What goes around comes around. Exploring how skilled migrant founder–managers of SMEs recruit and retain international talent

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Abstract

Purpose – This micro-level study unpacks the recruitment and retention of international professionals to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The study highlights the influence of the founders' international experience when applying organisational-level (meso) policies and practices. With their insider experience as skilled migrants, we share how the founders in each of the SMEs mobilised career capital into human resource management (HRM) strategies.

Design/methodology/approach – Combining literature on SMEs and skilled migrants' careers, we draw upon intelligent career theory to illuminate the recruitment and retention of self-initiated expatriates and skilled migrants in SMEs. With three SME case studies as samples–one micro, one small and one medium-sized organisation in Ireland–we consider the influence of the founders' international experience in the design and application of formal and informal HRM strategies (at the organisational level) that are operationalised to recruit and retain international talent to/in these organisations.

Findings – The HRM practices in the three SME cases in this paper, each run by migrant founders, vary from formalised (for our medium-sized organisation), semi-formalised (for our small-sized organisation) to ad hoc and tailor-made (for our micro-sized organisation). These particular SMEs were often more receptive to hiring other migrants. The important role of the three SME case studies' skilled migrant founders and their own international career experiences was apparent in the particular HRM approaches they adopted. The relevance of intelligent career theory when applying micro-level findings at the meso-organisational level is shown.

Originality/value – The paper presents how the international experience of founder–managers, in turn, impacts on the HRM practices and policies that are implemented to recruit and retain international employees. The study highlights how both organisation size and founder-manager international experience influence the degree of customisation of HRM practices and policies in SMEs, specifically pertaining to the recruitment and retention of self-initiated expatriates and skilled migrant employees. The heterogeneity within the sub-categories encompassed under the umbrella label of SME is emphasised; validating our case study approach, where nuance and detail of the specific organisation can be shared.

Keywords SME, Skilled migrants, Self-initiated expatriates, HRM, Intelligent career theory, Career capital, Recruitment, Retention

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

While academic publications on the human resource management (HRM) practices of SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) remain limited (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2021), academic research and discussions pertaining to skilled migrants' careers has been increasing (Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2018). Despite the discrepancy in academic interest, at the macro-/policy-level, the importance of both the SME sector (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2021; Lorenz and

Potter, 2019) and internationally mobile professionals (Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2018) to national economies is without question. Internationally mobile professionals are a valuable source of human resources at both the macro- and meso-(organisational) levels (Al Ariss and Syed, 2011; Cerdin and Brewster, 2014), bridging skills gaps in countries and organisations (Kerr *et al.*, 2016; Vaiman *et al.*, 2015). Global mobility contributes to the growth of international trade/business networks (Docquier and Lodigiani, 2010), while leading to increased innovation (Agrawal *et al.*, 2011; Foley and Kerr, 2013; Bosetti *et al.*, 2015) and transnational entrepreneurship (Stoyanov *et al.*, 2018). The importance of SMEs to local and national economies is equally substantial (Lorenz and Potter, 2019).

Our focus draws together literature and research on both subjects. The aim of this paper is to explore the recruitment and retention of skilled migrants and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) in SMEs, with an emphasis on the impact the skilled migrant founder has on the recruitment and retention strategies of this specific group of employees. Corresponding to the title of this paper, we wanted to explore if the international career experiences of the skilled migrant founders of our three case study SMEs (one micro-, one small and one medium-sized SME organisation in Ireland) influenced their respective hiring and retention policies and practices of international professionals. In this paper, we unpack how the recruitment and retention practices in the three different sized SME cases vary. Specifically, we explore how (and indeed, if) the individual, micro-level career experiences of the three SMEs' migrant founder–managers affected their respective recruitment and retention policies and practices of skilled migrants and SIEs, across different SME-sized organisations. The literature suggests it is not just size that affects the HRM practices of SMEs (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2021), but other factors also impact the HRM approach adopted, such as the type of management style (Hayton, 2003), as well as the influence of the founder (Baron and Hannan, 2002). In this paper, both the size of SMEs and the influence of the founder's international experience and status on the design and application of the company's HRM practices, in particular concerning recruitment and retention, is explored.

In this paper, we use the term "skilled migrant founder–managers" of SMEs rather than "expat-preneurs", since these founders have opted to remain indefinitely in the host country (Ireland). "Expat-preneurs" are defined as business SIEs (McNulty and Brewster, 2017) who are self-employed and operate a registered business in the host country (Vance *et al.*, 2016). While this appropriately describes our study's participants, "expat-preneurs" remain only temporarily in their host country ("the host country they ultimately will leave behind", Vance *et al.*, 2017, p. 36), while our sample's length of stay is indefinite and potentially permanent. To capture this, we refer to them as skilled migrant founder–managers.

The literature differentiates between SIEs and skilled migrants (Al Ariss, 2010). While both seek employment in a country other than their country of origin or home country, SIEs remain only temporarily in the host country (Cerdin and Selmer, 2014) and skilled migrants remain indefinitely (Al Ariss, 2010). In this paper, the founders of the three SME case studies self-initiated their expatriation to Ireland, originally on a more temporary basis, but have since, with the founding of their organisations, a more permanent footing in Ireland and no present intention to return permanently to their home countries. Those who are highly educated (to university level) are defined as skilled migrants (Al Ariss, 2010; Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2018).

This paper reflects on the international experience of skilled migrant founder–managers of SMEs and the subsequent HRM policies and practices in the respective SMEs to recruit and retain other international professionals (SIEs and skilled migrants). In this regard, the study utilises the theoretical lens of intelligent career theory (Arthur *et al.*, 1995; Zikic, 2015), concerned with the career competencies of "knowing why", "how" and "whom". This gives the study a wider, more holistic view of capital than the narrow human capital view adopted in many HRM and talent management studies (Crowley-Henry and Al Ariss, 2018).

Intelligent career theory focuses on the career capital that individuals draw upon to advance their career, or how the lack of particular career capital causes challenges to career progression.

"Knowing why" capital focuses on the motivations and ambitions one possesses, which may change over time and circumstances. "Knowing how" capital concerns the human capital, knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) one has: the greater one's know-how, particularly in areas with skills/talent gaps, the more sought after he/she will be by organisations seeking those particular skills/talents. "Knowing whom" capital refers to the social capital one relies on to access employment, promotions or business relationships over one's career. This capital "bank" (Agrawal *et al.*, 2011) can be strategically used by employers and organisations, as well as the migrants themselves on a once-off or regular/sustained basis.

While intelligent career theory has been used in other publications on internationally mobile professionals (Al Ariss and Syed, 2011; Winterheller and Hirt, 2017), there is an empirical gap concerning the context of skilled migrants' careers at the meso-level within SMEs (for exception, see Festing *et al.*, 2013; Festing, 2007). In this paper, we employ intelligent career theory to explore how SME founders draw upon their individual career capital experiences as SIEs and skilled migrants to shape the HRM policies and practices related to the recruitment and retention of their SIE and skilled migrant workforce in their respective SMEs. To support our application of intelligent career theory to the HRM-related recruitment and retention policies and practices of SMEs, we share three sample case studies of SME organisations in Ireland. Specifically, we focus on the influence of the skilled migrants' experience of living and working abroad in recruiting and retaining other SIEs and skilled migrants to the companies they have founded.

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows. The next section describes the organisation categories that fall under the "SME" umbrella. After this, we provide an overview of recent literature concerning the talent flow of SIEs and skilled migrants in the SME sector. It highlights the gaps pertaining to what we know about the influence of skilled migrant founders in SME staffing and HRM practices. We supplement this material with our original empirical research using the three case studies of skilled migrant founders' SMEs. Drawing on our empirical research, we discuss how our theoretical lens helps to explain our findings, adding to existing knowledge and research. Finally, we share the limitations of our study and provide recommendations for further research.

Defining SMEs

Depending on the definition of the SME used, an eclectic mix of organisations could hypothetically be labelled as "SME". The classification criteria varies across countries/ regions and, even within the SME grouping, there are pronounced differences. Therefore, it is inherently difficult to define and examine what an SME actually is. The OECD (2019b) definition of SMEs refers to these organisations as "non-subsidiary, independent firms which employ less than a given number of employees". Internationally, further criteria may apply; for instance, in the United States of America (USA), criteria such as the number of employees, ownership structure, earnings and industry sector are also taken into account (SBA, 2019). The European Union (EU) definition (European Commission, 2019) is the working definition for this study. It defines SMEs based on the number of employees and the turnover or balance sheet of the company (see Table 1 below for the EU categorisation of SMEs).

Company category	Staff headcount	Turnover	Balance sheet total
Medium-sized	50–250 employees	< €50m	< €43m
Small	10–49 employees	< €10m	< €10m
Micro	1–9 employees	< €2m	< €2m
Source(s): European Commission (2003, 2021)			

Table 1.
EU categorisation
of SMEs

SMEs employ on average 70% of the workforce worldwide (OECD, 2019a). However, the grouping of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises under the umbrella term of "SME" renders a thorough analysis of the SME context to be complex. The range of organisations that can be classified as SMEs varies from one-man shops to organisations employing up to 250 people (See Table 1). The variance in resources (physical, financial, human) across the spectrum of organisations categorised as SMEs is large.

SIEs and skilled migrants in the SME context
The world of work is constantly changing, a fact made even more evident during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic which forced changes to how and where one works almost overnight. At the skills level in international management, cross-functional and international expertise (being able to navigate cultural nuances), collaboration and a participative engagement, self-management and flexibility are competencies in high demand (Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017). This working environment is particularly suited to an internationally focused life/work trajectory (Crowley-Henry and Al Ariss, 2018), given the inherent agility and resilience required to relocate internationally. The role of internationally mobile professionals in knowledge and skills transfers between home and host countries has supported economic development fuelled by innovation (Agrawal *et al.*, 2011; Bosetti *et al.*, 2015; Foley and Kerr, 2013), entrepreneurship (Stoyanov *et al.*, 2018) and the maintenance of trade/business/investment networks (Chand, 2019; Docquier and Lodigiani, 2010). Considering the career of skilled migrants comprises work-related experiences at the meso-level and also character-building episodes from their personal life at the micro-level (O'Connor and Crowley-Henry, 2020). These individuals' career capital can prove beneficial to organisations, improving their competitive advantage (Zikic, 2015).

The benefits (at both macro- and meso-levels) of migrant entrepreneurship have been explored in business studies. For example, at the meso-level, studies such as Neville *et al.* (2014) and Morgan *et al.* (2018) suggest that immigrant-owned SMEs have access to extra forms of capital, such as the social capital provided by the founder's international networks, from which they can derive advantages when internationalizing and/or gain competitive advantage over non-migrant owned SMEs. Similarly, Gittins and Fink (2015) suggest returned migrants can "enhance local entrepreneurial activity by transferring skills and knowledge gained abroad... and drive SME internationalisation" (Gittins and Fink, 2015, p. 279). At both the meso- and micro-levels, therefore, the advantages accruing to migrants–as founders of SMEs and as employees–have been linked to their international career capital.

Apart from their personal motivations and life experiences, it is important to highlight the influence of the wider (meso and macro) context in the forming and transforming of skilled migrants' career capital (Inkson *et al.*, 2015), within the three ways of knowing framework–knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom (Arthur *et al.*, 1995). For example, the decision of which country (or organisation) an individual decides to move to and when (knowing-why), not only affects the individual himself/herself but could also have an impact on organisations' recruitment and retention strategies and how open organisations are to foreign talent (Almeida and Fernando, 2017; Almeida *et al.*, 2012; Crowley-Henry and Al Ariss, 2018). This is particularly relevant in the case of SMEs, as recent studies note that most international workers are employed by smaller, local companies (Vance *et al.*, 2017; Vance and McNulty, 2014).

Studies concerning the recruitment, selection and retention of international employees tend to mainly focus on multinationals (MNEs) in Western economies (see Allen and Vardaman, 2017). There is also evidence of academic interest regarding the development and practice of HRM and human resource development (HRD) of international workers (Kim *et al.*, 2018; McNulty and Hutchings, 2016). However, a pronounced gap exists pertaining to our knowledge of the same within the SME sector. Internationally, it is reported that it is largely

through the SME sector that migrants and SIEs can access employment openings (Barrett and Burgess, 2008), with many migrants (Connell and Burgess, 2009) and SIEs (Vance and McNulty, 2014; Vance *et al.*, 2016) employed in SMEs.

Academic literature presents dichotomous viewpoints on HRM within SMEs. The negative, "Bleak house" portrayal (Dundon and Wilkinson, 2019; Wilkinson, 1999) shows poor working conditions, in non-unionised, demanding and centrally controlled organisations (Briscoe and Schuler, 2007). On the other hand, the positive portrayal (Wapshott and Mallett, 2016) suggests that SMEs are informal, worker-friendly organisations, with a "happy family" positive image of HR and work relations (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2021). Harney and Dundon (2006) argue that this either-or view of HRM in SMEs is restrictive as HRM in SMEs is the result of a "complex interplay of external structural factors and internal dynamics" (Harney and Dundon, 2006, p. 48). It is within this dichotomous representation that we situate our exploratory study of skilled migrant founders of, and subsequent employers in, SMEs.

The literature suggests it is not just size that affects the HRM practices of SMEs (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2021), but other factors also impact the HRM approach adopted. These include the sector and market the SME operates in (Dundon *et al.*, 2006), the type of management style (Hayton, 2003), whether the SME is a family-owned operation (Forth and Bryson, 2019), as well as the influence of the founder (Baron and Hannan, 2002). As regards this study, it is the influence of the SME founder on the design and application of the company's HRM practices, in particular concerning recruitment and retention, that we seek to unpack.

The existing limited literature on SMEs in the HRM discipline highlights their difference to larger MNEs, particularly with regard to their (lack of) planning, degree of (in)formality and (lack of) resources (financial constraints) (Horak, 2017; Stokes *et al.*, 2016). It is propounded that SMEs are at a distinct disadvantage with regard to recruiting/retaining talented staff as they lack the expertise and formalised HRM procedures and practices to recruit, select and retain talented employees in the face of competition from larger, better resourced organisations (Festing *et al.*, 2013; Scullion and Brewster, 2001; Sparrow, 2012; Vaiman, 2014).

In the next section, we share our empirical approach and outline the sample case studies we use to inform our analysis of the recruitment and retention strategies of three different SMEs (as influenced by their skilled migrant founders) operating in the service sector in Ireland through our theoretical lens of intelligent career theory.

Research approach and case studies

At the macro-level, our study takes place in Ireland, an English-speaking, small, open economy, and a member state of the European Union. Almost 70% of people in Ireland are employed by SMEs, with foreign labour reported to be an important number of this workforce (McGinnitty *et al.*, 2018). Micro-enterprises account for the vast majority of SMEs at 92.1% of all businesses operating in the country in 2017, while small enterprises accounted for 6.7% and medium enterprises totalled 1.2% (Central Statistics Office, 2018). In the Irish labour market, non-Irish citizens make up 30% of all those employed in the hotels and restaurant sector, and almost 30% in care and domestic work (McGinnitty *et al.*, 2018), just two areas where SMEs make up the majority of the active enterprises. However, there is a dearth of contemporary research on SIEs and skilled migrants working in the Irish SME sector.

Acknowledging the heterogeneity of SMEs (see Table 1), we adopted a multi-case study approach (Piekkari and Welch, 2011; Piekkari *et al.*, 2009; Stake, 1995, 2006), where nuance and detail of the specific organisation can be shared. Utilising purposive sampling, we selected one micro-, one small and one medium-sized organisation as "illustrative individual case[s]" (Brosius and Bathelt, 1994, p. 48). In doing this, we wanted to unpack and showcase how different these organisations are and that grouping diverse organisations (in size, but also in industry, product etc.) as the homogeneous entity of an "SME" is a major limitation to research in the SME space. The case study approach we employ presents the heterogeneity here.

Also, our focus is at the micro-level and on the owner-founders, unpacking how their own unique experiences as skilled migrants are reflected in the policies and practices of their specific SME enterprise. We utilised the three case studies (based on the three main categories grouped under the SME umbrella) to illustrate how the size of an organisation (micro, small and medium), as well as the status, unique experiences and leadership of the founders combine to influence the recruitment and retention of skilled migrants and SIEs.

Importantly, each of the cases has a skilled migrant founder-manager at the helm. Reflecting the fact that Ireland is a services-dominated economy, all three companies operate in the service sector, which in 2018 accounted for 76.5% of employment in the country (Central Statistics Office, 2018). The selection also reflects the heterogeneity of the SME classification and the importance of sharing contextual information. Each case is unique and specific, and generalisations cannot be inferred from one case study or from each SME sub-category (micro, small and medium).

In order to define and provide as much data as possible on these diverse contexts, data collection was conducted from company websites and reports, providing background information on each respective organisation. Meso-level contextual data comprises information on the number of employees (including non-nationals), the specific sector these companies operate in, (reported) company culture and management style. Macro-level contextual data refers to institutional supports available to these organisations in Ireland. This contextual data supplemented the in-depth qualitative interviews with the skilled migrant founders of our sample organisations. The interviews focused on their personal career experiences as skilled migrants (at the individual level), and on how they mobilised their respective experiences in determining the policies they would adopt when recruiting and retaining other SIEs and skilled migrants (i.e. their career capital application at the meso-level).

The second and third authors conducted the interviews with the participants in this study. The interviews were transcribed in full and coded independently by each of the co-authors separately. The coding was then agreed by all authors to ensure inter-coder reliability and analysed following the intelligent career framework of knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom. The findings unpack how intelligent career theory influences SME founders' operationalisation of HRM practices. We focus, in particular, on the recruitment and retention of SIEs and skilled migrants; seeking to address current knowledge gaps regarding SMEs' recruitment and retention policies (or lack of) targeted at these international professionals.

Our purposive sample includes one sample organisation from each sub-category within the SME EU classification–one micro, one small and one medium-sized company. Since this is an explorative study on the application of the skilled migrant founders' career capital at a meso-level, the prerequisites for selection were that (1) the companies were founded by skilled migrants, (2) employed SIEs and/or skilled migrants and (3) met the criteria to be classified as SMEs. We refer to these companies as MI for the micro-sized organisation (1–9 employees), SM for the small-sized organisation (10–50 employees) and ME for the medium-sized organisation (less than 250 employees). To protect the participants' identity, pseudonyms are used, and their company names are omitted.

The first case study, in the micro category, MI, is what its founder describes as a "medical tourism" company, helping provide Irish and the United Kingdom (UK) (Northern Ireland) consumers with "competitively priced dental and health treatments in Poland". More recently, the company has branched out into education, organising for Irish students to study medicine in Poland, and is in the process of developing operations into Bulgaria. MI is owned and operated by a Polish national, "*Alan*", who lives in Ireland and, at the moment, operates between Ireland and Poland. The company is Dublin-based and was set-up in 2014, currently employing 8 people, including Alan. All staff are based in Ireland, five staff are Polish and three are Irish, with contractors based in Poland. Alan was responsible for setting up the

company and manages the general day-to-day operations. HRM in MI tends to be reactive and lacks formal HR policies or programmes. Alan makes all HR decisions, in what seems to be a subjective and ad-hoc manner. Recruitment, depending on Alan and his staff's knowing-whom capital, is by word of mouth and personal recommendation. Basic knowing-how capital is vital in recruitment decisions, with first-rate Polish and English language skills, as well as excellent customer service skills, essential for the roles in MI. The size of MI enables Alan to create bespoke individual employment packages that suit each employee, while also enabling flexible work practices. This factor has enabled retention of employees who want the freedom and autonomy available from working in a micro company, their individual knowing-why capital.

The second case study, in the small category (SM), is a company in a specialised high-tech area. The company, founded in 2018, is a spin-out from an Irish university, employing 16 people. SM has already partnered with telecommunication companies and universities on projects that will help these companies use SM's technology to enhance their content. The founders' vision is to "democratise" this technology so everyone can use it (via a mobile phone). To support this growth, SM has secured investment from venture capital (VC) as well as government funding. SM's core team is made up of creatives and specialised-technology experts and the company highlights the diversity of the team (currently featuring 10 different nationalities) as a recruitment strategy. With talent shortages in this niche space, SM's HRM function is performed by the three company founders. In particular, *Robert*, the Spanish founder, makes sure that the potential employees fit, and are comfortable with, the company values.

In the medium-sized category, ME, the third case study, is a financial technology (FinTech) company that was originally founded by two skilled migrants (Irish and African) in the UK. The founders leveraged their experience in the financial services and insurance sectors respectively and founded the company from their kitchen table in 2008, setting up an office and hiring their first employee in 2009. The FinTech sector comprises all areas of technology and innovation relating to financial services–banking, insurance, investment–to include payments, currency trading (FX), compliance and regulatory (RegTech). Due to the high demand for FinTech services worldwide, the industry is presently experiencing global skill shortages. ME moved its main operations to Ireland in 2014, currently employing 210 people between Ireland, the UK and Malta. Due to its relatively large size by SME standards, and the high level of skill/talent shortage in the industry worldwide, the HRM function in ME is formalised. "*Vicky*", the African founder, notes that due to the global skills shortage in her industry, ME has been forced to look beyond Ireland, the UK and even Europe in order to cover their staffing needs. ME employs developers, account managers, project managers and sales/business development managers. Knowing-how capital is the main driver for recruitment decisions, followed by knowing-whom (particularly for language-competency requirements). The location of the company's Irish office, in a medium-sized rural town in the mid-East region, provides employees with a more affordable alternative to capital-city living and a slower pace of life (knowing-why).

We summarise the HRM-related policies, function, recruitment and retention strategies of each organisation in Table 2.

In the section below, we analyse the different ways in which Alan (MI), Robert (SM) and Vicky (ME) apply their personal career capital experiences to the recruitment and retention strategies of their respective companies when employing SIEs and skilled migrants. To prevent researcher bias which may skew the objectivity of the results, the analysis was discussed between all co-authors to ensure shared understandings (Liu and Pechenkina, 2016). We take a micro-level perspective, considering the viewpoint of the organisations' founder–managers through the prism of the intelligent career framework.

Company Category	No. of staff	HRM function	Recruitment	Retention	HR Policy
Medium-sized 50–250 employees	210	Formal HR Department	Formal recruitment and selection policies International recruitment campaigns College recruitment	"Onboarding" programmes Innovative culture Internal "suggestion and comments" systems Inclusive environment Internal career development possibilities	Formalised HRM policies Planned HR campaigns and strategies
Small 10–49 employees	16	Founder-manager No formal HR Department, but formalised HR procedures by managers	On-line recruitment (formal) Informal networks Bespoke offers Thorough selection process to ensure person-organisation fit	Individualised packages Work-life balance practices Autonomy Trust	Mix of informal and formal Proactive, agile "Small is beautiful"
Micro* 1–9 employees * 90% of SMEs in Ireland	8	Founder-manager No formal HR	Informal Word of mouth Staff "knowing whom" Bespoke offers Offers of support	Individualised packages Flexible working arrangements Work-life balance practices	Informal/ Reactive "Small is beautiful"

Table 2.
Overview of Findings by SME in this Study

Data analysis and findings

Arthur *et al.* (1995) devised the intelligent career framework as a response to the then prevailing "competency-view" of the firm, shining the spotlight on the agentic characteristics and competences of the employee rather than the organisation. In this study, we go further (perhaps full-circle) by relating the knowing-why, how and whom acquired through the lived experiences of skilled migrants to their subsequent recruitment and retention HR policies and practices as founders in their own organisations. In this analysis, we focus on the "HR-Applied" knowing-why/how and whom, which explains particular elements of the recruitment and retention policies and practices employed by MI, SM and ME respectively. In the following sections, we present the findings per category. These findings are summarised in Table 3.

Knowing-why

Knowing-why relates to a person's motivations in the pursuit of a particular career path: their values, beliefs, attitudes and the non-work-related elements influencing this path (Arthur *et al.*, 1995). Our participants' personal knowing-why helps us set the context to understand the organisation's general direction and its HRM style, which we believe is reflected in the "HR applied" knowing-why they deploy (as applied to skilled migrant recruitment and retention strategies). Below, we give an example of "HR Applied" knowing-why per organisation category to explain the rationale of our analysis.

Company Category	Recruitment/Selection		Retention	
Micro (MI) (informal)	(1)	Knowing-how: Specialised knowledge required	(1)	Knowing-whom: Connections to home country enabled
	(2)	Knowing-whom: Personal contacts externally	(2)	Knowing-why: Flexible working arrangements - Work-life balance
	(3)	Knowing-why: Informal, personal/ individualised support		
Small (SM) (informal and formal)	(1)	Knowing-how: Specialised knowledge required, international experience	(1)	Knowing-how: Project ownership, Autonomy, Innovative culture
	(2)	Knowing-whom: Personal contacts and networks externally	(2)	Knowing-whom: International environment - Inclusive, family-like – Personal contacts/networks internally
	(3)	Knowing-why: Essential alignment with founder's values required	(3)	Knowing-why: Informality – Autonomy – Trust
Medium (ME) (formal HRM policies/ practices)	(1)	Knowing-how: Specialised knowledge required, high level of skill shortages	(1)	Knowing-how: Formalised team support – Innovative culture
	(2)	Knowing-whom: Forced to look beyond Europe in their recruitment drive; existing employees' "knowing-whom" helps them recruit in foreign markets	(2)	Knowing-why: Internal career development possibilities - Inclusivity - Opportunity for employee voice to be heard (formally)
	(3)	Knowing-why: Alternative geographical location, lower cost of living, less commuting, better quality of life as attractive to recruits		

Note(s): Knowing-how – Skills needed; Knowing-whom – Recruitment/retention channel; Knowing-why – Understanding employees' motivations

Table 3.
HRM policies and practices in the micro, small and medium (SME) case studies unpacked using intelligent career theory

MI "HR applied" knowing-why
Recruitment and Retention – Alan's experience of working and living as a migrant in Ireland meant he "knew" that by organising for Polish workers to come to Ireland, by providing a job and support, not only would he have these employees' loyalty, but also a source of educated and experienced employees that, due to the then tight Irish labour market, were not readily available to Irish employers.

> I knew from my Polish friends, and other migrants, [that] there is a fear when they leave home, a risk. Also, Polish people lack confidence when they come over here. They just want more money than they earn back home, but many have so much more to offer[...] – Alan

Alan's prior experiences of the cost and lack of housing in Dublin meant he recognised the recruitment value of assisting with accommodation. He also felt it was important to be flexible, offering employees the opportunity to work flexible times and sometimes from home (pre-COVID-19, this was not a common practice in most organisations). Working this way allowed his employees to avoid commuting traffic and to live further outside the capital, where rents are cheaper, and accommodation is more readily available.

> We are based in Dublin - that is where the business is. But being in Dublin has problems [...] commuting, rents are crazy here [...] – Alan

SM "HR applied" knowing-why
Recruitment – As a skilled migrant, Robert believes diversity and a multi-cultural environment are crucial for any business, but particularly in a start-up, small company.

[...] if somebody has worked in multiple countries or studied in multiple places [...] or just [...] travelled [...] I think that's very valuable [...] I totally see that plus – Robert.

SM uses a mixture of on-line advertisement (formal) and informal networks in its recruitment efforts, with bespoke offers to recruit skills in short supply. An acute awareness of the positions on offer in the sector in Ireland allows SM to focus on the organisation's values and culture in order to attract international talent to work in this cutting-edge technology company. From his own international experience in Ireland, Robert recognises the unique opportunity his SME offers to researchers and engineers who want to "do high-end tech stuff", which the more service and sales-orientated roles of the big tech companies' Irish operations do not offer.

So, it's VERY complicated to compete with any of these big companies in terms of salaries. The good thing is that [...] there's not that many companies doing specifically very HIGH END tech stuff. There ARE some [...] but not that many [...] – Robert.

Retention – Even though the company is quite young (under three years in operation), Robert understands the importance of creating a space where employees can be comfortable, happy and productive. From his own experience, he understands the need to treat employees like adults and give them the freedom to organise their work and own their responsibilities:

We treat them like the adults they are [...] we trust them and we're not going to be chasing them [...] we do not like micromanagement or anything like that. I have never "counted" anybody's holidays [...] or how many days you have to work from home [before COVID-19]. So, you basically explain a little bit where you come from [...] we come from the research world [...] so this is the way we work [...] it has worked for us for some time... we have freedom [...] – Robert.

The personal knowledge of one's employees (their knowing-why and whom) in a micro or small organisation is facilitated due to the small size of the firm and the hands-on approach of the founder–managers, enabling them to tailor employment packages to the needs of their employees. Roberts's experience confirms this.

ME "HR applied" knowing-why
Recruitment - As a result of strong competition for talent in the FinTech sector worldwide, Vicky has been forced to recruit outside of the EU. When she moved to London originally, her sister, who was living/working there, helped her to settle in. So, as a migrant from outside the EU, she knows first-hand that people from a different cultural background need a little extra support. She can relate to them and this directs the policies she endorses:

We organise visas for (non-EU) employees. We also find them a place to live for the first three months, within walking distance from the office. That takes some of the stress out of the move. – Vicky.

Retention – In a fast-paced, competitive industry, such as FinTech, it is important for employees to feel valued:

[...] all the staff are basically trained [...] your opinion matters [...] do not just wait for a manager to give an opinion. If you think your opinion matters, you're welcome not to [...] wait for your manager [...] you can throw in a suggestion and within our intranet, your suggestion will be picked up [...] that's the culture we've built. I want to make sure that anyone that comes to work feels [...] you know [...] they're taking part in the growth of the business. It's not enough to just to come to work and get paid [...] not for everyone. A lot of people want to come to work and FEEL that they're contributing and making a difference [...] - Vicky

Lifestyle considerations are also important. ME's regional location offers the possibility to avail more affordable housing and a more relaxed lifestyle, reducing (or eliminating) long commutes to the city:

By having a local company[. . .] or at least half-way between Dublin and where they were travelling from, they managed to get some quality time with their families instead of commuting[. . .] – Vicky.

Vicky's own experience with living in an expensive capital city (London, in her case) directly informed her decision to relocate her business to a rural area rather than to the capital city in Ireland (Dublin). Lower cost of living, a slower pace of life, and fewer local alternative employers all combine as factors which encourage her employees to remain in the organisation.

Knowing-how

Apart from the skills and knowledge acquired through general education and work experience (Arthur *et al.*, 1995), we consider knowing-how to also include the passive learning obtained when dealing with unfamiliar environments and cultures. Skilled migrants' knowing-how comprises both specific (of a role or industry) and transferrable skills. This personal learning is then applied in an organisational setting to identify employee skills and traits needed to attain competitive advantage, as illustrated in the examples below.

MI "HR applied" knowing-how

From his previous experience of running his own business back in Poland, Alan learnt the importance of recognising and utilising his employees' skills (their knowing how) to the company's advantage. Alan requires his staff to have two main skills: customer service and language skills.

Customer service skills are vital[. . .] Irish people have higher demands than Polish customers. It is different here. Our Irish sales manager is vital – Alan.

But now running a business dealing across different countries, he has also learnt the benefits and importance of his employees' specialised softer skills, such as cultural awareness.

We travel back to Poland a lot, escorting groups, meeting contractors and suppliers[. . .] I have Polish agents for our Polish contracts[. . .] People work better with people from the same, or similar, country, there are less mistakes[. . .] – Alan.

SM "HR applied" knowing-how

Recruitment - When recruiting, Robert looks for people with specific technical skills. However, due to the fast-paced nature of the company, it is crucial to ensure, as much as possible, that the potential hire is aligned with organisational values–so that there is a higher possibility of retention. First-rate engineering and other technical skills are essential, but a diverse background and a general openness to continuous learning are part of the company's values:

There was a [Specialised] Master in X (University in Dublin) [. . .] we got a really good engineer from that Masters[. . .] She wanted to change careers and she did that Master[. . .] we hired her[. . .] even though it was a kind of a bet, because she was pretty junior in this space[. . .] but she had plenty of experience as an engineer[. . .] she ended up being almost like the LEADER. . . she knew all the ways of working that sometimes more junior engineers do not know. . . including us – Robert.

This comment also shows that Robert's recognition of a gap in his own knowing-how was addressed in recruiting to fill those skills gaps. In this case, the employee was hired not only for her technical skills, but also for her organisation and leadership skills.

ME "HR applied" knowing-how

Recruitment - Vicky recognises the global technical skill shortages that affect her business. Therefore, she took the advice of a Vietnamese employee and is conducting an active

recruitment campaign in Vietnam. She also understands that languages are important, as it is easier to communicate with clients in their own language.

> Our Vietnamese employee is helping us recruit people in Vietnam. He's told us the right places and the right time to advertise and how long to wait in order to find staff[. . .] Our managers are from all over the world[. . .] Venezuela, France, Malta[. . .] that's how we wanted to build the team. We're diverse – Vicky.

As a medium-sized international organisation, Vicky is acutely aware of the importance of servicing international markets with employees who are from and have a firm understanding of those markets.

Knowing-whom

Knowing-whom refers to the contacts and connections, both professional and personal, which can be deployed in work-related or career-related situations (Arthur *et al.*, 1995). Having lived/worked abroad for several years has possibly afforded Alan, Robert and Vicky greater opportunities to expand their existing knowing-whom. These networks and connections have been useful for their respective businesses, as per the analysis below.

MI "HR applied" knowing-whom
Recruitment and Retention - Like many SME founder–managers, Alan prefers informal recruitment practices (Harney and Dundon, 2006). Alan utilises word-of-mouth recruitment, his personal contacts and references from existing employees to staff his organisation with new skilled employees. These informal methods have been effective to date, filling most of the vacancies Alan has had. Alan also uses the regular business trips back to Poland as a retention method, as it allows his Polish workers to maintain their links with their home country.

> We travel back to Poland. I could go more often but I do not. I use it as a selling point, a reward for workers – Alan.

However, when Alan saw an opportunity in the Bulgarian market, the limitations of word-of-mouth recruitment were exposed.

> I saw the opportunity in Bulgaria[. . .] My network is Irish[. . .] and from Poland. Now I need to hire someone to manage sales in Bulgaria. It is more difficult than I expected[. . .]- Alan

SM "HR applied" knowing-whom
Recruitment and Retention – Both for setting up the business and for recruitment, Robert and his co-founders have relied on personal/professional connections, particularly when recruiting foreign staff.

> It actually goes back to how we were sourcing the candidates[. . .] and most of them were actually through our networks. So, even though the last Spaniard we hired[. . .] we did not know personally, he came from our network. He was a guy who started in the same University as I did[. . .] a little bit younger[. . .] that a friend of mine knew[. . .] and saw the job offer and sent it to him. So, we were VERY successful in sourcing candidates through our network - Robert.

ME "HR applied" knowing-whom
Recruitment - Vicky's applied knowing-whom is linked to her personal philanthropic motivations. This exemplifies the relationship between the knowing-why (personal

motivations to help others) and knowing-whom (through personal and business networks) forms of career capital. In this case, Vicky's philanthropic motivations contribute to enhancing ME's good reputation in the community and beyond, helping to develop its social legitimacy and employer brand externally throughout the community.

> In Ireland we're involved in so many things[. . .] I'm a patron of the arts in [the Mid-Eastern town in Ireland] [. . .] We sponsor young artists and. . . the football, the camogie [Irish women team sport] [. . .] we're sponsoring them for the next 3 years[. . .] and the other football clubs and the different charities. When we gain as a business you need to give back something to society[. . .] and we try our best to give back something to society - Vicky

Through these philanthropic endeavours, Vicky has embedded a positive reputation for ME in the Mid-Eastern town in Ireland, and also has focused the ME culture around more inclusive, social and community networks. This, in turn, influences the knowing-why element of career capital in that it may attract increasingly more socially conscientious employees to work for ME, knowing it supports the local community.

This section has outlined the findings from our three case studies, categorised under the three types of knowing, showing how, within the context of SMEs founded and managed by skilled migrants, personal career capital influences applied career capital. Table 3 summarises these findings, unpacking where and how intelligent career theory informs the HRM practices of recruitment and retention in these three case study organisations.

The next section discusses these findings further, encouraging a reimaging and thorough interrogation of accepted myths pertaining to SMEs' ability to recruit, employ and retain skilled talent in an increasingly competitive global business landscape.

Discussion

Academic literature pertaining to SMEs has long highlighted the lack of formality of HRM policies and procedures in such organisations (Carroll *et al.*, 1999; Harney and Dundon, 2006; Kotey and Slade, 2005). The perception is that SMEs are at a disadvantage when recruiting/ retaining staff as they lack the formalised HRM procedures and practices that may aid large companies in their recruitment efforts, particularly in this era of worldwide competition for talent.

We find this is not necessarily the case. In fact, our three case studies show how SMEs' more informal methods may be individually tailored and thus more suitable to SIEs' and skilled migrants' needs and lifestyle than the formal procedures of large organisations. However, we also found that the more informal word–of-mouth recruitment had limitations when the SME founder–managers in our case study organisations moved outside their social and professional network: their knowing whom (Alan in our MI case study who was struggling to find Bulgarian employees). Conversely, our SME in the medium-sized grouping has formalised HRM policies and procedures. At just under the medium-sized employee limit of 250 employees, this organisation is more similar to traditional larger-sized organisations with formalised HR policies and practices. Figure 1 summarises this finding, showing how the assumed informality of SMEs' HRM practices is actually dependent, to a large extent, on the size of the organisation under the SME grouping. While the specificities of our sample means that results cannot be generalised, we find our results are consistent with previous research (Kotey and Slade, 2005), that size matters, even within the SME classification. ME's size (210 employees) and resource availability situates it closer to a large company classification, in need of more formal HR/management structures. On the other hand, both MI and SM exhibit a more flexible and holistic management style due to their smaller size. The size difference between micro (up to 9 employees) and small (10–49 employees) also has an impact on the degree of flexibility the organisation can afford.
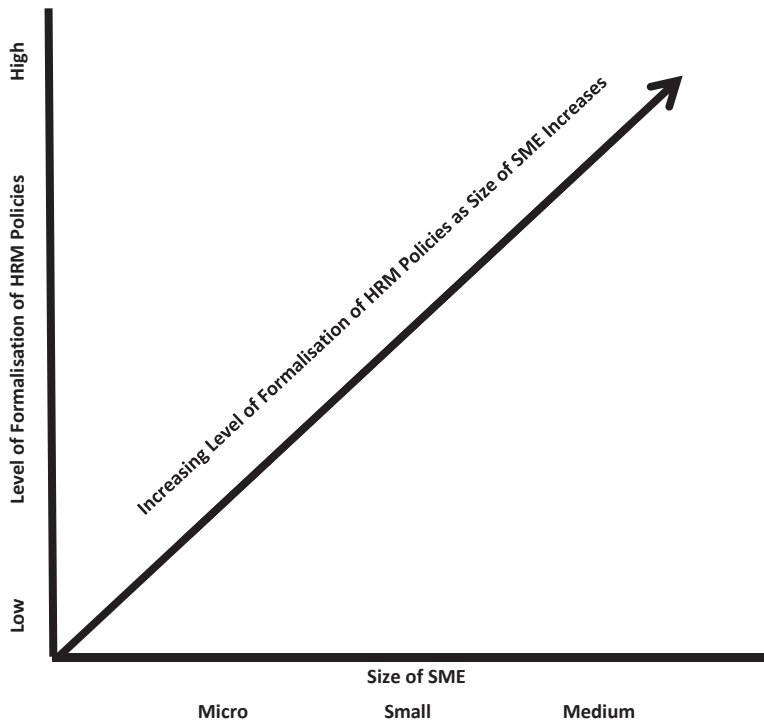
Figure 1.
Relationship of size of SME and formalisation of HRM policies across the 3 case studies (one micro, one small, one medium-sized organisation)

Overall, we found recruitment and retention strategies that ranged from the very ad-hoc and bespoke HRM methods of Alan in his micro company to complex international recruitment and retention strategies of the medium-sized SME, who are conducting an active recruitment campaign in Vietnam (see Table 2). The heterogeneity of HRM policies and practices, despite common factors across the three case studies (each founded and managed by skilled migrants in Ireland; each involved in hiring international staff), is apparent. While the formality of the HRM approach adopted varied in our three case studies and could be related to size (see Figure 1), all three SMEs were often more receptive to hiring skilled migrants and SIEs. The important role of the SME skilled migrant founders in our sample, and of their own international career experience, was underscored in how this affected the particular HRM staffing approaches that were employed. Both the size of the organisation and the career experiences of the founders influenced the subsequent recruitment and retention practices in our three SME case studies.

We believe that the merits of our study lie in the heterogeneity of the sample and its illustration of the widely varied and, sometimes, bespoke approach to HRM in the case SMEs. Our case studies show that the smaller-sized SME structure and flexibility can allow the micro and small SMEs to offer individualised HR strategies in a very competitive labour market. In the case of MI and SM in particular, our findings are consistent with Carroll *et al.* (1999), who found that, rather than engaging in formal recruitment policies, SMEs depended on recommendations from existing staff, connections and word of mouth. For our small case study, this was supplemented with more formal recruitment practices where they advertise for new employees on their website, conduct interview rounds with each of the founder–

managers and have skills tests as part of their recruitment process. This may also be related to the specific space where SM operates, where very specialised technical skills are required.

The degree of formality was even more marked for the medium-sized SME case. Among our three case studies, as the size of the SME increases, the formalisation of the HR practices also increases. While we found minor differences between the micro and small SME cases, there was a notable increase in the formalisation of HR policies in the medium-sized SME. This would seem essential, as managing large number of employees in the bespoke, individualised manner adopted in the micro and small cases would be next to impossible in organisations with larger numbers of employees, as in our sample medium-sized SME. As our example of a small company is nearer to the lower employee limit of small SMEs, further studies are needed to see if bespoke individualised HR plans might even be impractical in the larger sized small SMEs, such as small SMEs with approx. 30–49 employees. It is worth highlighting that while our micro and small SME cases are classified officially as falling under the micro or small category respectively, in fact there are only a handful of employees separating these and they are more closely aligned size-wise than our medium-sized organisation. However, the specific space (tech) where both SM and ME operate renders similarities regarding the type of skills these organisations seek/require.

The importance of each of the three types of career capital (knowing why, how and whom) utilised in the recruitment and retention decisions of the three case study companies varies considerably for our medium-sized SMEs due to the level of formality involved. While the micro and small companies do not have a formalised HRM department, the medium-sized company does.

The strength of the connection between the three types of knowing (why, how and whom) also seemed to lessen as the size of the SME increased. Again, this may be due to the increase in number of employees lessening the ability of the founder–managers to personally know the individual employees and their personal needs and wants (that is the employees' knowing why capital). For example, employees' knowing-how is vital for all sizes of SME, as employees must have the skills required for their job role regardless of the size of company. However, the knowing-whom and knowing-why seems to be more prevalent in the more intimate and hands-on management style of the smaller companies, the micro and small SMEs. An example of this is MI's recognition of the anxiety and stress faced by SIEs and skilled migrants, and the personal supports they provide to help with this. Also, the importance of knowing-why is highlighted in the SM example: while they recognise that their selection process may be slow, it is fundamental to them in the long term (retention) that the new employee fits in with their values and culture. While MI's and SM's offices are in Dublin, ME's choice of a rural location–as part of a recruitment/retention strategy–could be a pull factor for skilled migrants due to affordability and lifestyle considerations (Cerdin and Le Pargneux, 2009; Crowley-Henry and Weir, 2007, 2009). In an example of more formalised and complex HRM policies, ME's financial resources allow the company to include three-months housing as part of their onboarding package for employees hired abroad. While multi-national enterprises tend to centralise their national headquarters in major cities, SMEs are geographically diffused. Skilled migrants (and domestic employees) may be attracted to SMEs outside of urban areas due to the reduced cost of living, slower pace of life and better quality of living. This recruitment and retention advantage could be further promoted by SMEs in their drive to recruit skills and talent for their organisations.

Our study, with only three sample case studies across each of the SME organisation categories of micro, small and medium, showcases the inherent complexity of SME research and studies. While we are not claiming it to be representative of the SME population, our small sample shows that there is much heterogeneity across and within the SME sub-classification. Also, HR practices and policies in SMEs may vary for a number of reasons, apart from size (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2021). This needs to be accounted for in studies, as the

context of the study–the specific SME size, sector, management style, business model etc.–is important and will have an impact on the subsequent HR practices of each case. In our cases, in particular, we focused on the influence of the founders' career capital acquisition as skilled migrants, and the subsequent application of this capital in the recruitment and retention of other SIEs and skilled migrants. Overall, our research validates the case study approach, where nuance and detail of the specific organisation and its founder can be shared, rather than the generic classification of "SME", which is far too diverse to unpack as one complete, all-encompassing entity. Our findings cannot be generalisable, given the heterogeneity of companies under the SME label, which differ in size, industry sector and founder background. Nonetheless, generalisability was not the aim of this study, but rather the exploration of how skilled migrant founders of SMEs operationalise their international career capital in their recruitment and retention policies and practices. The detail we have provided here highlights how skilled migrant founders of SMEs mobilise their international experience and career capital in their subsequent recruitment and retention of international employees, drawing on their own international experiences and tailoring their policies and practices accordingly.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research

While case studies are of great value in unpacking the nuances and granularities of the skilled migrant experience as SME founder and employer of other SIEs and skilled migrants, the size of our sample (three case studies) and the limited number of interviews conducted in each (with the skilled migrant founder only) is limiting. We suggest that future research may concentrate on an in-depth analysis of one specific sub-category of SME–such as a number of micro-sized organisations (or small or medium- sized organisations) in order to further unpack common patterns and approaches within each of the sub-categories. Another avenue for research here, across the different SME sub-categories, would be to focus on a particular industry sector in order to better compare and contrast approaches towards staffing that may be industry specific.

Nonetheless, the case studies in this paper served the purpose of showcasing our contribution. Case studies, by their very nature, are individual accounts of a particular organisation. The findings here are specific to and represent the three case studies that we conducted.

We show the relevance of intelligent career theory and its application at the meso-organisational level, particularly identifiable through the HRM policies and practices promoted by the skilled migrant founders of SMEs. Specifically, we have shared how intelligent career theory can help explain the rationale behind the recruitment and retention practices in SME organisations, unpacking the three types of knowing in the intelligent career theory framework. We call on future studies to extend our adoption of intelligent career theory and its role in explaining the formation of particular HRM policies and practices within SMEs guided by individual founder–managers. For instance, a future study may examine a larger sample of SME migrant founders (in Ireland or another host country) to consider if these are, in general, more receptive to hiring migrants.

Moreover, our case studies (interviews, supplemented with the detailed contextual background of each organisation) have facilitated a nuanced understanding of SIE/skilled migrant employment within the SME setting, beyond what has been reported to date. Considering (size and other) differences within the different SME sectors, cross-national and cross-sector/industry comparisons are equally encouraged to add to the limited extant empirical research on skilled migrant employees within the SME domain.

The perceptions we share in this paper stem from the skilled migrant founders of the respective three case study organisations. They portray the more "small is beautiful" lens in

their interviews. These are, of course, influenced by their central role within the organisations as founder–managers. Further studies could include the voice of the SIE/skilled migrant employees in the analysis to provide a more comprehensive and balanced representation of the applied career capital types of knowing in practice.

Finally, while we focused on the SIE/skilled migrant workforce within SMEs, future studies may compare the experiences we have shared in this paper across domestic employees to ascertain convergence or divergence of HR practices in recruitment and retention.

Conclusions

This paper unpacks different ways in which skilled migrants, in their role as SME founder–managers, deploy their own career experiences to consider pertinent career capital inhibitors and facilitators to the recruitment and retention of SIEs and skilled migrants in SMEs. It was found that the recruitment and retention practices in SMEs run by migrant founders vary. In some cases, these individuals are often more receptive to hiring other migrants, with bespoke policies designed to suit individual circumstances. As captured in the title to this paper, "what goes around comes around", it is apparent that the international experiences of the SME founders in our case companies informed their corresponding behaviours when recruiting and retaining international staff. Moreover, the recruitment and retention successes of our three case study SMEs were influenced by their accommodating policies and practices towards potential and existing skilled migrant and SIE employees. These founders' acquired career capital is reflected in the recruitment and retention policies and practices they utilise in relation to their international workforce in their respective SME. This moves existing literature on intelligent career theory and career capital beyond the micro-level to a more relational, meso-level, showcasing the impact of an individual's personal career capital on his/her subsequent management decision-making concerning his/her employees' career capital enablers and/or blockages. The actions and behaviours that the skilled migrant owner–managers themselves experienced as employees in the host country, impacted on their subsequent actions and behaviours towards other skilled migrants and SIEs when they became SME founders and hiring managers.

Given the SME sector is credited with playing a seminal role in enabling access for internationally mobile workers to labour markets in countries other than their own (Barrett and Burgess, 2008), there is a need for further research in this area. Our study found that the organisation size–micro, small or medium–within the general classification of an SME determines their availability and access to resources, which in turn influences their respective recruitment, retention and management policies. While our study focused on three case studies, one from each organisation size, and the findings cannot be generalised to all SMEs across the different sizes, our findings do suggest that size indeed matters with regard to the formality of HRM policies that are enforced. It was apparent in our three case studies that the extent of formalised HRM policies increased with SME size. However, size bands within the small and medium categories of "SME" are particularly broad. Therefore, adopting a "one size fits all" perspective is dangerous and misleading, as it fails to reflect the detail of each individual category within the SME grouping. SMEs must be differentiated, and the specificities of the SME must be clearly shared in any research undertakings. Similarly, the industry sector, company culture/values, customer/client base and market are relevant in understanding a particular SME organisation and its attractiveness as an employer. The host country context, the industry context, the competitive landscape, the different positions available within a respective SME–each aspect will influence the need to staff the organisation with talent from beyond the home country and the attractiveness of the organisation for a SIE/skilled migrant. In order to move beyond broad labelling, we encourage researchers to share these nuances in the reporting of their empirical research undertakings concerning SIEs/skilled migrants (and other types of international

professionals) employed in SMEs, so that regional, industry and size (amongst other) comparisons can be facilitated.

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