the sustainable career process and that is enhanced by the qualities of resilience and proactivity that SIE traditionally have (Myers & Thorn, 2023; Jannesari & Sullivan, 2019).

2.4 Theoretical framework for the study

To support the research, the theoretical framework is built on the literature on SIEs and sustainable careers. SIEs have been studied from multiple perspectives throughout the years. SIEs are defined as professionals who relocate to a new country for work temporarily (Doherty et al., 2013). They have been studied for example in terms of cross-cultural adjustment (Koo Moon et al., 2012; Xiang et al., 2023), cultural competence (Chen et al., 2024; Li, 2020), career development (Myers & Thorn, 2023; McNulty & Vance, 2017) and overall the career challenges they face when navigating an international career. Similarly, a sustainable career has received more attention in recent years (De Vos et al., 2020; Donald et al., 2024; Van der Heijden et al., 2020; Retkowsky et al., 2023; Ruiz Castro et al., 2020). However, the sustainability of SIEs' careers has not been studied extensively, despite SIEs being an interesting group of professionals whose careers often face unique challenges.

SIEs have been studied from perspectives that are included in sustainable careers. They tend to face challenges that require good adaptability, proactive career behaviours and self-awareness (Talluri et al., 2022; Schweitzer et al., 2023). Factors such as cultural adjustment and identity development influence the sustainability of their careers (Ai et al., 2019; Moulaï et al., 2022). Moreover, organizational and societal support, social networks and perceived inclusion strongly affect well-being and long-term employability (Merchant et al., 2023; Richardson & McKenna, 2014; Cao et al., 2014). These studies suggest that the career development of SIEs is a dynamic process influenced by agency, the context and time sequences.

Along with existing research on SIEs' career paths, this study will use De Vos et al. (2020)'s sustainable career model as the main framework. The model indicates that an individual's career sustainability is determined by person, context and time. The person dimension stems from the individual and includes the agency, competencies and values of the individual to make career decisions and maintain adaptability throughout the career. The context is viewed from different perspectives, such as the organizational

context, the national context and the legal context. They are external factors that affect one's career. The time dimension explains the dynamics of the career and its evolution. To examine these dimensions and their effects the indicators of health, happiness and productivity are studied. They reflect on how individuals are able to sustain their overall well-being, satisfaction and ability to perform well in these circumstances.

Using the theory will enable the possibility of examining SIEs' career development from a sustainability perspective. Due to the lack of research made on the topic, it will offer valuable insights to the phenomenon and help to understand SIEs even better and study sustainable careers from an interesting point of view. In conclusion, this thesis aims to contribute to the literature of sustainable career development and study this specifically from the SIE perspective. This will be done based on a qualitative study of the existing literature on SIEs and sustainable career development and on the sustainable career theory by De Vos et al. (2020).

3 Methodology

This chapter firstly introduces the research approach adopted for the study and explains its relevance to the research questions. Following this, the specific research method used will be introduced. Thirdly, the data collection and analysis processes will be described, including details about the sample of the study. Finally, the study's validity and reliability will be discussed to acknowledge the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

3.1 Research approach

Research philosophy is about the process of generating knowledge and the characteristics of that knowledge (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 101). In research, it focuses on the way that knowledge is adopted. Saunders et al. (2007, p. 102-111) list three main research philosophies. Those are epistemology, ontology and axiology. Epistemology is the study of how knowledge is created, ontology is about studying the nature of already existing knowledge and axiology is about the values of said knowledge. For this research, the most appropriate research philosophy is epistemology since new knowledge needs to be gathered to understand the sustainable careers of expatriates.

Epistemology can be drawn into two categories: subjectivist and objectivist epistemology (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 112). The subjectivist approach takes feelings and attitudes into consideration instead of just focusing on measurable objects based on human perception (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 103) The subjectivist research philosophy used in this thesis is suitable for investigating context-dependent phenomena, individual experiences and subjective meanings (Saunders et al., 2007, p.106-107). Subjectivist epistemology assumes that people interpret their experiences differently and that reality is socially produced. SIEs navigate complex and unique career paths influenced by context, time and personal factors. These experiences cannot be fully captured by numerical data or objective measures alone. Instead, knowledge about SIEs' careers emerges from their own narratives and interpretations. Interpretivist epistemology allows the research to

explore these experiences in depth, focusing on how participants perceive and make sense of their career challenges and sustainability.

Since the sustainable careers of SIEs is an understudied phenomenon there are not many hypotheses that can be made to start with. Therefore, an inductive research approach was selected for the study. Inductive research focuses on building knowledge from observations (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 118). The main aim of an inductive research approach is to let insights and patterns arise naturally from the raw data, focusing on recurring or meaningful themes without being limited by predetermined structures (Thomas, 2003). This allows the study to make new observations and look at the phenomenon from multiple perspectives.

Because both the subjectivist epistemology and an inductive approach require rich, descriptive data, this study adopts a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research enables the depth and flexibility necessary to understand sustainable careers among SIEs. Qualitative research is an approach that involves gathering narrative data directly from individuals or groups to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon under study (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Qualitative research offers flexibility, enabling the researcher to revise or adapt elements of the research design as the study progresses, particularly in response to emerging insights or shifts in the research context (Maxwell, 2008, p. 215). This will most often be the approach when the phenomenon is affected by the context and depth rather than numerical values.

A qualitative method enables a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and supports an in-depth analysis. To explore the individual experiences of the SIEs, qualitative research allows them to explain their experiences and a better understanding of each situation will be gathered. Since structuring qualitative research is fluid (Maxwell, 2008, p. 233) it allows a personalized interview that adapts to each interviewee based on their needs. Qualitative interviews also take personal background and culture more

into consideration (Creswell, 2023), which was essential in this study. Thus, it was selected as the research approach.

3.2 Research method

To gain the best possible data for the research, an explanatory method is adapted. This is, because the aim is to seek new information about the phenomenon. According to Saunders et al. (2007, p. 134), there are three ways to conduct explanatory research. Those are searching for relevant literature using secondary data, interviewing individuals from the population and having focus group interviews. For this research, the most feasible option was to interview SIEs who had undergone one or multiple expatriations.

There are different ways to conduct an interview depending on its structure and formality. The data in this research was collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews consist of a pre-made list of questions, but further questions are typically created from the discussion itself (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). This allows participants to express their experiences in their own words while ensuring consistency across interviews and allowing comparability in the analysis. The interview consisted of two or more parts, depending on the number of expatriations each interviewee had experienced. To answer the research questions in detail, interviews are an important part of the study since the questions are broad and require qualitative analysis.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

To collect data for the research, a sample needs to be identified. A sample in research is a smaller group drawn from a larger population to represent that population (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 206). Population in this context is SIEs and crafting a sample is important due to the limited size of the research, the time limit and the population being so big. There are two main sampling methods: non-probability sampling and probability sampling (Etikan & Kabiru, 2017). Non-probability sampling is not random selection and is based on judgment and availability, whereas in probability sampling, the sample is

selected randomly and every individual has an equal chance to be selected (Etikan & Kabiru, 2017). In this thesis, a non-probability sampling method was chosen because the entire population was too big to identify and could not be realistically accessed for random selection. Non-probability sampling has five sampling designs: purposive sampling, snowball sampling, quota sampling, judgmental sampling and accidental sampling (Etikan & Kabiru, 2017). For this thesis, the combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was selected. Based on Saunders et al. (2007, p. 230-232), purposive sampling allows the researcher to use their judgment in selecting the sample and is especially used when specific information is sought from the sample. Snowball sampling is used when there is difficulties in identifying people to include in the sample. In this research, rich SIE experience was sought, especially from those who had expatriated multiple times. Additionally, due to the lack of a network with SIEs, snowballing was used to identify the best-suited individuals for the sample.

The individuals selected for the interview were classified as self-initiated expatriates, having independently chosen to relocate to a new country for work. They were chosen through personal networks. In total, nine participants were included in the study. Four of them were used as a secondary source in this research, since they had previously participated in another research project that this thesis was collaborating with. Some of them had only one international assignment, while others had moved more than once. The individuals were from various backgrounds, including SIEs from Europe, Asia, Africa and North America. Most of the SIEs were currently working in Finland, a few in Canada and one in South Korea. The interviewees had different educational backgrounds and professions. All of them had a university degree, either in the field of their current job or something else. Some of the individuals also had prior international experience through, for example, studying abroad before their overseas job experience.

The sample aimed to include diversity and different standpoints among SIEs to provide a better understanding of SIEs' sustainable careers in general. Among the participants, three were males, while the rest were females. The ages ranged from 25 to 44. Some of

the SIEs were still in the beginning of their career and the rest had already established a longer career by the time of the interview. Many of them already had a family or were in a relationship. The details of the participants can be seen in table 1.

Table 1. Profiles of SIEs

Code	Nationality	Sex	Age	Profession	Host countries
ID01	Austrian	F	28	Business specialist	1 (Finland)
ID02	American	F	25	Data analyst	1 (Canada)
ID03	Canadian	F	26	Architect	1 (South Korea)
ID04	Kenyan	M	27	Aerospace engineer	2 (The UK and Finland)
ID05	Indonesian	F	44	Financial specialist	3 (Singapore, Hong Kong, Canada)
ID06	Singaporean	M	-	-	1 (Finland)
ID07	Syrian	M	-	Computer and control engineer to PhD Student	3 (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Finland)
ID08	South African	F	50	Teacher	2 (UAE, Finland)
ID09	Malaysian	F	39	Content marketing strategist	2 (Finland, Iceland)

All of the interviews were conducted in English over Microsoft Teams. They were done during the time period of December 2024 to September 2025. The timing ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour and 20 minutes, depending on the depth of the interviewees' answers and how much time they had available. The interviewees were given a brief introduction to the topic, an explanation of the research objectives and an explanation of the key terms used and how they were defined in the research. They were given the freedom to ask questions and request clarification whenever needed. The interviews were conducted freely, following the interview template created to guide the interview process.

The interview consisted of two sections. The first part was focused on the international assignments from the sustainable career development model (De Vos et al., 2020) perspective and the second one was focused on contextual factors in the assignments.

After the interviews were done, the qualitative data was analyzed. First, the data from the interviews was transcribed. Data transcription means reformulating audio/video data into written form, which can also emphasize how things were said (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 475). For this research, the Microsoft Teams automatic transcription tool was used and it was enhanced manually. In qualitative research, rather than producing statistics, it is important to categorize the data into themes. This thematic analysis approach (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) is relevant to this study because the themes in the literature are already evident and reflected in the research questions. Qualitative analysis commonly consists of understanding the language, finding patterns, comprehending the patterns and reflection (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 478). This was considered in this thesis by first reading the transcriptions multiple times to become familiar with the data. Then coding the interview by highlighting significant expressions. Afterwards, these expressions and experiences were grouped to reflect on the indicators and dimensions of sustainable career theory.

Overall, the chosen data collection and analysis methods suited the research questions and objectives of this thesis well and enabled the exploration of the subjective yet complex nature of SIEs' sustainable careers. The semi-structured interviews provided in-depth data for analysing SIEs' experiences related to sustainable careers. This chapter has outlined the methodological choices, sampling strategy, data collection process, and analytical approach used in the study, providing the foundation for the empirical findings discussed in Chapter 4. In addition, the study's validity and reliability are discussed to ensure transparency and strengthen the trustworthiness of the results.

3.4 Validity, reliability and ethical considerations

To ensure the research is accurate and makes a valuable contribution to the field of study, its validity and reliability must be evaluated. Validity in research refers to the extent to which the evidence supports the interpretation of the results for the intended use (Creswell, 2023, p. 202). The validity of this study was considered in these ways. Based on cRose et al. (2020, p. 435) validity refers to the process of ensuring the accuracy and credibility of the study's findings as evaluated by the researcher, participants, or readers. Research that demonstrates a higher level of trustworthiness is generally regarded as more impactful and capable of contributing meaningfully to the field. The data was stored in the form of audio and video to avoid misinterpretation. In the analysis, he relevant background information about the participants was shared and included whenever it made a significant contribution to the findings. The repetitiveness of the study is ensured by sharing the research questions in the appendix.

Reliability in research is referred to as the consistency of data acquired in the study by using a specific data collection tool (Creswell, 2023, p.202). The data should be shared in a way that others can understand and replicate it (Kirk et al., 1985, p.14). This emphasizes presenting the data and the results in detail. Additionally, results are presented using theoretically relevant variables, measured in ways that align with accepted theoretical frameworks (Kirk et al., 1985, p. 14). The reliability of the study was enhanced by having using the same interview template in every interview and explaining the questions and definitions to the interviewees in detail. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in English and despite it not being the native tongue of most of the interviewees, it reduced the risk of mistakes in translations that the transcription could make. Lastly, to support language revision, the AI tools ChatGPT and Grammarly were used.

To ensure ethical considerations, the purpose of the research was explained to all of the participants and their verbal consent was taken to be able to be part of this study. No one was forced to take part and the interviews were conducted based on their schedules. They were able to choose if some information was confidential and not to be used in the

study. There are no identifying details, such as company names, about the participants in this study apart from those stated in Table 1. The identities of the participants are not disclosed in this thesis, nor are they disclosed to the other participants. All data were stored and used solely for academic purposes and handled in accordance with general ethical research guidelines. With these measures, the participants' privacy and ethical considerations were ensured.

4 Findings

In this chapter, the research findings are presented. The interviews conducted provided insights into the sustainable careers of SIEs and the key factors that have influenced their decisions and contributed to the sustainability of their careers. The findings will be analyzed based on the indicators (health, happiness and productivity) as well as the dimensions of a sustainable career (person, context and time). The interviews revealed many recurring patterns that many of the SIEs had faced within their careers despite the differences in their demographics.

4.1 Sustainable career indicators

4.1.1 Health

Health is a key element of overall well-being and sustainable careers. In this context, it refers to the physical and emotional capacity that enables individuals to perform well, manage stress, stay energized and recover from challenges over time. For SIEs, maintaining good health is especially important because moving abroad brings additional pressures, such as cultural adjustment and changes in climate, food and daily routines. If health is neglected, these challenges can become harder to manage, ultimately weakening the sustainability of their career path. In the interviews, the topic of health was addressed in the following ways.

Most of the participants described their physical health in their home countries as good. Since many SIEs were young when they first moved to a new country, they reported that youth was a factor in their maintaining good health. Being younger has its benefits and growing up in their home countries, they had established a healthy lifestyle that was already there as a foundation to enter the workforce. For example, ID02's perception of her health was the following:

> *"I was definitely not satisfied with the job but I was relatively healthy, I don't think I was struggling healthwise."*

To note, all participants worked in an office job or something similar, so the work was not physical. Therefore, the work did not directly affect the interviewees' physical health, unlike physically demanding jobs.

Interestingly, physical health did not seem to be a big factor for the interviewees. Most of them were focused on other things in the interview. They reported their physical health remained pretty much the same throughout their moves. Some exceptions were ID03, who explained how her physical health was negatively affected by the work culture she experienced in South Korea. The lack of sleep and a different diet, on top of the workload she had to handle, were not ideal for her body. She mentioned that she was trying to balance it out when her work was less busy, but during the busy times, her health declined. On the other hand, ID02 reported that her health improved after she moved to Canada because the weather and environment allowed her to be more active and enjoy the outdoors. However, most of the significant health changes were on the mental side.

The primary mental health factor that was repeated in the interviews was stress and its management. Mentally, some SIEs felt that they were coping well with their health. For example, ID06 and ID08 said that, despite the rather stressful nature of their jobs in their home countries, they were still doing well mentally. They had developed a way to deal with the stress that their jobs were causing. This stress-coping mechanism was something they were able to transfer to their new jobs in the new countries as well. ID06 said it stemmed from having a fulfilling, purposeful job. He expressed that:

> *"But I feel that in Singapore, I was living and working in a way that allowed me to keep being available 24/7 at work without burning up. So, I think for me, a lot of that came from learning how to say no to things so that actually, even though I am 24/7, I am deliberately saying yes and no to things. I'm not having it force upon*

me."

On the other hand, few of the interviewees experienced stress as more of an issue that impacted their mental health. ID01 described her experience in her home country as difficult due to the stress and lack of community at the workplace. It did not support her mental well-being. ID09 said that the work culture in her home country, Malaysia, was very ambitious and high-driven, with much emphasis on career rather than one's well-being. Based on her experience, there was not much time left for self-care and well-being, especially as a young professional, one is expected to work and perform well. It is not viewed from a work-life balance perspective. She brought up one specific example where this was emphasized:

> *"We had a senior who was like trying to buff us up if we put it that way, right? And I was on the night shift, so evening shift. So I started work at 3:00 and I was going to end work at 12 and just as I was about to leave. She was like, you don't get to. I need you to stay a couple more hours to watch the news desk, because that's just the life of a journalist. And that was kind of expected of the young people at that time."*

The commonality these expatriates had who experienced a stressful environment was that they eventually made the change and chose to seek for opportunities elsewhere. Therefore, mental health was one of the reasons they chose to expatriate.

When it comes to health, organizational support seemed to be important to the interviewees. Depending on the country, organizations also offer health benefits to the employees, which acts as an initiative to maintain a healthy work-life balance. For example, ID05 explained how in Canada her job offers her health benefits that she did not have when working in Hong Kong and Singapore. Not all countries focus on this and especially younger SIEs at the beginning of their career do not often get to enjoy these benefits. Additionally, as noted in the interviews, the size of the company often determines how much effort employers put into these benefits and into their employees' well-being.

Regarding health, the work culture in the countries played a significant role in how the SIEs perceived their health. A big part of the SIEs were working in Finland at the time and felt like the overall environment supported their well-being. The work culture in Finland, based on experience, was found to enhance employees' health by allowing better work-life balance and more space and nature. Similarly, ID05 experienced a similar working style in Canada and she felt like she had time to focus on her health and well-being more with the fixed hours and support from the workplace than before.

Overall, health seemed to be an important, yet individually interpreted, indicator of career sustainability. The interviews revealed that SIEs vary significantly in how much they prioritize their physical and mental well-being. For some, health was not a significant concern and did not serve as a motivating factor for career-related changes, while for others, it became a decisive turning point. For example, ID04 mentioned how he does not pay attention to his health now or in the past because it is not important to him, whereas ID05's poor physical health acted as a clear signal to reconsider her career direction when the demands of her job as a flight attendant began to take a toll on her well-being. In contrast, mental health was more commonly mentioned and often linked to happiness, yet it was rarely the sole reason for change. Overall, the findings suggest that while health contributes to career sustainability, its perceived importance varies among individuals.

4.1.2 Happiness

In sustainable career theory, happiness is mentioned in relation to a sense of fulfillment coming from work, career satisfaction, as well as a sense of meaning or purpose that the work gives to the individual. It assesses the right fit career-wise for psychological well-being and is shown in the form of positive emotions and engagement. Moreover, it is emphasized to be a long-term phenomenon where the individual can maintain this mental state for a long period of time. For SIEs, this is especially important due to the changing environments, social and work networks and adjustment to the new country and

atmosphere. Happiness is often also the driving force for SIEs to initiate the expatriation in hopes of finding a better fit for themselves and achieving happiness within their career.

In some cases, the home country of the expatriate was a barrier to happiness. Coming from a less fortunate country, it does not necessarily offer as many good work opportunities as other countries. ID04 perceived his happiness in his home country Kenya to be limited to the opportunities he had and being aware of it affected his happiness with his career in that context. He knew he would have better opportunities elsewhere and the possibility to develop in his career would not have been as simple if he had stayed. ID09 explained that she was also aware that her home country Malaysia, did not offer the same kind of options as other countries did. Both ID04 and ID09 stated that if they had stayed in their respective home countries, starting their own business or continuing their parents' business was the only way to reach their career goals and fulfillment.

Since SIEs are most often of different ethnicities or religious groups etc. this might influence how they are treated in the host country. Feeling of belonging is part of adjustment to the country and the theme was repeated in the interviews. As an SIE ID05 described how being a foreigner in a new host country can come with challenges linked to the common idea of being a domestic helper:

> *"So because of that, there's this preconception or bias against people coming from those countries. The minute they know you come from those countries, they automatically think that you are a domestic helper which I find quite irritating."*

Especially coming from a less fortunate country to a more developed country SIEs tend to face misconceptions based on their ethnicity which can have an affect on the overall adjustment and happiness in the country.

One's happiness is individual and the interviewees also shared different kind of experiences about their happiness. Differing from those who were not happy in their home countries, ID08 had a different kind of timeline with her happiness and satisfaction with

her job and physical location. She started her career in South Africa, in her home countryand described her career as:

> *"I was very fulfilled, efficient and very happy and loved my job. My family was there so had family and lots, you know, friends and was very settled. And the career was very satisfying. "*

She could have stayed there and had a sustainable career but decided to look for work elsewhere to "extend herself" and develop herself beyond what she could experience in her comfort zone. This was a common factor with other participants as well, being young and wanting to explore the world and see what is out there. While working in the Middle East she found herself not enjoying the work due to injustices, differences in values that she was unhappy about and the atmosphere at work and especially the supervisors she did not like. Also, the realization of never becoming a local was a lot to handle. After moving to Finland, she had trouble adjusting at first because it was a big change and the language caused an obstacle to her career. Eventually, she got a job she enjoyed and was very satisfied with her life and career at the moment of the interview. She explained her journey as:

> *"I literally haven't looked back, but yeah, it wasn't. It wasn't an easy pathand it wasn't a path I. Would have chosen but kind of it was a path I ended up on and I'm very satisfied."*

In her case, happiness was not the original reason why she decided to move abroad, but later happiness became a significant factor in initiating new expatriations and ultimately settling down in Finland.

A significant source of happiness was seen to be the fulfillment that the job gives the expatriate. The motivation often stems from a purpose, which many of the interviewees mentioned as an important factor that brings them joy in their careers. ID06 expressed his view on happiness the following way:

> *"I think when it comes to happiness as well, a lot of the happiness I find in my career comes from my definition of purpose, so I think maybe unlike some other people that I know, I wouldn't say how many percentage of them my career is built around purpose."*

This was also reported as a reason why some of the participants did not feel fully satisfied in their home countries or earlier expatriations. For example, ID03 mentioned that the job she had in her home country, despite the good well-being it provided, was not making her satisfied with the career trajectory:

> *"I was really not fulfilled by what I was doing, like I was not feeling like I was helping anything or that my work really kind of changed something."*

Despite it not being the only reason, she was looking for new work opportunities overseas it had an impact to look further and find a better fit. The same situation was faced by ID02, who was not fully satisfied with her work environment in her home country. The specific company she worked for and the city she lived in were not making her happy. This made her look for a job elsewhere.

Finding happiness externally, outside of work, also became an important theme in the interviews. While the SIEs get older also their life situations also change and they tend to start valuing external sources of happiness more compared to just seeking fulfillment with their jobs. Some of the SIEs are career-focused and ambitious since they have moved to new countries. However, it is not always the case. For example, ID05 described herself not having great ambition when it comes to work. At the time of the interview, she had already started a family and had been in the workforce for multiple years so her goals in life were not career-focused anymore. She mentioned that her purpose is to build meaningful connections with people around her and focus on her spiritual journey.

In addition, social interactions play a significant role in overall happiness. Having a stable social network in the host country seemed to be crucial for multiple interviewees. ID02 mentioned how at the beginning of her expatriation, she was struggling with the feeling

of belonging and happiness due to the lack of a social network she had in the country. When asked about the struggles she faced when first moving to Canada, she said:

> *"The only thing that was difficult was not knowing anyone in this country. So it's more like social, just like establishing your own community was hard when I was starting with basically nothing."*

After living in Canada for a year she started to build this community around her which seemingly increased her happiness in the country and made her consider staying for longer. She emphasized how making closer friends made her settle in better, which is linked closely to adjustment, which is important for SIEs. Similarly, ID04 observed that when he eventually moved to Finland he learned to appreciate the Finnish friendships and having a deeper connection with people, which was one of the reasons he decided to stay in the country. He explained that:

> *"Because when I was still deciding on whether I want to stay, one of the factors I consider was okay, the thing about Finns and Finland in particular is that while it might be hard for them to open up when they do, they do form lifelong relationships and friendships. So they either you either really have them or you don't. So that's one thing I came to appreciate in that the relationships and friendships."*

The feeling of happiness to him came from having a similar understanding of interpersonal interactions as people in the host country. In addition he brought up how based on his peers' experience, this in fact has been one of the reasons they have failed to adjust to the country because their understanding of friendships and social interactions is different. But for him particularly, this contributed to the sustainability of his career development. When SIEs leave their home countries, in order to sustain their career they have to find the best fit for them personally.

4.1.3 Productivity

Productivity is when individuals engage in tasks that reflect their personal values and strengths. They tend to find their work more meaningful and motivating, which

ultimately improves the quality of their output. Sustainable career theory interprets this as a key indicator of a career, as it not only enhances job performance but also strengthens employees' dedication to their organization. This was discussed in the interviews in multiple different ways and every individual seemed to have their own understanding of what makes their work meaningful and how they keep motivated.

Lack of productivity often stems from dissatisfaction in one's job or its environment and it may make the individual consider other opportunities. However, making major career changes, especially for an SIE who depends on their job and employability in other organizations, comes with additional challenges. ID03 explained her productivity in her host country as:

> *"I was feeling like I was not evolving so much as a an architect because, we were always doing kind of the same task because we didn't have like real constructible projects. So I was a little bit like feeling like I I should be learning more and that now I could not."*

This has led her not to be fully satisfied with her situation at the time. Limited work-related stimulus can often lead to reduced motivation. When the work environment does not provide sufficient learning opportunities or meaningful challenges, it does not positively impact their career sustainability. Finding meaning in one's work is essential for both personal and professional growth. However, ID03 is in a situation where her options within the company and outside of the company are limited and she would have to downgrade her current level if she stayed in the host country or moved to a different company.

The work culture differed among the participants based on the country they were from or the country they had moved to. Those from Asian countries or working there described their working hours as long and the expectations were high. At the same time, participants working in Finland or other similar countries found their work to be chill and laid-back. The participants experienced a more laid-back environment, which actually increased their productivity. As an example, ID01 explained that in her home country

Germany, productivity was often measured based on the hours one spent on the task rather than how efficient one was. She mentioned that:

> *"It is kind of normal and expected that you stay longer at work. Because it's just not time to go home yet, even though you're already finished your work or like had enough for or had done enough for today or did everything you were supposed to do. So it was just weird to be leaving work earlier when you have work more so in the end it's not really about being efficient but more being being busy."*

She felt that this was not the right fit for her productivity-wise, because she felt that instead of being productive, it was more appreciated to just look productive. She felt the change when she moved to Finland, where the workplace had a more laid-back environment and efficiency was emphasized. She reported having better engagement with her work in Finland for this reason.

However, career-wise ID01 felt that moving to Finland slowed her progress. The possible opportunities for her as a native speaker in Germany are higher, and her career has progressed faster in her home country. Quite often, SIEs face the problem of having to move down horizontally when looking for a job in the new host country. In addition, developing a career can be a slower process because of the additional challenges SIEs have to face compared to the locals, as perceived by ID01. Often the expectations are higher than what is feasible in reality. She explained how :

> *"I'm also starting here in junior position, but I think that it takes time for me to progress here, I think would just take a longer time and I think also what I already mentioned the market here is a lot tougher than it is in Germany for an employee. So therefore I said, I think if I would have not moved to to Finland, I would have been a lot further already in my career."*

In the interview, she said that she knew to expect the job hunting to be more difficult than in Germany, but it still surprised her how difficult it was. She analysed not speaking the local language was the main reason why this was the case. She still felt that she was

being productive in this setting, but it was affected because she was not fully satisfied with her career progress.

A similar experience was shared with ID05 and ID07. ID05 had progressed in her career during her first two expatriations, where she felt productive. When moving to Canada, she faced the situation where she had to move downwards despite having managerial experience in her previous country. This mentally affected her productivity and when asked if she was happy with this career direction, she responded that she had no other choice. In the job market now, she felt that any kind of job was to be grateful for. ID07 explained how, when she moved to Finland, she also had to move downwards. Since productivity is linked with ones abilities and skills, not being able to use them to the full extent caused dissatisfaction among those SIEs who had to make compromises with their job situation when moving to a new country.

A common theme that was brought up in the interviews by the SIEs was responsibility. Many of them felt fulfillment from the responsibility they have achieved in their companies and it enhanced their productivity. Some of the expatriates felt that the responsibility came from their unique skillsets of being an expatriate. It also was noted that working hard and overcoming challenges had shaped them into confident professionals and it was seen by the employers. Gaining more responsibilities was also a reasoning to seek for opportunities abroad. For example, ID04 and ID07 expressed how they moved to Finland for better salary but also to progress in their careers and the job offer gave them more responsibilities.

Even though expatriation is often associated with gaining additional experience and can be seen as an advantage, especially for younger SIEs, they might feel like they are also missing out on specific opportunities they would have in their home countries. The sacrifice they must make does not always result in a positive outcome. This was a concern mainly for those still aiming to return to their home countries after expatriation. ID03 observed how moving to a new country so early on her career shaped her expertise a lot

to fit her host country. Her ability to adapt to the host country's way of working enabled her to stay and work there, but at the same time drifted her apart from her peers in her home country, despite having previous work experience there as well. She described it as:

> *"Actually, if I would go back to Canada. I would be behind people the same age and if I compare to my friends for example who have the same education path I would be behind, of course, because I didn't fully learn the Canadian way to do itand I've haven't had, like, kind of the same experiences. So I would have to relearn a lot of things."*

However, during her expatriation, she has gained skills that she feels like she would not have achieved if she stayed in her home country. Especially, increased confidence is essential and will also help in repatriation if she decides to move back and readjust to her home country.

Moving from a bigger country to one with fewer opportunities can also negatively affect one's career and its continuity. ID02 is originally from the US and she works in baseball and most of the industry is located in the US. Despite being satisfied with moving to Canada and enhancing her career and well-being in multiple ways, she pointed out that she still had to sacrifice on the networking opportunities she would have had in her home country. She said that :

> *"I guess the only thing I can think of is like you are removing yourself a bit from networking opportunities that could come up in the US like if some teams are close together, maybe that they like interact with each other more often at conferences or that kind of thing"*

In this case, productivity is not only determined by external factors as in having the best possible environment to work in. It is more driven by the individual's personal motivations and strengths. Prioritizing well-being over context can lead to better engagement at work and to defining one's purpose there.

4.2 Sustainable career dimensions

4.2.1 Person

The person-dimension emphasizes the role of the individual in their career. It is about their characteristics, personal values and overall the sense of agency that guides their career trajectory over time. The person dimension considers everything that comes from the person internally, their mindset, identity and their self-awareness are key aspect in determining how they will perform in different situations and environments. SIEs make individual choices about their career and take responsibility of their own development. SIEs are not tied to a particular entity, therefore, they are in control of the direction of their own career.

Individual choice is especially emphasized in the SIEs decision to move abroad. The interviewees had different reasons why they chose to initiate expatriation, but the most common themes were personal growth, financial and economic reasons and family ties. Family ties affected the choice in few different ways, some of the SIEs had family over in the host country and some had either married or were in a relationship with the host country national. Additionally, one expatriation was completed because ID05 relocated to Hong Kong due to her husband at the time getting a job there, thus it was not done solely out of her own will. Some, like ID04, ID05 and ID07 wanted to move to another country to be able to do better financially because the economic situation was not great in their home countries. The most common reason was to see what the world has to offer and to achieve personal growth by identifying opportunities in other countries. For example, ID09 described her decision to move as:

> *"I moved to Finland directly from Malaysia, but it wasn't because of a work experience, it was more for personal reason. But there was always the hunger within myself to want to move abroad and to experience the world and to see how is it like working abroad…"*

SIEs moving abroad, especially for personal fulfillment, can be beneficial for the sustainability of their careers by providing additional satisfaction and meaning. Being able to choose to relocate based on their own aspirations can strengthen their sense of agency and support a career path that remains motivating and sustainable over time.

Initiating change is a key factor of the person dimension and when considering the sustainability of one's career, it is important to initiate it when one is not satisfied with their situation. In the interviews, many of the SIEs noted how they noticed a problem or something they were not happy with and tried to change it. Especially those coming from more developed countries, expatriated to a new country for better opportunities. After gaining more experience and confidence their motive for another move was more focused on personal growth. It is a decision that stems from the individual and their needs. For example, ID07 first said the following when talking about moving initiating his first expatriation:

> *"So I would like to say I was satisfied because it's my country, but I'm not satisfied about the job conditions, including everything from starting from salary to productivity to the work culture. So yeah, I would like to say regarding the job things, I wasn't satisfied…yeah, this is why basically I choose to leave like the country"*

The reasoning was dependant on the national context and its barriers. He was looking for a better opportunity outside of his home country borders. Most importantly, he made the decision himself and contributed to the sustainability of his career because he knew that his future was limited in his home country. After moving to Saudi-Arabia and from there to the UAE to have even better access to high-quality jobs, he moved to Finland for a different reason. He wanted to switch his career to academia and getting a PhD offer from Finland shaped his plans to have a new direction. He explained his reasoning for this change as :

> *"But my idea about life is something that you need to do what you like. If you can choose your life path and it is the best thing that you can do. However, not all*

people will have this advantage like they can change their life and go from here and there."

Other interviewees also made changes in their job fields during their time as SIEs. For example, ID05 studied psychology but worked as a flight attendant, in research and as an assistant vice president in a bank. She was adjusting to the changing environment, but also choosing to pursue another career direction when she was not satisfied with her situation. Notably, ID09 had an interesting situation because she worked in different fields, but also started a business when completing her first expatriation.

SIEs also have the option to choose which country they want to relocate to. Not being dependent on an organization they have more options and can decide on the best fit for themselves. Those whose decision to move was not related to personal ties chose their host countries for multiple reasons. For example, ID03 chose to move to South Korea because, as an architect, she was fascinated by the architecture in the east that differed a lot from the Western style. ID01 was fascinated by the Nordic culture and having already had previous experience from Finland after studying there briefly in university she felt like it would be a good fit for her. On the other hand, some SIEs just reported to have gotten a good offer from the host country and therefore made the move. For instance, ID04 said that he moved to Finland because the job paid better and offered him better seniority than in the UK. ID07 ultimately moved to Finland because he got a place in the PhD program and it was something he was interested in. Mostly, the moves were made to a country that was economically better off or on par with the SIE's home country. Only ID07 mentioned that he would be open to move to a developing country to share his expertise where it is needed. However, he emphasized that the move still would have to have a meaning:

"I'm open to moving to any other places around the world to work and learn and make research, even to be honest, I'm open to moving to a more developing country. I'm not only interested to just go to developed countries and the things, everything there is organised. This world is one piece and so if you finally aim to enhance this world you should go around it and give your experience to each different place there."

Choosing the correct country for the individual is crucial for long-term satisfaction and employability. The participants mentioned how they had to calculate on the possible employability in the host country before the move. Moving to a developed country generally opened better job opportunities for them.

Choosing how to prepare for expatriation can positively support the adjustment to the country. However, only a few of the interviewees mentioned having prepared for the move. For example, ID03 said she conducted basic research on the host country and that this was why she did not experience significant culture shock after moving. Others did little preparation and just moved. ID02 explained that because she moved to a country that was culturally very similar, she did not have the need to do research. Whereas ID04 expressed his belief that the best way to understand a country and its culture is through its people. He said that his company and coworkers were helpful for him in the beginning and that was crucial for his adjustment.

Across participants, a common pattern was the desire to steer their careers toward better well-being. Older SIEs with longer international experience were generally more intentional about seeking improved work–life balance, while several younger participants were still trying to find a balance that supported both their career development and personal health. For instance, ID03, who is early in her career, described her well-being in her home country as follows:

> *“It was more like a healthy lifestyle. The schedule I had and like salary and everything was very convenient. I worked one of the the first jobs I worked was for ministry. So governmental job and then the task and everything was very not stressful. But in that context even if it's it was kind of a very unstressful environment and well paid environment. “*

After relocating to South Korea, she encountered a work culture characterized by long hours and high expectations, which led to a noticeable decline in her physical well-being through lack of sleep, energy, and exercise. Similarly, ID05 explained that during her

initial move to Singapore to work as a flight attendant, the irregular hours and insufficient sleep negatively affected her physical health and felt unsustainable. Both participants highlighted the importance of adequate sleep, which they did not get in those jobs, for maintaining productivity and overall well-being.

Personal characteristics are often important when considering an individual and their motivation. The ability to cope with challenges was linked to certain characteristics such as curiosity and self-confidence. ID07 expressed how he enjoyed working in a new environment because of his personal interest in culture and its people. He described his career satisfaction as:

> *"I am a person interested to know that the people and their culture and trying new things. So, with this people from that countries I start to do some things like sharing some sweets and dealing with different cultures. So yeah, it was a more satisfying career in that that country in many senses."*

The mix of cultures was not something he was able to experience to full extent in his home country. This was an important factor for him when thinking about expatriation and more so made a positive impact in his happiness to work abroad. SIEs also tend to naturally have characteristics that help them achieve goals and overcome obstacles along the way. ID03 described herself as a positive person and emphasized how it has made a significant difference in her way of coping with the challenges she has faced during her time as a SIE. She said that :

> *"I think also I'm very positive person, so I was always kind of like cheering myself up and trying to cheer my colleagues as well and I think they appreciate it like it's something that was appreciated to have that kind of this positivist that in the end we will still make it and it will still be okay."*

Openness to the world and being optimistic towards the challenges that SIEs especially might face seemed to be shared with a lot of the participants. Having a strong willpower to make things work no matter what helped them to achieve things.

What many SIEs have in common is the mentality they have to cope with these challenges in a way that makes them overcome them. ID05 expressed how essential it is for her to have the mindset of being able to do something if she puts her mind into it. She faces challenges as they are and finds the best solution for that in the best way possible. In her mind, having preparation will only go so far. She described her time in Hong Kong without speaking the local language as:

> *"But when I'm thrown into a new situation and I know that's where we're going, that's the way we're headed because of. That's how the situation developed, right? Then, Then I am solving the problem as it comes. So, for example, I don't speak Cantonese, so I can't even tell the taxi driver whether to turn left or turn right. So, because of that, I enroll myself to a Cantonese class. That is making me good enough to tell the taxi driver to turn left or right. So all that learning is circumstantial because there are problem that needs to be solved at that time."*

Similarly, ID07 highlighted the learning curve he has had throughout his career by the time of the interview. Instead of being prepared to every situation and having full control of the things that he faced during his time as an SIE, he learnt from the time when he faced a new situation and used this knew knowledge later on in his career. The more experiences he faced the more he improved his confidence and ability to adjust and perform in new changing environments. He stated that:

> *"I was maybe not that preparatory in the beginning of my foreign journey may be because I did not know how things work in different contexts. But later, when I got familiar into how things work internationally, next time I knew what to do. So yeah, I think I get career success and experiences by time. Similarly, when I moved here in Finland, I discovered the new things. That what you are needed to enter the job market."*

Both of the situations for ID05 and ID07 emphasized the specific characteristics that a sustainable expatriate career depends on how individuals navigate evolving circumstances and create meaning from those experiences. The ability to remain flexible, to adjust one's mindset and to learn from diverse cultural and professional contexts contributes to career success and to personal fulfillment.

Most of the interviewees described themselves as risk takers. Although many highlighted that they take calculated risks, risk-taking remains a common quality among SIEs. They are willing to leave an already established life behind to seek other opportunities elsewhere. The willingness to be out of one's comfort zone is typical for SIEs, and the innate desire to explore the world will often lead to feelings of fulfillment and personal satisfaction.

In search for the right motivation, having one's values to align with their job is essential. Sustainability is achieved when an individual feels like they are working ethically and they can stand behind the policies of the company. For example, ID08 decided to leave Saudi-Arabia, where she had moved to from South Africa, because of the injustices she felt were involved in the job environment. This did not align with her personal beliefs and despite it being favorable for her, she did not feel comfortable with it. She explained that:

> *"It didn't work for me. So yeah, I decided when I realised and I didn't like there, for example, my head of department was I think she was an Indian lady and all the other ladies in the maths department were, as I said, Middle Eastern and because I was a white woman, I got a higher salary than them all. So, there were a lot of injustices that I couldn't change, but I also felt I couldn't accept them anymore."*

Personal values also change over one's career. Many of the SIEs emphasized the valuable experience they gained from working abroad, including exposure to different cultures and people that they would not have had if they had stayed in their home countries. The learning curve that they go through also shapes their idea of what they find important. However, not all SIEs can easily seek a better opportunity that aligns with their values, because they sometimes have to prioritize other things. For example, ID05 expressed how her priority is to keep herself financially stable and in the current job market that she experienced to be unstable for her, she could not make too many demands and just accept whatever comes to her way.

In addition to finding a purpose with their job, some SIEs emphasized the importance of flexibility and its impact on overall well-being. Flexibility is something most of them achieve only later in their careers, but it also depends on the country. Those who had expatriated to Finland reported more flexibility than the others. They felt that it was an important factor to increase their satisfaction with work and life outside of work. ID01 explained that she felt freer after moving from Germany to Finland. She said:

> *"I think also to have the flexibility when it comes to remote working for example, I think it's a lot easier here and people have a lot more understanding if you need to to know work remotely or have time off. Even I would say I've never taken that, but I think if I had said that, I need to go home to my family to take care of someone, then I think no one would be like, but you can't do that."*

A similar experience was faced by ID07 when he moved to Finland. He expressed how flexibility positively impacts on his well-being. He highlighted that :

> *"The flexibility in here is great. Especially, when you have a family, when you have other duties to care about, it is not only to focus on your job and your tasks and such things, it is good for the well-being and that makes you productive as well."*

Having a rigid job environment was more linked to bad experiences among the interviewees. They expressed how having more control in their jobs led to better results. This feeling of independence and control over their job was applicable not only in the workplace but also in more general situations.

4.2.2 Context

When moving across the national borders, coming in touch with different cultures is inevitable and something SIEs have to be prepared for when planning their expatriation. If an expatriate is not willing to adjust to the host country it will have an impact on the work adaptation and therefore impact on the sustainability of their careers. Especially big moves geographically are often accompanied by cultural differences. Finding this difficult is normal and part of the adjustment process. Those who have moved around more

tend to be more aware of the changes and mentally prepared for it. As ID04 explained his mentality going for his second international move:

> *"I did not feel that there was a need to be social, of course, friendships and social connections, yes. And integrating was a big part of my goal and it's always a key aspect when moving to a new country. It makes your life a lot easier. It makes it easier to find milk. It makes it easier to, you know, navigate to places."*

Cultural adjustment is crucial when it comes to feeling happy and satisified in the host country.

Navigating the host country, especially in the beginning, can be difficult and SIEs often make the moves without an already existing support network to help with the adjustment process. For example, ID08 mentioned how moving to Finland came with challenges because of the different culture:

> *"So yeah, moving here (Finland) was probably the hardest of all of them because of the language and I found the people very closed. You know all the places I've lived, everyone's loud and outgoing and I found all the Finns very, very close and people didn't smile and... So, for me that was very difficult."*

Losing a sense of familiarity offers a challenge that the SIEs have to overcome in order to adjust in their new environment. The interviewees mentioned how everyday routines that were more or less automatic before suddenly require more effort. However, it seemed that early difficulties often became important learning experiences that shaped how the SIEs approach future challenges. These adaptive abilities can support a more sustainable career by enhancing resilience and staying employable in the long term.

Cultural adjustment is closely linked to the language barrier that SIEs have to often deal with when moving to a new country. Most of the participants reported to have struggled with the language barrier when moving to a country that does not have English as their official language. Especially those who moved to Finland experienced it being an issue. Language is an important part of culture and also adjusting one to the local social

networks and everyday life. Thus it affects the sustainability of one's career. ID08 explained how the language barrier was visible every day. She said that:

> *"Yeah, Finland, the language. Very hard. So just shopping. I'm used to living in countries where there's English. So it would have the name of the stuff you're buying. And I would be able to get the groceries because there would be an English translation or I would have said in Finland."*

When talking about employability, many of the interviewees who worked in a non English speaking country expressed their concerns regardling the language barrier. They felt that it was an obstacle for them getting more opportunities and having more options to progress. For example, ID01 emphasized not speaking the local language was affecting her in many ways. She mentioned that :

> *"But when we're looking at jobs, for example. It limits me a lot that I don't speak Finnish, but also I think just as a feeling for or that I have in in me, like if I come to a new country, I want to integrate myself and also you know be able to speak the language and I think Finnish is quite hard language, that's. something that requires a lot of effort…I think that is also that is something that would maybe influence my happinessand I would say maybe to some extent also my mental health in that sense."*

However, it was also noted in the interviews that sometimes the struggles were dependant on the job or the city that the job was located in. ID09 noted how in Finland she worked in a team that was very accommodating and internationally minded and speaking English was the norm especially when she was around. ID08 mentioned how she first struggled with the language barrier because she was living in a smaller city but once she moved to the capital city Helsinki she was more at ease with the language and felt more comfortable.

Language can also be a barrier at the workplace and prevent the SIE from showing their full skillset. Being a non-native English speaker has its cons and can make the work more challenging. ID05 experienced this when living in Hong Kong where she worked in research. Despite the work being in English and her being able to communicate and work

using the language she found that the expectations for her output were unreasonable. She described it as:

> *"It was quite stressful because the level of writing, it's almost like it's almost like the level of journalism in English that you have to write. I don't have that because but English is not my native language. Right. So that expectation is weighing very heavily on me. I end up spending way too much time on each report, trying to make it as high quality as possible. But obviously it's it's taking time more than I should have."*

This was also one of the reasons she ended up switching her career trajectory and started a new job in a financial field instead. The additional stress coming from having to meet the expectations was not making her happy and she was not satisfied with the job. However, the language being a problem and a barrier to productivity depends on the abilities an individual have and different jobs require different level of language skills. As she mentioned, she did not experience this problem anymore after switching jobs, therefore she had found a better fit for herself.

ID08 found herself in a situation after expatriation to Finland where she did not manage to get a job in the field of her expertise because the options were so limited for someone who does not speak the local language. Especially in Finland, where education is standardized, not being able to speak Finnish is an obstacle to employment in that field. She explained how she therefore had to accept jobs that did not match her skills and she was not fully satisfied with it:

> *"It was very hard and I couldn't get work because I didn't speak Finnish. I got work at the International school there and I was doing things like pouring coffee and packing the dishwasher. So, you know, you kind of had to, I had to accept some pretty menial jobs."*

The job that she landed was not the best fit for her because she was not able to use her skills and abilities productively and it was a step back for her career development. She mentioned how this would not have been the case in an English-speaking country. Additionally, she felt like she had to put in more work than her peers. Later on, when she

got to teach in bilingual schools, the situation still was not equal compared to them because they would be using the same material that was in Finnish and she had to put additional effort into translating it to have the same starting point to do her job as effectively as her peers. Language barrier can be minimized by learning the langauge before moving, however, all the SIEs said they did not do so. For most of them, moving was a fast process and there was simply no time to learn the local language of the host country.

However, a different culture is not always a negative factor in one's career. Sometimes moving to a new country and experiencing its culture can end up being better for the individual in the long run. For example, ID04 expressed how moving to Finland felt comfortable because the culture fit his personal needs and characteristics. He said that:

> *"So that (cultural adjustment) was one of the first things I ended up doing the first one, but the good thing about Finland is that the culture is not to interact too much with people. So it's pretty easy to fit in. So it kind of it was kind of much easier than in some other countries where you have to talk to people in word fitted suits. That it was really more or less perfect for someone who does not."*

He described how he did not know a lot about Finland before moving there but ended up staying not only because of the good job he had but also because it was a good fit for him culturally. ID01 also expressed to have gained enjoyment from the Nordic culture. She stated how it was also one of the main reasons she ended up pursuing a career in Finland.

> *" I think I do like the Nordic culture, if you want to maybe call it like that, I do like it a lot and I think it is for the individual, but also for the community sense a lot better. I think also now being here, it was very true...I think other than that the culture is like I feel quite comfortable in the Finnish culture, apart from the language barrier."*

Therefore, while cultural differences can be challenging, they equally provided some of the SIEs opportunities for growth. For some SIEs, such as ID04 and ID01, alignment between personal and cultural values serves as a foundation for both professional success and personal well-being, which shows that sustainability in expatriate careers can be

created not only by overcoming challenges but also through a balance with the surrounding environment.

The context of family was mentioned multiple times throughout the interviews. It was evident that family was influencing the SIEs' decisions in the past, present and in the future. Family was a reason for some of the participants to initiate expatriation in the important in coping mentally with the challenges of self-initiated expatriation. For example, ID03 expressed how her source of stress relief comes from life outside of work. She has created a life in the host country that is giving her the strength to overcome the mental overload of her work. She mentioned that:

> *"I definitely survive the mental and physical overload of my work (stress, overtime) because I have a very good, supportive and loving environment when I get home after work"*

Additionally, the family topic also caused concerns and thoughts about the SIE's future. Some of the younger participants were especially unsure about their future as expatriates, as they mentioned that being close to their families is important. Also the thought of getting serious in their relationships and starting a family seemed to be an important factor when thinking about the future. Many SIEs are single when moving and the chances that they find a partner in the host country are high. Even if initially planning to stay in the host country for only a limited time, other external factors may dictate to prolong the length. For example, ID08 moved to Finland having the thought that she will end up going back to her home country but she got pregnant and ultimately ended up staying. Whereas ID04 moved to Finland single, in his twenties and he noted the following :

> *"So it's not something that you know, you have to actively want to be someone to stay there for a long time. So I think my friends here and if I start a family here, get married, probably I'll be stuck here so that's that's a huge factor. If I if I decide if I do decide to start a family here, which is very possible and might happen sooner than I thought."*

In his mind, how and where time will pass is not related to his career because he is confident that with his skillset, he will be employed in his field in the future as well. Getting married and starting a family was seen as a future goal for all the younger SIEs. It can increase one's happiness and therefore contribute to the sustainability of their career as well.

A big challenge that SIEs have to face when planning their careers and expatriation is the legal formalities of living and working in a foreign country. However, part of sustainability is the ability to make something long-lasting and legal contextual issues contribute to the direction of the career. This challenge was faced by many of the interviewees but none of them reported that being something that prevented them from moving to or staying in a country. There are multiple ways to gain and maintain a visa and a work permit in a foreign country. Among the participants, some of them gained it originally through study permit, some of the got it by a sponsorship from the company their working for and for example, ID03 initially was on a working holiday visa that allows a young professional to travel and work in a foreign country for a temporary time. After which she switched to professional visa that was sponsored by her company. Compared to working in one's home country, SIEs have to take the work permit side of things into consideration when planning for the future. This affects the stability and comfortability of the length of an expatriation. ID02 explained her current situation and how she feels about the control she has over her career as:

> *"So, in that way, legally, no.I have less control because as of now if I got fired I couldn't stay in Canada but job wise, I would say more control, more direction, maybe not control as much as direction."*

The lack of control that SIEs are experiencing is an external factor that they have to accept. Similarly, ID03 expressed how she is dependant on her current job to stay in the country and this also affects future employability in the country becuase when looking for new job opportunities, she would have to find a company that is willing to sponsor her. This already puts her in a disadvantage compared to her peers that are citizens of

the host country. Her company went through a hard time one year and it caused her extra stress just because she was worried about her losing her job and it would mean that she would also have to leave the country. In the interview she said :

> *"That (the company's financial problems) was quite hard in this context because also Korea had kind of economic drop in the last year as well. But I mean, this can happen everywhere, I think. And but it sure that in another context as I'm expat here, I rely on my job to live here, which would not be the case in Canada."*

Similarly, ID09 explained how she was in a rush to find a new job in Finland after moving back from Iceland because she had to regain her visa to be able to live and work in the country.

The legal context can also act as an incentive for initiation the expatriation. Many dual citizens or people who have attained permanent residency to a foreign country because of their family members or partners see it as an opportunity to explore the options outside of the home country. In ID05's case, she had gotten Canada's permanent residency through her ex-husband. She had never lived in Canada but after getting to the point with her career when she was open to another international move she decided to move to expatriate to Canada in order to eventually apply to a citizenship. The permanent residency allows an individual to live and work in a country similarly to the locals. It had residential requirements, thus ID05 made the decision to move so that she would not lose this opportunity. She explained how conflicted she was about this decision but in the end decided to go for it:

> *"When I moved from Hong Kong to Canada, even though it's a conscious decision, but there's also an underlying reason, which is me wanting to keep my permanent residency, right? So in so far as it is a conscious decision that I want to keep that and as a result, of that conscious decision of wanting to keep a permanent residency, then circumstances dictate that I move to Canada right? And then because circumstances already dictated, then the consequences of that is I will lose the job that I have in Hong Kong and there is a worry for me to have to try to find a new a new company to work for as a mean to like sustain myself financially."*

The move caused concern to her, she was older and had a good job in Hong Kong at the time. However, at this point her career motivations had changed and she did not have family members in Hong Kong anymore to keep her there.

In the organizational context, the SIEs were influenced by their workplace in various ways. The SIEs received varying levels of organizational support at different phases of their expatriation. ID09 experienced her employer taking advantage of her as a foreigner by paying her less than the standard for local employees. She said that :

> *"…and it was until much later, many years later, that I spoke to my former co-worker and they were like, yeah, that was what was happening (getting underpaid). And it was the same employer. The reason I left was because I felt like I wasn't growing, and it was the same employer who wouldn't allow me to work at one point."*

Being an SIE can come with the challenges of lack of organizational support and not getting what is promised. Similarly, ID08 described her managers in UAE as :

> *"They were awful. They were very much what? They superiors told them to do so. It was. Very authoritarian and not necessarily for the better of kids. So I didn't enjoy working. I found them. They weren't teachers. I didn't enjoy my superiors at all."*

Although it was not the reason she temporarily moved back to her home country, the work environment negatively affected her happiness. On the other hand, the organization can support the SIE and appreciate their unique skill set. ID03 experienced that eventhough in the beginning of her expatriation she had to learn a lot and progress was slow, after few years the management is now fully supporting her and including her into multiple projects to help with her professional development.

Having different languages can also result in segregation at the workplace which affects one's comfort level in their environment. ID03 explained how she is the only non-native in her South Korean company and everyone else speaks Korean. Her being the only one

who does not have caused situations where she does not feel as included as she normally would. She does not necessarily feel fully equal to her Korean colleagues but to cope with this she says she thinks about it as in certain things just are not for her because she is not a local and instead she has responsibilities in the company that the locals cannot take part of. She explains it as:

> *"The office kind of adapt to me and work and speak a lot of in English. So I really need to take my own free time to study (Korean) more if I want to improve. Which is yeah, which is a little bit difficult...So of course, now it's (country specific regulations) all new and I need to kind of learn it through my colleagues and everything, so these kind of things I need to kind of compensate because I don't really, I don't know. But at the same time, because I'm not Korean, it's not really my job to do this part."*

In her case, being a foreigner among locals has its pros and cons. Despite the challenges in the beginning, she has achieved synergy with the company and her colleagues. She cannot fully interact with her colleagues comfortably because of the language barrier, but she has more responsibility when it comes to the company's international operations. Speaking English fluently in addition to being a native French speaker, the company has made improvements because of her and it makes her feel seen and it emphasizes her importance to the company, which increases her motivation.

4.2.3 Time

Expatriation is seen as a short-term decision to temporarily work overseas. From the sustainable point of view, it is a flexible concept that adjusts to the needs and desires of the expatriate. Especially SIEs are more personally in control of their time spent abroad which can end up being longer than expected. In the interviews a noticeable theme was that many of the SIEs did in fact think the expatriation was initially for a short time and they were planning to return to their home countries eventually. However, other contextual reasons shifted their timelines and they ended up staying longer than originally planned. For example, ID03 expressed how she never intended to stay in South Korea for longer than six months:

> *"So for the visa, in the end, at first I was intending to stay for six months, so like to do intern like one month….But I think those questions of long term arrived when they, after six months they suggested me to extend for like a professional visa and then to stay for however. Yeah. So those kind of long-term impact questions really came when I received the opportunity to stay."*

A similar situation was faced by other interviewees as well, where they thought that the international move and job assignment would be just temporary. In many of the earlier expatriations of the SIEs this in fact was the case. For example, ID04 first moved from Kenya to the UK and expressed how he always saw it just as a stepping stone to get experience in the industry. He knew it was not a place for him to stay in. Later he moved to Finland and the intention behind the expatriation changed. He sees it as something more permanent and while still being open to new moves he is not consistantly thinking about it.

SIEs are often characterised to be young and early in their careers. While aging their motivations and goals tend to shift. Many interviewees reported gaining confidence throughout their careers. The confidence stemmed from the challenges they had to face as SIEs, and overcoming these challenges improved their self-awareness and ability to trust in themselves. ID06 said that :

> *"So, I do have more confidence now. That my mobility is good. It's transferable. It's portable and it can be found interesting "*

Getting older also means different kind of priorities and responsibilities. In the beginning of their expatriation, the priorities are often focused on personal wellbeing and a successful career. In the interviews future plans such as getting married and starting a family became topics that were influencing the SIEs decisions in the past as well as in the future.

There were differences in the time conception of the SIEs. While some did not plan their life too much in advance, some had clear plans for the future that reflected on time. ID04 mentioned that he has a clear 5 year plan for the future and this is not tied to him identifying as a SIE. He expressed how the plan fundamentally stays the same regardless of his physical location :

> *"I do operate operate like a government. So I have a 30 year plan split into five year plans split into year plans split in quarters. So that never changes. The plan never changes. The thinking that changes is how we get there, but that fundamentally does not change."*

Viewing future plans personally is an essential context for the personal adjustment for in the new country as well as in the career trajectory. While a firm plan can limit certain individuals to achieve further happiness and new experiences, some find it important for their personal and professional growth. ID05 had a different kind of approach to her future as an SIE. She defined how she takes the opportunities and situations as they are and work for the best approach in the moment :

> *"I don't have preparation. I don't do like a 2 year plan or a five year plan. I don't have that right. But when I'm thrown into a new situation and I know that's where we're going, that's the way we're headed because of. That's how the situation developed"*

Time as a concept is much more blurred to her and it also reflects on her career goals. These two types of examples show how SIEs also differ in their time orientation and career planning, which furthermore shapes their perceptions of career sustainability. Some expatriates trust in long-term goals which provide stability, while being a SIE staying in the moment mindset can also lead to long-term sustainable solutions because adapting to changing circumstances and opportunities is essential when stepping out of ones comfort zone in hopes of better satisfaction.

Time moves in sequences and individuals experience it in phases. Working at a job that is not beneficial for career growth could be considered a waste of time. Expatriates tend

to sacrifice a lot when they pursue an international move and job assignment. This can lead to the feelings of disappointment and failure as they might perceive the time wasted. However, many of the participants viewed it from the perspective of learning something. The time they spent on those earlier assignments was not a waste of time but instead it offered important learning lessons and opened their vision of the world and its people. ID08 described her time in UAE as :

> *"Well, in Middle East, I literally just worked to make money. The focus wasn't a future career or climbing a ladder or anything. It was just a job and I focused on the other aspects of living in that mixed society because it was a very mixed society. Lots of expats, lots of different cultures. It was an amazing cultural hotspot. So for me that was a very interesting learning curve and I was in terms of actual teaching I had taught…so I learnt a lot from that which was quite fulfilling and interesting."*

The journey for a sustainable career is not necessarily linear and it often involves multiple steps. ID08 felt that her time in the UAE was important to her further career as well and it prepared her for the adaptation in Finland as well where she ended up staying. ID09's experience differed in a way that she moved to Finland, studied and worked there for few years and eventually moved to Iceland. After 3 and a half years living in Iceland she moved back to Finland. This had multiple reasons but one of the reasons she expressed to be :

> *"So that's when I realized that, um, I enjoy the working culture in Iceland, where people are very ambitious, they're very driven, but it is not good for my mental health, I need the balance or that drive and also at the same time being able to have the calmness and the strength in planning of the Finns."*

Already having the experince of working in Finland made her realize that ultimately it was a better fit for her. Moving backwards is common shared experience with expatriates but in her case it was the key to move towards a sustainble career.

Being an SIE the time spent for each expatriation is not limited to a certain time frame which is why the ending of it might be blurred. Multiple of the interviewees mentioned that when considering new moves at the time of the interview, the most common

answer was to repatriate instead of starting over in a new country again. For example, ID03 mentioned how the expatriation process has been challenging and she would not want to do it again. She would consider moving back to Canada, to her home country, if it was a smart move for her career and if his partner moved with him. ID01 also expressed that she has no ambition to initiate expatriation to another country anymore and would just be open to move back to Austria. However, she emphasized that at that point it was not anymore her individual choice. Especially, those who had moved to far away from their home countries were battling with this thought more.

Time conception especially among the younger SIEs are heavily affected on their plans of having a family and the idea of settling down. Not only does it sometimes affect the reason to initiate expatriation, like for example ID09 decided to move to Finland because her partner at the time was from there, but it also affects the length of the mission. ID03 mentioned how her future plans are affected by the concern that her current job is not suitable for having kids. She explained it as :

> *"I know that maybe a small office is not necessarily sustainable in the long term if I want a family etc. It's known also it looks like it's known that if you want a family, or if you want like actually when you get older, you never stay work in small offices and you're usually going to bigger ones. You lose a little bit of that creativity and I think I would be less happy, of course, of what I do. But I would have a better worklife balance. For now, I don't know."*

Future plans differed among the SIEs. Those who were professionals in a more technological field, such as engineering and artificial intelligence, felt that their future employability was secured. They were confident in their skills and expressed how they know their value to the possible employers. Additionally, working on a field with not many physical requirements it opens more possibilities for the SIE in terms of geographical location. ID06 mentioned how working in blockchain allows him to live in a country and work in another one. On the other hand, ID04 explained that his job being an aerospace engineer is dependent on the location and if he had a chance to work remotely, he would consider his options from a different angle. On the opposite end,

future plans did also create concern for some. For example, ID05 explained how she experiences the job market to be very unstable at the moment and based on her experience during her career it will not be easy to maintain a sustainable career. She is not sure how long her current job will last and she is not sure what kind of opportunities she will get in the future. This forces her to not specialize too much on her career and keep flexibility to adjust to the changing situations.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the thesis summary and recommendations for further research are presented. In the summary, the analysis of the findings is explained through the indicators and dimensions of sustainable career theory. The recommendations for future research discuss certain limitations of the study and offer additional perspectives for studying the phenomenon.

4.3 Summary

This study aimed to study sustainable career and study it from the perspective of self-initiated expatriates. It sought to understand how career sustainability is affected by self-initiated expatriation and in what way contextual, personal and time factors influence it. The objectives of the study were to understand the challenges SIEs face during their careers and how they overcome them. To answer the research questions, a qualitative research design was used and the findings were analyzed along with the main theoretical framework used in the study by De Vos et al. (2020). The thesis made key findings that contributed to the limited research done about the sustainable careers of SIEs. It showed that self-initiated expatriation significantly affects career sustainability from multiple perspectives.

Firstly, health was studied as an indicator of career sustainability. The results were different when it came to physical and mental health. Especially, physical health was not emphasized by the participants and it was not something they were consciously thinking about. While the intention to improve physical health did not become a driving force for SIEs to move to a new country, it was still a factor in their satisfaction in the host countries, leading them to stay for a more extended period of time. It was clear that different countries and careers led to varying health concerns, which in turn impacted their careers. However, physical health was not something that the SIEs prioritized over other factors.

Mental health and especially stress, was a significant factor in the SIEs' perception of their well-being and something that redirected their career trajectories. SIEs have to face challenges that their peers staying in the home country might not come across and this can lead to additional stress. Worrying about the job security, the additional workload that is due to a language barrier and adjustment to the new national and organizational culture can keep the stress level high and affect the mental health of the individual. The participants reported dissatisfaction due to the level of stress they had and this made them seek other opportunities. This finding aligns with Wurtz (2022) in understanding the effective stress-coping mechanisms SIEs have and what drives them to expatriate again. However, the uncertainty about the foreign environment sometimes limited the linear sustainable career development that led to better outcomes.

To contribute to their mental health, SIEs made proactive decisions to make a difference. According to Schweitzer et al. (2023), individuals need to stay proactive to enhance their career sustainability. The realization that their job circumstances harm their mental health made them change the context. Due to the nature of SIEs, whose job opportunities are borderless, these opportunities were mostly sought in other countries. Because SIEs are not tied to a single context, especially early in their careers, they can make decisions effortlessly. This shows how self-initiated expatriation positively affects career sustainability because it was a driving force for the participants to seek for a better fit for themselves.

Happiness was then studied to understand the satisfaction the SIEs had with their situation and career moves. In the existing literature, happiness is mostly researched from job satisfaction point of view (e.g. Cao et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2024). In this thesis, happiness was examined in both work and non-work contexts. Most participants reported that their subjective happiness had either grown or remained the same after their expatriation experiences. It was a linear concept that kept increasing. In situations where happiness decreased, the SIEs either relied on their resilience to eventually increase

happiness or, if that was not possible, switched their environment. Happiness in work and nonwork contexts did not always align, leading to contradictory results.

One major factor affecting SIEs' happiness was the career direction during the moves. Those who reported being happier once moving to a new country, found a good job and the movement was upwards. They managed to progress their careers while moving to a new country. However, career-wise, moving to a new country tends to force the SIEs to shift downwards in their careers at least in the beginning. This will negatively affect their career happiness and satisfaction. The feeling of missing out on career opportunities they would have had in their home country was a challenge for some participants. Therefore, happiness did not always increase when moving to another country.

Having career progression in multiple countries also lead to better feeling of competence and learning how valuable the SIEs skillset is. Some of the participants were from highly appreciated fields and their skills were needed in many parts of the world. They expressed how they had multiple opportunities beyond the country borders and moving to different countries had shown them how valuable their skills are and how they are competent to perform well in different environments. Similar to the study by Maharjan et al. (2022), some participants focused primarily on their careers and jobs in the host country, demonstrating higher productivity by placing less emphasis on the context they were in. However, since some of the participants reported the opposite and losing career progression, this is not always the case. Self-initiated expatriation, according to this study, will increase productivity for those who have already developed a strong skill set and have made greater career progression in their home countries.

The sustainability of SIEs' careers was also examined through the dimensions of person, context and time. Those affected by career decisions in various ways, and the study revealed the importance of self-direction, the correct organizational and national fit, and the significance of time sequences in one’s career. The “person” dimension was emphasized throughout the study. It was shown how the individual, their characteristics, their

own decisions and expectations shaped the SIEs' careers mostly. Compared to AEs, SIEs do not rely on MNCs for lifetime employability (McNulty & Vance, 2017), the importance of the individual is emphasized. The personal initiative and proactive decisions of the individual have been emphasized in the literature (Bharadwaj & Buchanan, 2023; Schweitzer et al., 2023; Talluri et al., 2022). The agency approach to sustainable careers was reflected in SIEs through their proactive decision to pursue international opportunities, manage their career development and actively shape their career paths in response in the changing environments.

One major result of the study was that self-initiated expatriation can significantly enhance career sustainability by creating a stronger sense of purpose and direction. Many SIEs reported that identifying their personal and professional purpose during their international experiences became a key factor in maintaining long-term career satisfaction and resilience. While their environments and circumstances changed, their underlying career goals provided a sense of continuity and motivation. This clarity of purpose enabled them to adapt to new cultural and professional settings more effectively, turning challenges into opportunities for growth. Consequently, self-initiated expatriation supported the sustainability of their careers by reinforcing persistence and meaningful engagement with their work over time.

The ability to choose where to relocate and which job opportunities to pursue was a significant factor in the sustainability of SIE’s careers. As Lent and Brown (2020) found, heuristics affect expatriates' decision-making. They mentioned how it can narrow their possibilities without realizing it and having a negative impact on sustainability. However, in this study, participants' decision-making led them to new experiences perceived as good learning opportunities, even if they did not directly help their career progression. Despite various reasons for initiating expatriation, they all reported that it increased their confidence. Having greater confidence not only helps them adjust to new countries and cultures but it also transfers to their professional lives and to the confidence in their skills and ability to perform well in foreign environments. Self-confidence was among the

main things the SIEs reported their expatriation had positively impacted their careers. Based on their experience, they knew they could overcome challenges at work and in their personal lives.

SIEs have a strong sense of individuality which was important to learning new skills to adapt to the host country. The participants were consciously absorbing information from their surroundings and identifying the skills that would be beneficial to them. Stepping out of one's regular environment tends to offer more possibilities to learn and develop oneself. This was especially needed when facing a language barrier and a cultural barrier at work.

SIEs have characteristics and personal traits that make them more likely to succeed in their careers. For example, cultural intelligence that has been emphasized in the literature (Sambasivan et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2006) is often associated with SIEs. This was noted in the results of the study, how the participants demonstrated cultural intelligence in their everyday situations. The study found out how many SIEs share similar views of the world and they utilize their skills and qualities in a similar way to help them cope with the challenges. The willingness to explore something new when dissatisfied is a factor that will lead them towards a sustainable career. SIEs step out of their comfort zone and are not afraid to try something new that is not guaranteed to succeed. The SIEs demonstrated high confidence in their careers as well as in their personal life. This is in line with the study of Myers and Thorn (2023) about how SIEs are more aware of this due to their experience and therefore have a good sense of their position in this world, which leads to a stronger, sustainable existence. They showed a lot of resilience, continuing their careers in a foreign environment and making it work despite the barriers they faced.

Context was seen to have both positive and limiting factors for SIEs in achieving a sustainable career. Context has been seen as an important factor in expatriation affecting its success (Andresen et al., 2021, p.1). As mentioned earlier, SIEs tended to change their

context when health and happiness were not doing well. Finding the right fit within the context was emphasized, especially for participants who had moved multiple times. This is supported by the study of Kilic and Kitapci (2024) which showed that contextual factors shape sustainable careers by linking career crafting to improved employability, work engagement and overall person–career fit. The national and organizational context caused challenges and the legal context negatively affected the sustainability. The labor markets caused concern, but social networks increased the feeling of SIE finding the correct fit for them.

Culture, and especially language, seemed as a limiting factor for SIEs at first. However, most participants overcame this challenge after living in the host countries for a longer period. Cultural adjustment of SIEs has been studied vastly in the past (Xiang et al., 2023; Koo Moon et al., 2012). This thesis supports the understanding and importance of cultural adjustment as a positive factor for SIEs to sustain their careers. In general, adapting to the host country culture depended on the culture and the preference of the SIE. This is reflected in the resilience of SIEs and in their strong minds, which do not give up immediately. Some participants found the new culture a better fit and reported it had a positive impact on their other careers. In the end, the new national context was perceived as making a positive impact on their careers.

The social and family context was influencing the SIEs career sustainability in a mostly positive way. In the literature, social interaction is an important part of the SIEs perceived happiness in their host countries (Agbanyo et al., 2024; Bastida et al., 2023; Merchant et al., 2023). SIEs find comfort in their social networks (e.g. friends, church, co-workers) and it helps them with adjustment to the country but also feeling of belonging and ability to see their future in the country, which reflects to the longevity of sustainable careers. This study supports the acknowledged impact of social network to the happiness of the SIEs. Additionally, family was a factor that impacted the SIEs' careers in few different ways. Family and partners offered the SIEs important emotional support in the hardships they faced which increased their resilience. On the other hand, family became a deciding

factor for some to either stay in the host country or move to a new one. Additionally, family was something that especially the younger SIEs were thinking about considering their future and viable options. Therefore, it is evident that the family context has a major impact on SIEs career sustainability.

In comparison to their peers, who stay in the home country, SIEs often face legal problems to be able to work in a country where they want to pursue a career in (Crowley-Henry, 2012). Visa and work permit-related issues were seen to limit the opportunities available to participants. Moreover, they sometimes led them to make rushed decisions to just stay in the country. The legal factors, therefore, affect one's career trajectory negatively because it limit the options and cause additional concern about the circumstances. From a sustainable career perspective, self-initiated expatriation presents unique challenges that are worth considering when planning one's career steps.

In the organizational context, organizational support is also important to the SIE's career (Cao et al., 2014). Especially, the lack of support seemed to have a negative influence on the sustainability of the SIEs careers. Those who received good support were able to take advantage of it and see future opportunities for progression within the company. Despite the national context being emphasized a lot with SIEs, it is important to understand that the organizational fit is also significant for their careers. Additionally, the social support from coworkers that the SIEs received was perceived positively and helped them to adjust to the organization and stay productive. This finding aligns with the study of Fu et al. (2017) about organizational socialization. The organizational culture was a factor that made the SIEs satisfied and willing to have long-term plans in that context.

The time dimension was difficult to define for SIEs. De Vos et al. (2020) describe sustainability as tied to time, especially emphasizing longevity in one's career. Maintaining a long-lasting career is key in achieving a sustainable career. For SIEs, their career decisions often move in sequences and the concept of time has to be reconsidered in their terms. Depending on the state of their careers when they first initiated expatriation, the

participants experienced linear and nonlinear progression. However, they evolved during the time they spent in each country and gained a unique skillset and characteristics that gave them the possibility to shape their careers to a more sustained outlook. In the end, sustainability is described as something dynamic which is an important part of self-initiated expatriation. The three career stages of a sustainable career, according to Andresen et al. (2021, p. 3), were also identified in this study. Career success came in phases for the SIEs and they explored them throughout their moves. The life and career stages was demonstrated through their personal development and family in non-work context. Lastly, adjustment was experienced in multiple ways. For SIEs, these stages happen to change when initiating a new move and it comes with adjustment not only to the new career stage but also to the national and organizational context. Therefore, it is emphasized how person, context and time dimensions are intertwined. Understanding it is essential for understanding how SIEs navigate and sustain their careers.

Time can be outlined to pass in sequences (De Vos et al., 2020) and for SIEs, these phases are distinguished by the context. In the study, SIEs tended to change the context when they felt like their time in that country was over. They had gained the professional experience that they needed, they had undergone the adjustment process to the culture and they did not see a future anymore in that context. As Merchant et al. (2023) discovered, SIE's well-being tends to be decreased over an extended period in the same employment context. However, based on the findings, the SIEs did not report decreasing well-being directly linked to the time they spent in each country, therefore, it cannot fully be supported by this study. Ultimately, some of them found themselves in a context where they could see settling in. This is a key aspect of sustainability and finding the individual's best fit in terms of all the indicators and dimensions of sustainable career theory. In comparison to their peers, SIEs are in a good position to aim for finding this fit because they are not limiting themselves to just finding the best organizational fit and they are not limited by one context.

Having gone through one expatriation, the ability for renewability increases. Renewal is a recognized factor in offering well-being and happiness to individuals (McDonald & Hite, 2018). Those who had moved multiple times during their careers learn how to cope with obstacles better. Moving to a new country is always a new situation and something that SIEs will always have to adjust to during different career moves. However, resilience and adaptability are key qualities that SIEs have and those are also key competencies for maintaining a sustainable career. It was found that those are developed the more moves the individual goes through. On the other hand, certain individuals have characteristics that help them adjust and stay resilient even without prior experience on expatriation.

Overall, career sustainability was affected positively by self-initiated expatriation. Many of the participants expressed their gratitude towards the challenges they had faced during their international careers and reported it had affected the sustainability of their careers positively. When individuals learn how to overcome challenges, gain confidence and resilience and have strong personal characteristics to help them with the journey, their careers become dynamic, adaptable and long-lasting. Compared to their peers SIEs career options are borderless due to their willingness to move to a different country and seek for opportunities there. This allows them to explore the better fit for them from a wider spectrum which ultimately gives them a better chance of sustaining their career as they wish. The contextual factors were both limiting and supporting of sustainability, and especially the national context was important to the SIEs, which was also the one they sought to change when the level of sustainable career indicators was decreasing. The time factor was mostly affecting the careers of SIEs by the sequences they went through because of the moves they initiated. The long-term idea about sustainability was reflected in their careers by the resilience they demonstrated go through these sequences and manage to sustain their careers. Together, these factors illustrate how SIEs actively shape and sustain their careers over time, turning challenges into long-term strengths that support their career sustainability.

4.4 Recommendations for future research

While this thesis advances understanding of the sustainable careers of SIEs, its limitations highlight additional factors that should be considered in future research. Most importantly, when it comes to sustainability, the idea of longevity should be include. Therefore having a longitudinal study about the topic should be conducted to understand the career sequences that SIEs go through better. Since the data in this thesis was collected only at a singular point of time this could not be achieved. Additionally, future studies should adopt designs that capture the temporal and contextual shifts that shape SIEs' career trajectories, as these dynamics cannot be fully understood through cross-sectional data. Longitudinal approaches would also make it possible to investigate how career sustainability evolves in response to changing personal circumstances, labor market conditions, and organizational environments. Furthermore, a larger sample of SIEs who have expatriated multiple times can provide more valuable insights into the topic.

To include more perspectives to the research, AEs could be included in the comparison with SIEs and research into whether the type of expatriate makes a difference. Due to the different characteristics AEs and SIEs have, this could help understand SIEs even better. Additionally, an interesting approach for a future research would be the difficulty of having many options. SIEs agency was highlighted in this study as well as in the previous literature, but the downside of having the choice for yourself has not been researched in terms of sustainable careers. Examining how SIEs handle the pressure of a free choice may highlight significant differences in their decision-making processes and identify possible pressures that could impede the long-term success of their careers. By recognizing that freedom of choice can also introduce ambiguity and the potential of unsustained career trajectories, such an analysis would supplement current understandings of agency.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview layout

1. **Background questions**

Demographic details: Age, Nationality, Gender, Level of education, Family details

Details about mobility: Countries, years of working, direction of movement (horizontal or vertical)

A. **First expatriation** (In the home context before the first move)

- Experienced level of career sustainability: 3 indicator areas
  - Were you happy, healthy and productive in your career you had in your own country?
  - What were the explanatory factors (key issues that lead to your decision to move abroad)
  - To what extent such experience in these three elements influence your decision to work abroad?

B. **Sustainable career abroad** (1st Assignment)

- What is the level of career sustainability in this new context?
  - In what specific ways?
    - Health:
      - How is your physical health?
      - Level of stress?
      - What is your overall job/career wellbeing?
    - Happiness:
      - Are you satisfied with your job/career in this new context?
      - What do you think about your overall career success?

- Productivity:
  - Do you think you are performing well in your job?
    - Have you adequately completed assigned duties during this movement? (performance)
    - Do you feel that you are able to (is it easy or difficult) get new job positions inside or outside the organizations? (perceived employability).
- What were the explanatory factors (key issues that lead to your decision to move abroad)
- At what point of time/why did you start to plan a new (2nd) expatriation?
- In which areas of HHP were you looking for a better fit?

D) Future plans

- Interests toward new moves (a comparison with the old self)
- Any challenges or limitations as a SIE in reaching the career potential? If so, what are those?
- Future ability to be employed (employability) as a SIE?

Article two:

1. How did you use career adaptability to reach career sustainability during your global career? – Starts with this open question and then proceed into the specific areas.

A. **Concern:**

- Were you actively involved in seeking opportunities abroad?
- How did you prepare for your moves abroad (for example: did a research about the context?)
- How did you aim to improve your awareness about the future possibilities/difficulties of the new context before initiating your move/s abroad?

- How much were you thinking about the long-term career consequences of your expatriation?
- Overall, if you compare your situation of domestic career setting, do you see any difference in this 'concern' factor in the expatriation context? (have you been more or less concerned)

B. **Control:**

- How do you improve your skills to match the changing demands of the new career context?
- Was it initially hard for you to cope with the challenges in the expatriation?
- How did you try to emotionally cope those challenges? (keep yourselves continuously motivated)
- What actions did you take/how actively did you stay consistent/focused on your career goals, even in unfamiliar or challenging expatriation situations?
- Overall, if you compare your situation of domestic career setting, do you see any difference in this 'control' factor in the expatriation context? (have you been more or less controlling)

C. **Curiosity:**

- When considering a new move, what kind of opportunities were you looking for improving/changing yourself?
- Do you consider yourself as a risk taker or do you avoid risk when taking such career related decisions/moves?
- How active are you when thinking about future career possibilities (career dreams) during your global career?

- Overall, if you compare your situation of domestic career setting, do you see any difference in this 'curiosity' factor in the expatriation context? (have you been more or less curious)

D. **Confidence:**

- Were you persistent (courageous) in your aims to succeed abroad?
- Do you think that you had the ability/capacity to do the job successfully in the new environment, and why?
- How did you try to keep up your self-confidence in difficult situations you faced during expatriation?
- What did you do to improve your skills and knowledge to stay confident and cope with the challenges in expatriation? (continuous learning, activeness)
- Overall, if you compare your situation of domestic career setting, do you see any difference in this 'confidence' factor in the expatriation context? (have you been more or less confidence)

2. How these actions related with career sustainability

- How have the four areas of expertise mentioned above impacted your global career overall, considering the three indicators?