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Migrant CEOs: Barriers and Strategies on the Way to the Top\*

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## Migrant CEOs: Barriers and Strategies on the Way to the Top

**Abstract**

This study discusses the main barriers that qualified migrants face in their route towards becoming Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) along with the strategies they employ in their quest to reach the top. The study was conducted in France, a leading economic power with a long history of migration. A relational analytic framework was adopted, where in-depth interviews with migrant CEOs were triangulated with accounts from native CEOs, organizational leaders, and institutional actors. It emerged that meso- and macro-level factors created powerful barriers to advancement, while migrant CEOs tended to deploy four career strategies, two of them reactive – adaptation/adjustment and overcompensation – and the other two proactive – differentiation and manoeuvring. In addition, substantial differences were identified in the accounts of migrant CEOs and the other participants as to the existence of barriers and awareness of these by organizational actors.

*Keywords:* migrants, CEOs, career barriers, career strategies, relational analytic framework

### Migrant CEOs: Barriers and Strategies on the Way to the Top

Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) are connected with the probability of a firm's success and long-term value creation (Antia, Pantzalis, & Park, 2010; Levery & Grace, 2012). Hence, CEOs are important not only for firms, but for the economy and society in general. In addition, the need for CEOs is on the rise, partly because of increasing opportunities that globalization presents for organizations (Sutherland, 2013).

While some knowledge exists on the patterns of ascending to the CEO position (e.g., Ellersgaard, Larsen, & Munk, 2013; Sanders, 2011), no research to date has examined how migrants who became CEOs reached their positions. This might result from CEOs being both a small and difficult population to access for researchers in the first place, and this is even more pronounced for migrants. However, migrant CEOs are of interest for many reasons, including internationalization of firms, increase in international migration, and growing recognition that multi-cultural competencies – that qualified migrants can bring to organizations - are an advantage (e.g., Cooke, 2007; Tung, 2016). In this line, recent empirical evidence shows that the ability to integrate migrants into top management and the CEO position is key for firms' international success (Davoine & Ravasi, 2013; Piaskowska & Trojanowski, 2014). In addition, to be competitive organizations these days need to recognize and promote all potential talent and not only that of the indigenous workforce (e.g., Vaiman, Haslberger & Vance, 2015).

Migrants are individuals who are foreign-born but have moved at some point in their lifetime to the country they currently reside where they have the right to live and work legally regardless of whether they hold or do not hold its citizenship (Dietz, 2010; Fang, Samnani, Novicevic & Bing, 2013). The number of migrants worldwide is estimated at around a quarter of a billion (United Nations 2015), with proportionately the largest number (in the vicinity of 75 million) in Europe (United Nations, 2015). Furthermore, migration is intensifying (OECD, 2016; United Nations, 2015). Unlike the popular view that considers migrants as a uniform population, migrants differ sharply in their aspirations, professional experience, skills and

qualifications. In this respect, there are major differences between unskilled and qualified migrants (Cerdin, Abdeljalil & Brewster, 2014; Author, 2015). Qualified migrants are typically multi-lingual, adaptive, and highly educated; hence, they pose a significant opportunity for organizations in host countries that may be left unexploited if their career potential is not adequately unleashed.

The interest in the topic of migrant CEOs' careers comes with the recognition that qualified migrants benefit host country firms and economies (Dickmann & Baruch, 2011; Liu, Gao, Lu & Wei, 2015; Rowthorn, 2008). However, it appears that migrants with qualifications and career potential face considerable obstacles that prevent them from realizing their potential within the very host countries to which they contribute (e.g., Author, 2011; Tharmaseelan, Inkson, & Carr, 2010; Cangiano, 2012). Thus, we can safely infer that the few migrants who have achieved the feat of becoming CEOs have managed to overcome or bypass substantial barriers. Studying them, therefore, will provide us with knowledge on the barriers they face and insights into the strategies they employed to succeed despite the odds. From an organizational and management perspective, the pool of human resources to which organizations now have access is increasingly made up of migrants. However, there is lack of systematic research, and hence of practice-oriented knowledge, on how and whether organizations understand qualified migrants or have systems in place to ensure opportunities for them to advance towards the top, which will allow full exploitation of their talent to the benefit of firms' competitive advantage (Fosslund, 2013; Author, 2015).

In light of the above, the present study addressed the following questions: (1) What are the main career barriers that migrants face on their way to becoming CEOs? (2) What are the strategies that migrants who become CEOs employ in their quest to reach the top? (3) What explanatory insights can established career frameworks, namely the boundaryless and the protean, provide on the careers of migrant CEOs?

France occupies a central economic position in Europe and globally. In addition, being an economic and cultural centre for many centuries, along with its long history of colonization, France has long been a preferable destination for immigrants (Constant, 2006; Forbes, Hewlett & Nectoux, 2001; Vladescu, 2006; Eurostat, 2015). To illustrate, in 2013, France received more than 330,000 immigrants while nearly 8 million people who currently reside in France were not born in the country (Eurostat, 2015). However, despite composing a substantial part of the population, migrants appear clearly disadvantaged in terms of representation in prestigious occupations (Insee, 2015). The above facts make France an ideal country for our study.

### **Theoretical Background**

The extant literature provides some insights into the career barriers migrants face in host countries. Yet that literature is limited to early career stages. Systematic research on the careers of migrants who manage to reach the upper echelons of organizations is lacking (Author, 2016), and even more so for those migrants who have become CEOs. It is important to stress here that simple extrapolation from the limited knowledge about migrants' barriers in host countries' labour markets is insufficient, if not misleading, to develop a valid account about migrants' barriers and strategies in reaching the corporate elite in host countries. The demands and difficulties in finding work and moving upwards at lower and middle organizational levels are different from the demands and difficulties in moving past these levels and reaching the executive suite (Clauseen, Grohsjean, Luger & Probst, 2014; Fitzsimmons, Callan & Paulsen, 2014). This is more even so for disadvantaged groups for whom advancement beyond middle organizational levels apparently involves factors and criteria clearly different from simply ascending to junior and middle levels (Helfat, Harris & Wolfson, 2006; Rosette & Tost, 2010; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004). Nevertheless, the literature on migrants' careers in general is useful for developing a preliminary framework about contextual barriers we may expect to find. Moreover, the notions of boundaryless (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989) and protean (Hall,

1976) careers can provide explanatory angles because they take the perspective of individual agency and the capacity for resilience and flexibility in realizing favourable career outcomes.

### **Potential Barriers and Strategies of Migrants on the Way to the Top**

The literature suggests that institutional barriers, lack of language proficiency, and overt discrimination are potential barriers to migrants' careers. Social capital should be added to these.

Host country institutions may impose substantial career barriers on migrants by setting up unfavourable requirements for entering and progressing within the labour market (Author, 2012). There are labour regulations which impose restrictions on migrants in terms of obtaining visas and work permits (Rodriguez & Mearns, 2012). Also migrants may find it difficult to have their qualifications recognized and skills acknowledged by organizations in their host countries (Painter, 2013) and therefore end up accepting positions non-commensurable with their professional and academic qualifications (Almeida, Fernando, & Sheridan, 2012). In addition, professional associations and licensing bodies are known to set the boundaries of entry and access to elite professions such as medical doctors, lawyers, accountants, among others (Author, 2012). These trends hinder the internationalization of professional services and limit the employment opportunities for skilled migrants. Host country language proficiency is yet another potential issue (Chiswick & Miller, 2008). For example, simply foreign accent, with excellent otherwise command of the language, may create significant handicaps, since accents induce negative impressions of competence (Hosoda, Nguyen & Stone-Romero, 2012).

Another likely barrier is implicit or explicit discrimination resulting from negative stereotypes and attributions (Dietz, 2010; Pio & Essers, 2014). Migrants may be simply seen as inherently less knowledgeable and less capable and, hence, not given equal preference in promotion decisions or opportunities for key positions. The literature indicates that migrants of certain ethnic backgrounds are more vulnerable to negative discrimination in employment than others. For example, it has been found that highly skilled Turkish job seekers in Germany

suffered important career hindrances as a result of negative perceptions in German society about Turkish people (Baltes & Rudolph, 2010). This trend of racial discrimination appears widespread, for instance, with Latin Americans in the USA (Padilla 2008), or against Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in Canada and the UK (Model & Lin 2006). In another example, by examining techniques of job-search and wages of migrants in Canada, Fang et al. (2013) found that recruitment agencies tend to stereotype migrants. This type of discrimination could cause stress for migrants because they would perceive themselves as being constrained by the perceptions of the society in their new country (Bhagat & London, 1999) which could decrease their ability to engage with career opportunities.

Finally, intuitively speaking, lack of social capital with natives must also place serious limitations on advancing and reaching the top. The ties that provide the most useful social capital for career advancement are those with others in the dominant group of society (e.g., McDonald, Lin & Ao, 2009; Portes & Vickstrom, 2011). Natives normally form that dominant group. According to social identity and self-categorization theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), people categorize themselves and others according to salient features, with native origins being one such feature, and then identify and associate with those they perceive as belonging to the same categories as themselves. Hence, host country natives would be less likely to perceive migrants as similar to themselves and choose to associate with them, and *vice versa*.

Since there is a dearth of literature on migrants who have achieved successful careers, literature on the strategies migrants may use to advance to the top is naturally lacking. The present work seeks to redress this imbalance and provide knowledge on this issue as well.

### **Boundaryless and Protean Career Orientations**

Reaching the CEO suite is presumably a long and tedious journey with many setbacks and course corrections, and this should be even more so for immigrants. Successful completion of this path requires strong personal drive, flexibility and persistence in the face of obstacles. These requirements should apply even more strongly to migrants because, as already seen, they



apparently face greater barriers than natives. Indeed, recent life-history research with migrant women in New Zealand implies strong determination, flexibility and value-drive behind their quest for success (Pio & Essers, 2014).

The idea of boundaryless career (Arthur *et al.*, 1989; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) was introduced to account for careers under intense competition and uncertainty. Current thinking (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Lazarova & Taylor, 2009; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) assigns it two dimensions: psychological and physical. Psychological boundaryless means a mindset aligned with the idea of crossing job, occupational, organizational, and even national boundaries. A strong boundaryless mentality means heightened desire for reaching across functions or organizations, and for crossing through or even changing their occupational and organizational roles. Physical boundarylessness means actual movement across boundaries, such as moving in order to grasp a better job opportunity in another position, firm, or even country. The idea of protean career focuses on whether careers are driven by personal values and directed by personal choice (Hall, 1976, 2004). Driven by values means pursuing what one considers worthy and important, while self-direction means taking personal initiative instead of relying on one's employer or being left at the mercy of market forces (Briscoe & Hall, 2006).

Strong presence of protean and boundaryless elements facilitates career progression (Briscoe, Henagan, Burton, & Murphy, 2012; Muja & Appelbaum, 2012) because it enables setting career goals commensurate with one's own values along with initiative, resolution and flexibility in pursuing these goals (Segers, Inceoglu, Vloeberghs, Bartram, & Henderickx, 2008). The notions of boundaryless and protean career may, therefore, enhance understanding of what shapes the career journeys of migrants who manage to reach the CEO suite, because it makes sense to expect that these individuals need to demonstrate strong resolution, flexibility and agency in their career endeavours (Author, 2016).

To summarize, the work at hand focuses on migrants who managed to become CEOs in France to gain an understanding of: (1) the barriers faced on their way to the top; (2) the

strategies they deployed to overcome these barriers and reach success; and (3) the extent to which the notions of boundaryless and protean career help explain their career journeys.

### **Method**

A qualitative and exploratory (interviews) methodology was employed, as necessitated by the research goals and the nature of the target population. Migrant CEOs represent a tiny population in general and in France in particular (Davoine & Ravasi, 2013), with the consequent difficulties of locating and accessing them. Qualitative methods produce data whose richness may offset the unavailability of large samples (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, & Locke, 2008). In-depth interviews with 12 migrant CEOs of medium and large organizations in various industries in France were conducted. Their curriculum vitas were also requested and consulted in the process.

To ensure the rigor of this study (Amis & Silk, 2008), multiple means were employed to gain research access to them: snowballing, a selection technique where one participant recommends another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Silverman, 2005); contacts with leading professional networks and business leaders in France; and the authors' personal contacts. Finding migrant CEOs was more difficult than finding and contacting French CEOs, HR directors, and other stakeholders who are discussed below. To overcome this difficulty, at the debriefing stage of the interview, we explained the importance of the study to interviewees so that, when possible, they would provide the research team with contacts of other migrant CEOs they happened to be aware of. To achieve a diverse group of participants, purposeful sampling was used in selecting interviewees, a method that picks information-rich cases for in-depth study (Seidman, 1998; Maxwell, 1996). Table 1 provides the demographics of the migrant CEOs.

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INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

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For triangulation, which was considered necessary to enrich understanding of the role of contextual factors in migrant CEOs' route to the top, interviews with other stakeholders were also conducted. These included eight native French CEOs, seven human resource (HR) directors and diversity managers, and eight institutional actors involved in diversity and immigration matters (Tables 2 to 4 for demographics). These sources (a) enriched our understanding of the nature and the way in which organizational and institutional parameters affected the careers of migrant CEOs (especially interviews with HR directors/diversity managers and institutional actors); and (b) native French CEOs provided the required framework for comparison, the benchmark to start from in our mission to isolate the issues specific to migrants.

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INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

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A relational design and analytic framework (Özbilgin, 2006; Syed & Özbilgin, 2009) was adopted. This framework enables a nuanced understanding of phenomena such as careers that operate at different levels, which are interconnected and interwoven. This approach both enables and requires that researchers take into account the dynamics between various levels: individual (micro), organizational (meso), and institutional/national/international (macro), which may influence the phenomenon under study (Özbilgin, 2006; Syed & Özbilgin, 2009; and also Author, 2014; Author, 2011); and is deemed as especially useful in studying the careers of qualified immigrants because such careers are under the influence of factors at multiple levels (Author, 2016). The micro-level comprises an individual's subjective experiences, agency, and various forms of capital (for example, the perceptions of migrant CEOs about restrictions in their careers, and their reactive and proactive behaviours to these). The meso-level pertains to organizational mentalities, practices, and HR policies that may frame career paths and affect outcomes for particular groups. Finally, the macro-level refers to a

country's institutional context with its norms, values and legislation (Author, 2011; Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). In the present study, the macro-level also included the international dimension because particular migrant characteristics or skills (e.g., race, religion, culturally-bound habits and behaviours) may acquire different value across locations of multi-national corporations (e.g., see Furusawa & Brewster, 2015) that abound nowadays.

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Interview questions were aligned to the interviewees' profiles. For example, CEOs were asked about their career histories and pivotal points within these in detail (e.g., "can you describe your career path?"; "Did you encounter difficulties or sometimes failures? If yes, can you talk about these? ... How did you overcome these?"). This life history approach allowed accessing personal interpretations of events and individuals' own actions (Petit, 2012). The other informants were asked questions about diversity in organizations and migrants' careers within these organizations (sample questions posed to HR and diversity managers: "do you have specific programs, such as mentoring, etc., targeting high potentials belonging to diversity?", "what initiatives in favour of diversity were the most and least successful in your company?", "according to you why?"; sample questions posed to institutional actors: "how do you see diversity management in France in general?"; "how do you see diversity management in French companies?", "are there differences according to the hierarchical level, including access to management positions?", "according to you, how diversity management may evolve in France?").

It must be borne in mind that although different sources were utilized, our primary source of information was the migrant CEOs, whose careers were the focus. Therefore, the results and discussion naturally and primarily revolve around the findings of the interviews with the migrants CEOs.

All interviews but one (John, American, who preferred to be interviewed in English) were conducted in French, recorded, and fully transcribed. The interviewing and the analysis went together (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012; Langley, 1999). Therefore, each interview was transcribed and first-order analysed as soon as possible after it was conducted. A large number of interviewees' terms and issues emerged early in the research (in reference to Corbin and Strauss's [2015] notion of coding). In this first-order analysis, we attempted to faithfully follow the voice of the respondents. Naturally, the number of themes initially coded became quickly very large. As the analysis progressed, the research team started seeking similarities and differences among the many emerging themes, a process which reduced the themes to a more manageable number of categories. We then gave those categories labels and we reflected on the deeper second-order theoretical explanations emerging in light of our research questions. At this second stage, coding and making sense of the categories was partly guided by the research questions and the themes identified in the literature review (Fendt & Sachs, 2008). Coding differences, whenever they appeared, were discussed and resolved before proceeding to data interpretation. This stage led to the common themes that corresponded to five barriers and four career strategies, which are presented in the findings. This process is widely endorsed in qualitative research as a way to ensure the rigor of qualitative analysis (Gioia et al., 2012; Pratt, 2008; Tracy, 2010). This analytic strategy is known to be very effective in concept development (Gioia et al., 2012). For example, in our study, it guided us towards four concepts that represent strategies that migrants use to overcome career barriers and becoming CEOs, that is adaptation/adjustment, overcompensation, differentiation and manoeuvring. These concepts (explained in our findings and discussion) are general notions that capture propensities,

cognitions and behaviours of international migrants in their quest for career success, and allow the development of theory (Gioia et al., 2012).

In line with ethical guidelines (e.g., Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2015), but also for validity reasons, participants, all of whom were evidently desirous of giving the interview, were assured full anonymity. Pseudonyms were utilized from the data collection stage (their names did not appear in the tape recordings and they were referred to with their pseudonyms in the transcripts) and throughout the rest of the stages of the research. All participants, and especially the migrant CEOs, were eager in participating and providing their views and experiences. Nevertheless, full anonymity safeguarded that their responses reflected their actual views and experiences at their best recollection, which is a requirement for validity (Kuzmanic, 2009). On the other hand, we did not conduct further alterations (e.g., locations, ethnicities of participants) either in the interview transcripts or in the quotations within the paper, which are sometimes recommended as additional safeguarding towards anonymity (e.g., Tolich, 2004) because: (1) such alterations could have compromised content and meaning, hence the validity of conclusions, but also could have caused mistaken interpretations by the readers (Kaiser, 2009); and (2) such alterations are appropriate for vulnerable populations (Goodwin, Pope, Mort & Smith, 2003) and our participants by no means fall into that category, given that they had already reached powerful positions.

### **Findings**

In presenting the research findings of this study, we build on quotes from the participants in order to illustrate (1) the main career barriers migrants perceived they faced on their way to becoming CEOs, (2) the strategies they deployed; and (3) insights on the boundaryless and the protean elements in their careers. Quotes from the participants show the way meso- and macro-level factors created barriers to migrant CEOs' career advancement, their career strategies – tailored or not to particular barriers –, and the extent to which responses were revealing of boundaryless and protean career elements. The three pillars of the study, barriers, strategies,

career notions correspondence, were nested into each other, for example, the agentic nature of the protean and boundaryless notions underlined career strategies, some – though not all – of which were rooted into the perceived barriers.

### **Barriers to Becoming a CEO**

**Barrier 1: Elite qualifications.** Migrant CEOs indicated, and their French counterparts corroborated, that French ‘elite’ educational qualifications were of key importance in becoming a CEO, above and beyond actual competence or skills. These elite diplomas are conferred by a few schools, the *Grandes Écoles*, which in essence educate the future business and political elite of the country and stand apart from the mainstream university system.

In French companies, there are paths you need to have followed, schools you need to have gone to. So if you didn’t go to Science Po, HEC, Polytechnique, Centrale, it is more difficult... University diplomas don’t easily give access to important jobs. (Mokhtar, Moroccan, Migrant-CEO)

I had a significant handicap in seeking work in French companies: my diplomas. In France, people are very attached to the paper [diploma], and not very mindful about potential, which is more the case in Italy. (Carlo, Italian, Migrant-CEO)

“I was fortunate to make it to the university and get a Master’s degree in Sports Management, but it was not ‘bankable’ per se on the job market.” (Moussa, Malian, Migrant-CEO).

Native French CEOs corroborated but they were aware of the issue from the beginning of their careers and had thus dealt with it in various ways.

You know, sometimes the fact of not having studied in a particular school, such as Centrale...or a *Grande École*... So, even if you have proven yourself, sometimes you feel that there is still that little overhanging difference of treatment, more than I think in other countries. In France...if you haven't got the right label, your capabilities are not recognized. (Marc, French CEO)

This suggests that compared to native CEOs, migrant CEOs were by default at a disadvantage in terms of the value of their credentials in the host country job market.

On the other hand, surprisingly, the issue of elitist French qualifications – that migrants were unlikely to possess – was not detected in the accounts of HR directors and diversity managers. For them, the only mentionable issue was the integration of unskilled

migrants into firms and broader society. Problems that may be faced by qualified migrants in their advancement were beyond their awareness. Yet, institutional actors were more conscious of the weight of elitist education and their impact upon migrants' careers. For example, the president of a French association connecting large multinationals with smaller companies and policymakers noted:

Another thing, I think that this is still French history...In business, there is a pathway and there are schools that you have had to be part of. Therefore, if you didn't do Sciences Po [School of Political Science], or Centrale, it makes it harder...There are many, many, many people who are well-trained and who are able to take up positions of responsibility, but...because they followed a school or university programme that was a bit different...(Bouzid, President of a diversity and entrepreneurship association)

**Barrier 2: Language proficiency.** Ability to use the French language at a level similar to that of a native speaker also emerged as an obstacle. Imperfections in the use of the language were not easily forgiven, even when migrants were able to compensate with competence in another language that may have been more relevant to their job.

"It is more sensitive concerning communication... and when there is a problem, it easily turns against you" (Andreas, German, Migrant-CEO)

However, although mentioned by virtually everyone, the language perfection barrier was not a daunting issue for migrants from countries where French is widely spoken (e.g., former French colonies). Therefore, not perfectly mastering the French language with its explicit and implicit meanings, presented another perceived barrier for migrant CEOs.

**Barrier 3: Social capital.** Accumulation of social capital was very difficult for migrants because they had to break into the networks of powerful natives who share that social capital amongst themselves. This finding can be likened to a 'glass sphere': a transparent sphere that contains the top people who can be clearly seen from the outside, but which only allows in the people with the appropriate social ties. Those within the 'glass sphere' make the key decisions, including who is allowed to pass through the invisible barrier.

The percentage of people with migrant origins at the top of organizations is very, very low in France. In support jobs, you can find people with similar profiles to mine; at the executive levels, you can't... I think it is because of corporatism. Very often, these



people know each other, they lived together, and they spend time together, and finally, in these environments, there is no place for new entrants. (Mokhtar, Moroccan, Migrant-CEO)

Of course I had a network in sport that I developed during my first career as a professional player, but I didn't have any business network... To be honest, I should have understood - because I had already been confronted with racism and discrimination" (Moussa, Malian, Migrant-CEO).

In line with the perceptions of migrants, some institutional actors mentioned that many large French firms have been historically owned by families that usually do not open key positions to outsiders, especially those who are seen as 'alien,' such as migrants.

It is existing corporatism in operation. These are people who know each other, who live in a close-knit group, who socialize together... and in such circles, there is no room for newcomers. (Bouزيد, President of a diversity and entrepreneurship association)

French CEOs noted the importance of relationship ties, but from their native standpoint, they had no difficulties accumulating social capital by various means, including family connections, elitist alumni networks, professional associations, as well as personal connections that provided privileged links with business leaders and policy-makers:

[speaking about his initial education in the preparatory schools for the elitist *Grandes Écoles* ] I went to a preparatory school for the Navy, which was run by the Christian Brothers. That really and clearly significantly triggered things off...I still maintain close contact with my fellow-peers...because they also come up against the same issues...So, it is good to exchange in a neutral manner...In fact, never a week goes by without receiving a call from one or other of them. (Jean, French CEO)

Finally, both HR directors/diversity managers and institutional actors alike considered the acquisition of social capital ("network building") as solely an individual's responsibility. Hence, improving access to networks or key individuals – for example, mentors - for migrants was not within their mental horizon much less in their agendas.

**Barrier 4: Fitting in with the native cultural mindsets and behavioural norms.** This was a meso-level barrier and refers to understanding native cultural norms regarding appropriate work behaviour and business thinking. Comprehending and abiding by these subtle codes was viewed by all migrant CEOs as key to gaining the acceptance of organizational decision makers because it grants 'cultural weight'. On the way to the upper echelons, and

especially around and near the top, it was ‘cultural weight’ that, according to them, provided the impetus, much more so than competence and skills.

When I came to France, I did not know the business culture here and its unsaid concepts. For example, when the CEO speaks and has an idea – even a terrible idea – you don’t express that as an employee. In the US, they actually encourage that! If there is a bad idea, you are asked to point it out. I didn’t know that speaking out was not considered appropriate in France... There is one situation that was significantly challenging. The CEO had proposed an idea and I said in a meeting that I was against it because it was a bad idea. I was surprised that even my closest colleagues didn’t support me on that! After that, I noticed that I had been ostracized from future decision-making processes that I used to be part of before... If you aren’t listening entirely and if you don’t really say ‘yes’, you won’t be in the circle anymore... (John, American, Migrant-CEO)

Anglo-Saxon cultures allow people to express their opinion. It is not the case in the French culture... It is more restrictive. In France, there is a style of management that I call the ‘Louis XIV style’. The manager is the Sun King. Here, who would dare say no to the boss? I remember once, on purpose, I asked one of my managers to do several work tasks, including a few that I knew were the wrong actions, and when I asked him if he had understood me, his answer was, “Yes, I’ll take care of it.” Then I told him that I knew that he knew some of the points were wrong and that he should challenge me on that. Then he left, and I’m pretty sure that he was thinking ‘This guy is stupid!’” (Omar, Egyptian, Migrant-CEO)

**Barrier 5: Stereotyping and prejudice.** According to migrant CEOs, there is negative stereotyping, mistrust and prejudice against migrants that often translates into negative discrimination.

As an Italian, I’ve had, on occasion, to face mistrust, as we have the reputation in France of being ‘slick’ and ‘cheaters,’ so people sometimes had trouble believing what I said. (Carlo, Italian, Migrant-CEO)

You know I am a foreigner. I was involved in the top circle but when they realized who I am, they pushed me out of it and it was very difficult to get back in. Yeah, I thought it was sort of the wrong place. There are some levels of discrimination at play. (John, American, Migrant-CEO)

The French are unconsciously racist... I left the company because I knew I had reached the glass ceiling. There were positions above, but I knew I couldn’t access them because of my nationality and my name. (Omar, Egyptian, Migrant-CEO)

It emerged, however, that cultural distance between France and the country of origin, coupled with the French colonial history, seems to exacerbate this phenomenon. Migrants from

countries with less perceived cultural proximity with France or from ex-colonies tended to testify to more negative stereotyping and prejudice than migrants from Western cultures.

I have a skin colour that you can hardly hide...and also a name. I've been confronted with racism and discrimination...The national statistics are here...It is much more difficult for a foreigner, especially if he/she looks like a foreigner. (Moussa, Malian, Migrant-CEO)

Nevertheless, a distinction in treatment was also discerned among Western migrants, with North-Americans experiencing more negative stereotyping than Europeans.

It is informative to note that only one of the above barriers was shared with the native French CEOs, namely Barrier 1 (elite qualifications). Some French CEOs mentioned lack of such qualifications (essentially a Grande École diploma) as a cause of difficulties in their ascendance to the top. The difference, however, with migrant CEOs was that the native French were aware of this from the beginning of their careers, hence, they were cognizant of and prepared accordingly. Migrants had discovered it on the way, making it more difficult to deal with. Some French CEOs also mentioned the importance of social capital and the fact that they had to consciously work on building social capital with key individuals as part of their career strategy. However, the barrier for the migrant CEOs was “lack of social capital with natives”. For French CEOs other natives were the natural type of tie to build, which – for reasons explained in the theoretical part - was not the case for the migrant CEOs. As to be seen below, despite considering ties with natives as a barrier to career progression, migrants did not seem to deploy a strategy as direct response to it.

The responses of organizational and institutional players revealed two rather contradictory pictures. While institutional actors' views largely concurred with those of migrant CEOs, the topic of ethnicity/nationality was either absent or severely downplayed by HR directors and diversity managers. These understood “diversity” only in terms of gender or physical disability, while their discussion of ethnicity was confined within the general principles of equality.

“Here is how it goes: we have professions that become gradually accessible to women, and because of this fact, they [the women] in turn also become gradually attracted to these

professions, while at the same time there is an issue, in terms of ease of integration of women candidates, there is also some ‘resistance’ in women candidates to embrace such professions ... So you see, this has to be approached from both sides. So this is something that is done little by little in terms of gender mix, and even gender equality.” (Julien, Diversity Manager, DRH4)

The views of French CEOs on diversity and migrants largely echoed HR directors and diversity managers’ perspectives. Their responses revolved around the general principles of equality and similarity (rather than differences). For example:

All this about affirmative action etc.... But up to now, I have never had a collaborator or a manager who had a rotten attitude to any future manager on the basis of ethnic, religious or gender differences. I have never encountered this in respect to myself...I think that there is too much emphasis put on such issues. (Christophe, French CEO)

In contrast, as noted, institutional actors demonstrated much greater awareness. For example:

As soon as you move up in the hierarchy, there aren't many people of foreign origin to be seen. It is often true that being managed by someone whose origin or religion is different to one's own is not often accepted. In France, we are in the habit of saying that ‘the French are the best; we are the ones who know best’ ... It is our colonialist vision of ourselves, ‘we are the strongest, we know better than anyone else’. (Sophie, Senior manager specialized in diversity, MEDEF – the largest union of business owners in France)

In addition, at times, they questioned whether there was congruence between rhetoric and practice within firms on the matter of ethnic diversity.

In [name of company], I see it as a show that’s almost fashionable and also obligatory, [to talk about] integration, corporate responsibility...I also see HR marketing in it, excessively so. And there, I get it. I work with [list of large companies], they do it by obligation...but in the day-to-day reality, I don’t see any difference between the beginning when I worked with them nine years ago and today, I don’t see a single one... it’s incredible. And after, even in practice, I’ve not spotted a single non-French director in nine years in the region. (Arthur, Senior consultant specialized in HR and diversity)

### **Strategies for Ascending to the Top**

To reach their career objectives, migrants deployed four main strategies: adaptation/adjustment, overcompensation, differentiation and manoeuvring. The former two strategies enabled them to navigate within the confines of the system and fit in by hiding or compensating for their differences, whereas the latter two enabled them to interact with the system’s limitations by exploiting their differences and turning these into advantages.

**Adaptation/Adjustment.** This strategy consisted of identifying, assimilating and abiding by cultural norms; mastering spoken and implicit French language codes; understanding the business' mindset and conforming to it; as well as deciphering organizational politics and penetrating them. This strategy was used by all migrant CEOs, particularly when facing barrier types 1, 2 and 4. Typically, they adopted this strategy from their early career stages.

Interviews with French CEOs provided a glimpse into what it means to be a CEO and what it takes to become one within the French context. A CEO was portrayed by them as someone who adopts a paternalistic style that touches upon authoritarianism, who is also able to handle power and political games and survive 'cut-throat' competition [e.g., "It is competitive. One should be aware; there is really competition between people, and there are some who wouldn't hesitate at walking over others to take their place." (Victoire, French CEO)]

In their way to the top, migrants had to deal with the challenges that are common to all (above), along with learning to adapt their own management style to French norms, and coping with barriers that were unique to migrants. The case of John from the USA is illustrative:

It is necessary for survival in France to speak French...and so I learned the language...After four years, I can understand much of what is happening, maybe around 75%, so if I go to a meeting in French, it's not a problem...I don't think that the company was ready for the type of management I brought with me... So I [also] learned from these three years [after being ostracized from the top circle for having contradicted the CEO].... (John, American, Migrant-CEO)

Clarissa from Germany noted that, apart from her non-perfect French and her non-elite diploma, her reluctance to play political games was an additional barrier to overcome:

I spoke French but I was making mistakes and I had a strong accent so I was getting disagreeable comments such as 'Hey, they recruited a German', 'She doesn't speak enough French!' That acted as a booster, and I made huge efforts to speak well... My remaining weakness is my diploma level... I've been learning so much about political games for the last three years that I know now how to make war; I know how to do politics! I still don't like it, but I know now how to deal with it. (Clarissa, German, Migrant-CEO)

**Overcompensation.** This strategy focuses on demonstrating more in terms of competence and performance than what would be expected from natives. In this way, migrants tried to partly

make up for what they may lack in other domains, such as linguistic skills, social capital, elite qualifications, and ‘cultural capital’. They did so by fully using their experiences and knowledge in a way to demonstrate to their organizations that they can over-perform compared to other employees. In this way, the migrant CEOs' assumption was that their employers would recognize them as key talents for the sake of organizational business success.

How did I overcome that [feeling of discrimination]? By trying to be twice as competent or to perform twice as well as someone who is more inside the ‘normal’ frame. (Tariq, Pakistani, Migrant-CEO)

Any foreigner who works in France is like a woman in a man’s environment, if you understand what I mean. You have to work twice as hard and three times more effectively to make it, to succeed. (Omar, Egyptian, Migrant-CEO)

**Differentiation.** This strategy consisted of migrants cleverly trying to take advantage of any differences that could add value to their capacity to do the job and to offer to their employers. It involved using personal features, skills and qualities that natives were lacking. This meant, for example, taking a mission or position abroad where their ethnicity, culture or linguistic skills made them ideal candidates. This strategy was often used together with the adaptation/adjustment strategy. Differentiation was most likely when facing barriers of type 3, 4 and 5. In this case, the diversity background of the participants became a strength (rather than a weakness) as it brought success to the organizations in which they were employed.

An opportunity in the group arose abroad. It was in line with my interests, so I said, ‘yes’. I left and from there things have rapidly evolved...In France, the fact that you belong to a diverse group is almost a defect. Today, working in Dubai and belonging to a diverse workforce, I see that as an advantage. Here, having a Muslim name facilitates connections. My difference is an asset today. (Tariq, Pakistani, Migrant-CEO)

I see myself as someone within whom different cultures are melting, and I’m more attuned to what that offers me rather into the obstacles it represents in daily life. (Moussa, Malian, Migrant-CEO)

**Manoeuvring.** This involved intentional and frequent change in direction or work environment by moving across jobs or firms, crossing subsidiaries, innovating, or even quitting the employer and starting one’s own company for a while. When performing those manoeuvres,

their aim was to bring themselves into a position that would make the top more reachable by bypassing obstacles. This was the only strategy that French CEOs also employed (though not quite for the same reasons). However, it was especially pronounced in migrant CEOs, as demonstrated by their intense movement across organizational and functional barriers. The strategy appeared particularly likely when facing barriers 1, 3 and 5.

I left the company because I knew I had reached the glass ceiling...  
(Omar, Egyptian, Migrant-CEO)

I soon understood, because I was confronted with discrimination, that if I wanted to succeed I should not put myself on the job market the conventional way but start my own firm. (Moussa, Malian, Migrant-CEO)

Although in some cases actions that fell into this strategy could be seen as parallel to the differentiation strategy, these two strategies are clearly distinct. The manoeuvring strategy primarily aims at bypassing or avoiding obstacles altogether, while the differentiation strategy aims at turning perceived disadvantages due to migrant/foreigner status into advantages.

Finally, it emerged that strategies were utilized at different career stages and as responses to particular barriers, as summarized in Table 5. This enabled migrants to realize their full career potential.

Of the above strategies, analysis showed that only manoeuvring was also employed by French CEOs. The aim was the same, to move closer to the top or to earn a long-term career advantage. However, narrations suggested that for French CEOs manoeuvring, and especially its timing, was more under their own control than it was for migrant CEOs. That is French CEOs had more latitude in choosing the moment they would perform their moves. Migrants were more restricted in this, as there were mostly the circumstances (e.g., perception that glass ceiling had been reached or that their superiors were not positive towards them) that would dictate, or force, them to move somewhere else.

Before progressing with the findings as to the boundariless and protean frameworks, it is worth mentioning that the narrations of the two female migrant CEOs did not reveal any

barriers caused by their gender per se. That is at no point were there hints in their narrations that being women was an additional burden for them. On the other hand, the study was designed to look at career experiences that were related to the migrant status, hence, there were no specific questions on gender.

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### **The Boundaryless and Protean Elements**

The careers of all migrant CEOs contained strong protean and boundaryless elements. This suggested potent agency. Psychological mobility was reflected in statements like the following:

Changing companies and positions has never scared me. I don't think you should plan too much in your career: Have a more free spirit, seize opportunities, and don't stay in a predetermined frame that might not adapt to your journey, your needs, your expectations. (Carlo, Italian, Migrant-CEO)

The strong physical mobility was evident by the average number of firms, five – revealed in their CVs and confirmed in the interviews - that our migrant CEOs had worked for after graduation from university. The average for European and US CEOs is three firms (Hamori & Kakarika, 2009). Furthermore, our migrant CEOs had occupied at least six senior managerial positions before reaching the CEO position.

Our migrants made career choices according to their own personal ideals (that included reaching the top, being independent, and pursuing their ideas), and they clearly wanted to be in charge of their own fates. This strongly abides to the protean career notion.

I've always wanted to be a CEO or to be independent. When I changed jobs and joined my current company, it was with the clear objective to end up managing the subsidiary within a five-year time frame. (Tariq, Pakistani, Migrant-CEO)

In all my jobs, I've always had in mind that one day I could be my boss's successor. It has always been what drives me... When I start a new position, I always figure out I'm in a cycle of two to three years, and once I've reached a certain level, I'm looking for another opportunity. (Aïcha, Algerian, Migrant-CEO)



Apparently, the strong boundaryless and protean elements enabled these migrants to identify and manoeuvre through obstacles posed by organizational and institutional elements, but also to spot and seize opportunities while remaining focused on their goals.

### **The Meso- and Macro-level Situations in Migrant Ascendance to the Top**

The testimonies of the various actors revealed an uneven picture with respect to awareness and policies on migrants with qualifications and career potential at the meso- and macro-level in France. This was yet another important finding. Although the topic of diversity was apparently embraced by firms and institutions, its notion was confined to physical handicap, gender and, to some extent, age. The following quote is illustrative:

I refuse, by the way, to implement positive discrimination regardless of the population: men, women, disabled, homosexual. However, let me put it like this: I would say that the absence of discrimination is the basis on which the business is run.” (Aline, HR Director)

With respect to migrants or foreigners, diversity was absent from official policies but also from institutional and firm mentalities.

For us, diversity starts from here and is something we consider as natural. We don't do specific actions to favour diversity; it is an openness of the mind to exchange. (Francis, HR Director)

We don't work specifically on this, but that being the case, we don't put any barriers to it either. When we process the CV, it sometimes happens that we take people from different communities. (Paul, HR Director, DRH7)

Only after prompting was diversity described as relevant to unskilled migrants who alone may need assistance. References to the French colonial past hinted that the topic was “taboo.” For example, compiling statistics on ethnicity is illegal in France for governments or companies.

Only a minority of firms were open to migrants. Their profiles fell into two extremes: either larger firms with an international orientation or smallish French firms (i.e., medium size in our study) whose owners or founders apparently valued diverse ethnic backgrounds as a source of abilities, skills and creativity. All these firms were looking for talent from any source or direction. However, for the majority of firms, openness towards ethnic diversity appeared

more a matter of rhetoric, particularly at the senior level. Hence, pertinent policies might be implemented at lower levels, while at the top it was the ‘glass sphere’ that governed decisions on ascendance.

Concerning organizations, it would be nice if diversity was not only on the photo, but also appears on the organization chart. And concerning the chart, it is not just about the lower levels, but also the upper levels, with promotions that are not based on favouritism but on competencies. (Kofi, Togolese, Migrant-CEO)

From the day I started, I haven’t seen real changes in these companies... And at the top, the diversity you find is close to zero... progress is very slow... (Arthur, Senior consultant specialized in HR and diversity)

### **Discussion**

The major contribution of this study is the development of frameworks of barriers that migrants face in their route to becoming CEOs and the strategies they employ to arrive at the top. This is in line with recent calls on the importance of identifying barriers faced along with strategies utilized by qualified migrants to reach the upper management echelons (Author, 2016). These frameworks are of significance in the light of the importance of CEOs themselves, the increasing pool of qualified immigrants, and evidence that integration of qualified migrants into the top team increases firms’ competitiveness. A second contribution is the identification of the institutional/organizational perspective with regards to the ascendance of migrants to the top, which has thus far been overlooked in research. The third contribution is finding that the notions of boundaryless and protean careers can, in combination and only in combination, provide an explanatory vehicle for the capacity of those migrants to reach the top, hence, extending the range of usefulness of these two key concepts within career studies. To realize these contributions, we adopted a relational approach using triangulated data from interviews with migrant and French CEOs, HR directors and diversity managers, and institutional actors.

#### **Discussion of career barriers.**

In their review of international migration, Author (2015) concluded that meso-level factors, such as exploring HRM strategy at organizational level vis-a-vis the foreign qualified

workforce, have been overlooked. Our study uncovered discrepancies and tensions in the accounts and perspectives of individuals, organizations and institutions on the matter. While migrants perceived multiple key barriers to their career progression, HR directors and diversity managers appeared generally ignorant of them. On the contrary, institutional actors (mostly working on diversity issues) demonstrated substantial awareness of the problems qualified migrants face in their careers and transmitted the belief that ethnic diversity is a “taboo” topic that deserves more overt attention.

According to the literature, migrants may face problems with recognition of their qualifications. What emerged, however, was different in the sense that only elite educational qualifications are valued in France as far as ascendance to top positions is concerned. Hence, even full recognition of migrants’ credentials could not eliminate the problem. In essence, therefore, elite credentials could pose a handicap for the entirety of an immigrant’s career. Linguistic competence also emerged as an obstacle, primarily concerning migrants who were not from countries where French is widely spoken. This could arguably be described as the least serious of barriers because it is to some extent rectifiable.

In line with our theoretical speculation, lack of appropriate social capital was yet another obstacle (which, however, did not seem to generate a corresponding career strategy). Migrants, as outsiders, reported substantial difficulties in developing meaningful career-enhancing ties with people in positions of power.

The rest of the identified barriers were more subtle in the sense that developing awareness of them required a longer period of experience in the host country. One major such hurdle was cultural norms (such as not to question authority and being politically astute). In particular, it emerged that a major norm to be aware of and abide to was not to question the superior pretty much under any circumstances, even in cases it was evident that the superior was clearly wrong to the extent that could harm the organization. That cultural assumption that the leader is not to be challenged was at odds with beliefs, apparently instilled as part of national cultural and

educational background, of the majority of migrant CEOs. It is interesting to note that the “untouchability” of the leader was odd not only for migrants from countries where the distance between supervisor-subordinate is low (e.g., the US, Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010), but also from countries where that distance is rather strong, such as Egypt (e.g., see quote from Omar, Egyptian, Migrant CEO, p. 16). Until migrants became aware of these norms, typically via painful trial and error, they could not seriously contest positions towards the top because of lack of appropriate ‘cultural weight’ (or ‘cultural capital’ as per Bourdieu, 1986). However, acquisition of such cultural weight often necessitated disguise or abandonment of espoused cultural principles of behaviour.

Findings on the barriers of social capital and cultural norms led us to conceptualize the notion we termed the ‘glass sphere’, referring to individuals at the top who share common characteristics that have probably helped them to reach that level in the first place. Despite its ostensible transparency, however, the ‘glass sphere’ is very selective as to who is allowed to cross its boundaries. Participants’ accounts indicated lack of knowledge about how one could enter this sphere. What was only clear was that sheer skills, abilities and performance were not sufficient. It appeared that factors, such as French elite qualifications, previous connections such as through family ties with members of that elite group, and ‘cultural weight’, facilitate entry. Migrants, however, apparently and ironically have an *a priori* and largely irrevocable deficit in these. What further reduced the probabilities of entry into the ‘glass sphere’ was perceived direct discrimination due to stereotyping, mistrust and prejudice coupled with organizational and institutional magnifiers (e.g., lack of any policies). Without exception, migrant participants keenly felt themselves the target of prejudice and direct discrimination.

As noted, the identified barriers differed in terms of how immediately discernible and how rectifiable they were, with these two not being perfectly related. For example, the language barrier was both easy to discern and potentially possible to rectify. On the other hand, the glass

sphere would take time to identify and would require deployment of multiple strategies to penetrate with uncertain results.

### **Discussion of migrant CEOs career strategies.**

On their way to the CEO suite, migrants apparently employed four main strategies. These strategies were usually utilized in combination and sequentially. That enabled the migrants who made it to the CEO suite to navigate through and over barriers with success. Though most strategies were linked, albeit non-perfectly, to particular barriers, some conspicuous barriers did not seem to evoke specific strategies. To illustrate, there was very little to suggest that migrant CEOs had expended conscious efforts to develop social capital with natives. The reasons can only be speculated upon, a possible explanation being that migrants did not feel there was a critical mass of others who are like them or who sympathize with them in the upper echelons and, hence, may have considered developing ties with those at the top as unrealistic.

Strategies fell into two categories: First, those aiming at assimilation and increasing the probabilities of acceptance into the existing system, which included adaptation/adjustment and overcompensation. By means of these strategies, migrants tried to integrate themselves into the system by becoming as much like the natives as possible and by gaining recognition via demonstrating greater input. Under the principle of equality, which was transmitted by French CEOs and institutional players, these strategies should be sufficient – but apparently they were not. The second category included strategies, such as differentiation and manoeuvring, via which migrants proclaimed their unique features or competencies. Differentiation aimed at taking advantage of features and skills that natives may lack, such as linguistic or negotiation skills with other cultures, hence, turning a difference or disadvantageous feature into an advantage. The manoeuvring strategy aimed at bypassing obstacles by changing the setting to a more favourable one, for example, transferring to a position where one's skills may be valued more or to an organization that was perceived as less discriminating. In this case too, they did not deny their differences but instead tried to find an environment that would accommodate

them better. Indeed, findings suggest two organizational mentalities in terms of discrimination: one that apparently represents the majority of firms where diversity is valued only in rhetorical terms; and one that is limited to a minority of firms – either large multinationals or small firms that depend on innovativeness – where competence rather than ascriptive criteria is valued. By seeking a timely move to firms with the latter mentality, our migrants did not deny their differences but instead tried to find environments that would accommodate them better. Although migrants' agency is sometimes underestimated (e.g., Essers, Benschop, & Doorewaard, 2010), these two strategies are indicative of strong agency, which brings us to the next section.

### **The protean and boundaryless elements in the careers of migrant CEOs.**

Strong protean and boundaryless elements in migrants' journeys to the top were identified, which are indicative of potent agency that enabled them to impose themselves and navigate their way by bypassing obstacles or shortening the route towards the top.

Clear in the narrations of migrant CEOs were both elements of the protean career, drive by personal values and self-direction (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Hall, 2004). These had enabled them to create conditions they considered favourable for their careers. A major personal value was the desire to constantly move upwards, in many cases with the specific goal of becoming a CEO. The case of Aïcha from Algeria, who mentioned that every time she was taking a new position, she envisaged herself becoming the successor for her boss, is characteristic of that. The second protean element, self-direction, was especially conspicuous. What was detected in the narrations of virtually all migrant participants was a very strong determination to take their careers into their own hands and assume control over their own destiny. This allowed them to navigate their ways and take initiatives that enabled them to bypass obstacles or to shorten the route towards the top. That was achieved either by consciously moving into positions that enhanced their career within the same firm, or by moving across firms and occasionally starting their own companies when they considered that a 'ceiling' or deadlock had been reached with

their present employers. That proactivity into creating conditions they perceived as favorable towards reaching the ultimate goal, the top, appeared to be key in their adventures.

Both elements of the boundaryless career were also clearly noticeable. Strong psychological mobility manifested itself by means of migrant CEOs' alertness and constant readiness to move in response to threats to or opportunities for their career plans. Psychological mobility materialized as actual mobility, the second dimension of boundaryless career, which manifested itself as tendency to bridge across domains of responsibility, functions, organizations, or even national borders, which was evident in the career patterns of participants. Indeed, motion was one of the major features in the careers of our migrants who had reached the CEO suite.

Apparently, it was the combination of all protean and boundaryless elements that enabled these migrants to succeed. It is doubtful that the presence of only some of these elements would lead to the same outcome. For example, simply aiming at the top and desiring to master one's own fate (the two protean elements) would not have paid dividends in the absence of a mindset attuned to constant monitoring of the environment for potential moves within and outside or of the willingness to actually attempt such moves (the boundaryless mindset). This would not enable navigation through certain barriers (for example, stereotyping or prejudice by an employer) or grasping an opportunity to move into a more advantageous position. Similarly, continual monitoring of the environment and readiness to cross boundaries would have had limited effect in the absence of clear goals linked to personal values and determination to take ownership of one's career. In that sense, our migrants fall into what Briscoe and Hall (2006) labelled "protean career architects", a rare breed of individuals in whom all four elements of proteity and boundarylessness are present and strong (Briscoe & Hall).

### **Managerial Implications**

Within what is essentially a globalized business world and a war for talent, domestic and international organizations can benefit from the rich human resources pool of qualified

migrants. To do so, however, firms should help talented migrants advance towards the top by attenuating serious obstacles for them. For instance, an actively inclusive and differentiated strategy in staffing, retention, and development can ensure that firms are able to employ, retain and develop talented migrants and, therefore, reap benefits from this process. Before that stage, however, it seems that a change in mentality is in order. As it stands, ironically, it appears that qualified migrants, at least within the French context, are in essence marginalized by being seen as ‘equal’ and hence not in need of any particular support. Therefore, a change of mindset in many indigenous firms and executives is apparently necessary if they are to take advantage of unique inputs that qualified migrants have to offer by occupying top positions.

The implication for qualified migrants themselves is that constant movement, in terms of both mentality and actual physical movement, is necessary to reach the CEO position. Our study showed that being a qualified migrant within a country with strong cultural and institutional stereotypes that require meeting specific profiles for reaching the top means an inherent disadvantage in most cases. This is further exacerbated by the apparent lack of recognition by native business leaders and HR professionals of the problems migrants with qualifications and career potential face. Hence, the willingness to exert extraordinary effort and to adapt are in order, as is the capacity to use all special personal qualities and differential skills to one’s own advantage. What is equally important is not to hesitate to move, however personally inconvenient this may be, when the circumstances dictate.

This study suggests that in organizations having no systems or plans – and sometimes not even awareness – for managing their qualified migrants, international migrants find themselves fighting alone against difficult hurdles, unable to break into the glass-sphere, and having their talents disregarded and unexploited. Therefore, there is an urgent need for research to devote effort toward identifying relevant HRM strategies and practices (see, for example Author, 2015) that can help better manage the talented migrants, which is ultimately of benefit of host organizations, the host country and society as a whole.



### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

A limitation of the study pertains to its generalizability to other major host countries. It must be borne in mind that the research was exploratory in nature, the primary aim and concern being the valid identification of career barriers and strategies of migrant CEOs within one particular context rather than generalizability. Therefore, our findings have to be treated as an initial general framework that is useful for guidance, and further investigations in other countries that are established migrant destinations are necessary to establish its generalizability. Nevertheless, our view is that the majority of findings are applicable to other national contexts, but the degree differs. To illustrate, we expect that lack of social capital with natives must be an issue in every culture; however, the extent may differ noticeably considering that the influence of social capital on careers depends on societal characteristics (e.g., Bozionelos, 2015). For example, Bozionelos (2015) developed the argument that the importance of social capital for career progression relates to the strength and combination of institutional and in-group collectivism (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004) in the society. Similarly, a combination of boundaryless and protean mentalities should also be a characteristic behind migrants' ascendance to CEOs' positions everywhere, but the extent to which strong physical mobility (frequent moves) is necessary may depend on the degree to which meso- (organizational) and macro- (institutional) structures and mentalities in the society are matured and 'friendly' towards migrants. Cultural capital should also be important everywhere but the degree to which cultural 'mistakes' are forgiven along with the content of the cultural norms (for example, the cultural norm of not questioning the leader that emerged in our study) must differ. Yet we believe that some findings may be quite specific to our particular national context. For example, the apparent imperative of having attended particular elite educational institutions may be peculiar to France. To illustrate, though elite qualifications enhance career progression in Anglo-Saxon societies (Australia, North America, the United Kingdom), also major recipients of immigrants, their importance is less pronounced there (Bruni, 2015); while

in Germanic countries the institution where the qualification was earned bears very limited, if any, relationship to career progression (Ellersgaard *et al.*, 2013). Future research, therefore, should seek to investigate the career trajectories of migrants who reached the CEO suite in other countries that are established destinations for immigrants, so the frameworks developed in the study at hand can be further consolidated or enriched and adjusted accordingly.

In addition, the present study employed migrants who managed to navigate their way to the top. We can safely speculate that many other migrants did not achieve the same outcome despite having good credentials and strong intentions. Therefore, it will be worth also studying those migrants who had good backgrounds or even promising starts but never broke into upper organizational echelons in host countries. This may provide additional insights into elements such as barriers, strategies, personal characteristics, or even happenstance that exclusive focus on those who succeeded may have missed (see, for example, Ciampa, 2005).

Finally, the study was not designed to investigate whether gender, and in particular being a woman, imposed additional obstacles to migrant CEOs. Gender plays a role in the ascendance to the top in general (e.g., Helfat *et al.*, 2006), hence, it is not unlikely that gender by itself or in terms of intersection with other migrant characteristics (such as ethnicity) is an additional factor in migrants' quest to reach the top. Future research should, therefore, look at whether there are differences in the experiences, and consequent career strategies, of female and male migrants who ascend to the executive suite.

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Table 1: Descriptive information for migrant CEOs

#	Fictitious name	Nationality of origin	Gender	Size of companies they worked for*
1	Carlo	Italian	Male	M / L
2	Issam	Lebanese	Male	S / M / L
3	Omar	Egyptian	Male	S / M / L
4	Clarissa	German	Female	L
5	John	American (USA)	Male	S / M / L
6	Andreas	German	Male	L
7	Tariq	Pakistani	Male	L
8	Aïcha	Algerian	Female	L
9	Kofi	Togolese	Male	S / M
10	Mokhtar	Moroccan	Male	S / M
11	Moussa	Malian	Male	S / M
12	Theodoros	Greek	Male	S / L

\*S: small; M: medium; L: large

Table 2: Descriptive information for French CEOs

#	Fictitious name	Gender	Size of companies they worked for*
1	Jean	Male	M / L
2	Marc	Male	S / L
3	Victoire	Female	M / L
4	Christophe	Male	S / M
5	Louis	Male	S / M
6	Vincent	Male	S / M / L
7	Thomas	Male	M / L
8	Daniel	Male	L

\*S: small; M: medium; L: large

Table 3: Descriptive information for HR directors and diversity managers

#	Fictitious name	HR Directors / Diversity managers	Gender	Size of companies they worked for
1	Charles	HR Director	Male	L
2	Aline	HR Director	Female	M / L
3	Caroline	Diversity manager	Female	L
4	Julien	Diversity manager	Male	L
5	Elisabeth	HR Director	Female	L
6	Francis	HR Director	Male	M / L
7	Paul	HR Director	Male	L

\*S: small; M: medium; L: large

Table 4: Descriptive information for institutional actors

#	Fictitious name	Institutional actor	Gender	Size of companies they worked for
1	Viviane	Institutional decision maker at the regional level	Female	S / L
2	Corinne	Senior consultant specialized in HR	Female	M / L
3	Georges	President of a diversity association	Male	S / M
4	Nathalie	Senior consultant specialized in HR and diversity	Female	S / M / L
5	Arthur	Senior consultant specialized in HR and diversity	Male	S / M / L
6	Sophie	Senior manager specialized in diversity (MEDEF)	Female	S / M
7	Martin	Legal specialist	Male	S / M
8	Bouزيد	President of a diversity and entrepreneurship association	Male	S

\*S: small; M: medium; L: large

Table 5: Barriers and strategies pertaining to migrant CEOs careers at the individual, organizational, and institutional level.

**Barrier 1: Elite qualifications:**

*Individual level:*

Migrant CEOs' previous diploma did not fit into the categories recognized by French organizations as national elitist educational institutions (essentially the 'Grandes Écoles'). So they had to undertake further studies in French elitist educational institutions, such as MBAs, in order to gain legitimacy.

*Organizational level:*

HR directors and diversity managers ignoring the impact of elitist qualifications and giving less importance to meritocracy.

French CEOs recognizing this problem but doing nothing to overcome it.

*Institutional/national level:*

Institutional actors recognizing this issue as a problem but leaving it to organizations and individuals to solve it.

Strategies of migrant CEOs to overcome barrier 1: Adaptation, Manoeuvring

**Barrier 2: Language proficiency:**

*Individual level:*

Learning to speak French perfectly (without a foreign accent) and understanding the codes of the language. How/when/how to use French words and understand linguistic subtleties.

*Organizational level:*

French CEOs, HR directors and diversity managers do not recognize this barrier and therefore do nothing to help migrant CEOs to overcome it.

*Institutional level:*

Problem ignored at the institutional level.

Strategies of migrant CEOs to overcome barrier 2: Adaptation/adjustment , overcompensation, differentiation

**Barrier 3: Social capital:***Individual level:*

Migrant CEOs did not belong to the French *Grande École* alumni. They did not have family connections. They had to re-build their own networks but were never able to catch up with the French CEOs in this respect. French CEOs were born and raised in France, went to preparatory schools, *Grande Écoles* and/or prestigious universities in France. Therefore they had more time to build strong social capital in France. Some of them had families that were historically very well connected to the French higher social classes.

*Organizational level:*

HR directors and diversity managers ignoring the fact that migrant CEOs need help in terms of building their networks. Instead, the assumption is that individuals should have and bring their own networks.

French CEOs recognizing the effect of social capital on their career progress and utilizing it.

*Institutional/national level:*

Strong alumni, families, professional associations, politicians backing-up French CEOs.

Strategies of migrant CEOs to overcome barrier 3: Differentiation, Manoeuvring

**Barrier 4: Fitting in with the native cultural mindsets and behavioural norms:***Individual level:*

Efforts required from migrant CEOs to understand and learn how power/politics operates in organizations. Migrant CEOs learning the French mindset (e.g., unquestionable acceptance of authority).

*Organizational level:*

French CEOs adopting a paternalistic management style. Leaders are supposed to bring solutions to their teams and organizations. They are supposed to know better than their employees what should be done. Employees are supposed to obey and accept decisions coming from their CEOs.

Migrant CEOs were supposed to play this same game.

HR directors and diversity managers doing nothing to enhance the adaptation of migrant CEOs to French behavioural and mindset cultural norms

*Institutional/national level:*

Problem ignored at the institutional level.



Strategies of migrant CEOs to overcome barrier 4: Adaptation/adjustment

**Barrier 5: Stereotyping and prejudice:**

*Individual level:*

Stereotyping experienced by nearly all CEO migrants, and discrimination experienced mostly by those who came from previous French colonies or those whose culture and religious traditions are considered in France as very different from traditional European culture.

*Organizational level:*

French CEOs, HR directors and diversity managers assuming (in their majority) the non-existence of ethnic/national based discrimination. Instead, focus of HR policies is on the unskilled migrants. Qualified migrants were assumed to have no problem in this regard as they are 'equal' to the native French. Ethnicity as a taboo topic.

*Institutional/national level:*

Institutional actors focusing on equality and republican values. Recognizing this issue as a problem but leaving it to organizations and individuals to solve it. Ethnicity as a taboo topic.

Strategies of migrant CEOs to overcome barrier 5: Overcompensation, Manoeuvring