EXECUTIVE RESEARCH BRIEF

Why Globally Mobile Executives Stay

Career ambition, organizational embeddedness, and the leadership choices that shape retention

THE CENTRAL FINDING

Globally mobile senior executives stay when they believe the organization offers a credible path to the career outcomes they value—and leave when that belief erodes.

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Based on the submitted manuscript: Why Globally Mobile Executives Stay

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01

Executive Summary

Organizations often treat globally mobile executive retention as a mobility problem: improve relocation support, strengthen local integration, and reduce the sacrifices associated with another move. This research suggests a different diagnosis. For senior leaders whose careers already span countries, attachment to place is not the principal reason to stay. The decisive question is whether the organization still represents a believable future.

EXECUTIVE TAKEAWAY

Retention is a forward-looking career judgment, not simply the cumulative weight of past attachment.

What the research found

- **Job embeddedness matters.** The overall measure explained 37.3% of variance in intention to stay; with controls, the model explained 48.2%.
- **On-the-job factors dominate.** Career opportunity, values alignment, skills utilization, and family perception of organizational fit carried the explanatory power.
- **Place-based factors were not active anchors.** City of workplace and relocation impact on family were not statistically significant predictors in this sample.
- **The same broad pattern held across demographic groups.** No significant moderation appeared by gender, age, marital or family status, tenure, nationality, country of work, or mobility profile.

What this means for leaders

Do not wait for resignation signals and then negotiate compensation. Make the executive’s future visible before doubt hardens: clarify the path, demonstrate fair sponsorship, deploy scarce capabilities, live the stated values, and help the family understand why the organization remains a good platform for the executive’s future.

02

The Retention Problem

Globally mobile senior executives carry unusual strategic value. They accumulate firm-specific knowledge across markets, connect headquarters with affiliates, maintain cross-border networks, and preserve leadership continuity. Their departure removes not only an individual leader, but also relationship history, organizational memory, and tacit knowledge that are difficult to replace.

Why prevailing assumptions may mislead

Job embeddedness theory explains retention through links, fit, and sacrifice—both inside the organization and in the surrounding community. That framework was developed largely with domestic, relatively immobile employee populations. It therefore assumes that local friendships, housing, a partner's employment, and community ties create meaningful barriers to leaving.

For repeatedly mobile executives, those assumptions may be structurally misaligned. Their family systems have adapted to mobility; their professional networks extend across locations; and their external career options are often strong. The question is not whether embeddedness disappears, but which forms of embeddedness still matter.

Population	Peripatetic International Executives (PIEs): senior leaders with current or recent work outside their home country
Context	Global life sciences—pharmaceutical, biotechnology, medical technology, and related sectors
Retention outcome	Self-reported intention to stay with the current employer
Theoretical starting point	Job embeddedness theory, interpreted with expectancy and motivation–hygiene logic

THE REFRAMED QUESTION

For a highly mobile executive, is retention driven by how deeply the person is anchored—or by how credibly the organization supports the next chapter of the career?

03

Research Questions and Analytical Model

Four research questions

- **RQ1.** What is the relationship between job embeddedness factors and globally mobile executives' intention to stay?
- **RQ2.** How does that relationship vary across demographic and occupational subgroups?
- **RQ3.** How does a career ambition mechanism help explain variance in intention to stay?
- **RQ4.** What management practices follow for multinational enterprises seeking to retain senior internationally mobile executives?

The proposed career ambition mechanism

Valence	Is the future outcome worth pursuing? Executives read organizational growth and opportunity as evidence of future value.
Instrumentality	Will strong performance lead to advancement? Fair processes, visibility, and sponsorship make the career promise credible.
Expectancy	Will effort be recognized and rewarded? Leadership quality and enacted culture shape this belief.
Hygiene threshold	Relocation and family support can trigger departure when inadequate, but adequacy alone may not create commitment.

DECISION LOGIC

The implicit executive question is: Does this organization offer a credible path to the career outcomes I value?

04

Methodology

The study used an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. Interviews first identified the factors and mechanisms salient to globally mobile executives. A subsequent survey tested the resulting framework at scale. The integration was substantive: qualitative findings directly shaped the quantitative instrument, and the statistical results were interpreted through the interview evidence.

Phase 1 — Qualitative discovery

- **26 semi-structured interviews** with senior globally mobile life sciences executives across 16 countries.
- **Purposive maximum-variation sampling** across gender, role level, nationality, and geography; thematic saturation was reported in the final five interviews.
- **45–90-minute video interviews** using a laddering approach, moving from career experiences to deeper retention motives.
- **Hybrid thematic analysis**: deductive coding against the original 40 job-embeddedness items and inductive coding for new factors.

Phase 2 — Quantitative testing

- **258 qualified survey responses** across 38 countries, screened for international experience and senior management responsibility.
- **A 12-factor instrument** derived from the interviews: 11 adapted job-embeddedness items and one new factor, interaction with other cultures.
- **Intention to stay** measured on a 10-point scale; demographic and occupational controls collected separately.
- **OLS regressions** with robust standard errors, factor-level models, demographic interaction tests, and a reduced four-factor model; analysis conducted in Stata 17.

05

Who Participated—and How to Read the Evidence

Interview sample	26 executives; 59% men, 41% women; 61% over age 40; participants across 16 countries and major GLOBE cultural clusters
Survey sample	258 qualified respondents across 38 countries; 66% men; 70% age 45+; 84% married; 54% with children under 18
Seniority	66% in executive-level roles, including CEO and C-suite positions
Industry mix	All in life sciences; 71% in research-based pharmaceuticals
Organizational tenure	Mean tenure of 8.3 years
Mobility	More than one-third had worked in three or more countries

Evidence strengths

- The qualitative-to-quantitative sequence reduced the risk of imposing a domestic retention model without first checking its relevance.
- The sample spans many countries and includes executives with substantial seniority and international experience.
- The results converged across interviews and survey analysis, strengthening confidence in the pattern even though they do not establish causality.

Interpretation discipline

The study measures intention to stay, not observed turnover. Its cross-sectional, single-industry design supports evidence-informed action and further testing—not universal causal claims. Coefficients reported below come from separate factor regressions and should not be read as a direct ranking of causal effect sizes.

USE THE FINDINGS AS

A sharper hypothesis for executive retention decisions, a guide for leadership practice, and a basis for organization-specific diagnosis—not a mechanical prediction formula.

06

The Findings at a Glance

PRIMARY FACTOR	β	INDIVIDUAL R^2	EXECUTIVE READING
Career growth opportunities	**0.773**	31.2%	Career pathway
Family perception of organizational fit	**0.718**	27.4%	Family endorsement
Personal–organizational values alignment	**0.610**	19.8%	Enacted culture
Skills utilization	**0.360**	14.2%	Capability deployment

Note: All four factor relationships were significant at $p < .01$. Individual R^2 values come from separate regressions.

Model-level results

- **Overall job embeddedness:** $R^2 = 0.373$; $\beta = 0.287$; $p < .01$.
- **With demographic and organizational controls:** $R^2 = 0.482$; job embeddedness remained significant ($\beta = 0.300$; $p < .01$).
- **Reduced four-factor model:** $R^2 = 0.556$—reported as a 49% improvement over the full 12-factor model.
- **Off-the-job tests:** city of workplace and relocation impact on family were not statistically significant.
- **Demographic moderation:** no tested interaction was statistically significant.

PATTERN, NOT PARADOX

Three primary factors concern the executive's future inside the firm. The fourth—family perception—also evaluates the organization, not attachment to a city or community.

07

Finding 1: Retention Is Future-Oriented

Career growth opportunities were the strongest qualitative theme and the strongest factor in the individual quantitative models. Executives connected staying to the organization's trajectory, innovation pipeline, and implied opportunity structure. A growing firm was attractive not simply because growth felt positive, but because it created believable future roles.

What executives appear to evaluate

- **Opportunity value.** Does the enterprise have a future that creates meaningful scope for me?
- **Path credibility.** Can I see how performance, international experience, and capability lead to the next role?
- **Sponsorship.** Is someone with influence actively helping convert performance into opportunity?
- **Timing.** Is the pathway concrete enough to matter before external alternatives become more compelling?

Why conventional retention conversations arrive too late

A senior executive may remain engaged while privately concluding that the career promise is weakening. Because the decision is forward-looking, dissatisfaction may not be visible in current performance. By the time a resignation is announced, the executive may already have rebuilt expectancy and instrumentality around another organization.

LEADERSHIP IMPLICATION

Career architecture is not an HR process adjacent to retention. For globally mobile executives, it is a primary retention system.

Diagnostic questions

- Can this executive describe two plausible future roles and the capabilities required for each?
- Have we made advancement criteria visible, or are we asking the executive to infer them?
- Does international experience increase talent visibility—or remove the executive from the networks that allocate opportunity?

08

Finding 2: Values and Skills Are Career Signals

Values alignment is enacted, not advertised

Executives distinguished between stated values and leadership behavior. Misalignment was not described merely as cultural discomfort. It signaled whether merit, international contribution, and strong performance would actually be recognized. A politically driven or opaque system weakened confidence that the organization could deliver the promised future.

Skills utilization signals how the organization sees the executive

Underutilization also carried more than a job-satisfaction meaning. Placement in a role that failed to use the executive's capabilities suggested that the organization did not view the person as high-potential or on an upward path. Skills deployment therefore communicated talent status.

Stated value	Meritocracy
Observable test	Are international contributions visible and rewarded in promotion and succession decisions?
Stated value	Development
Observable test	Is the executive receiving assignments that stretch and display strategically relevant capability?
Stated value	Global collaboration
Observable test	Do headquarters and regional leaders share influence, information, and opportunity?

WHAT LEADERS COMMUNICATE WITHOUT SAYING IT

Role design, access, recognition, and promotion decisions tell executives whether the organization's values are real—and whether their future belongs there.

09

Finding 3: Family Endorsement Is Organizational

Family perception of organizational fit emerged as an additional significant predictor and was not specified as a career factor in advance. The result deserves careful interpretation. The item did not ask whether the family liked the city or felt attached to the community. It asked whether the family believed the organization was a good fit for the executive.

Why this matters

The family may act as an organizational evaluator. It sees the personal cost of the executive's work, the fairness of treatment, the credibility of leadership, and whether mobility appears to be producing a worthwhile future. Family endorsement can therefore strengthen the executive's own judgment that the firm remains a worthy platform for ambition.

What this does—and does not—justify

- **It supports thoughtful family inclusion.** Selected events, leadership contact, and clear communication can help families understand the organization and the purpose of the role.
- **It does not justify intrusion.** Participation should be optional, culturally sensitive, and respectful of privacy and family structure.
- **It does not replace mobility support.** Schooling, partner careers, relocation, and community integration remain necessary threshold conditions even if they are not active positive anchors.

A DIFFERENT FAMILY QUESTION

Do not ask only, Is the family settled here? Also ask, Does the family believe this organization is treating the executive well and offering a future worth the cost?

10

Practical Implications for Organizations

1. Shift retention investment toward career credibility

Use succession planning, talent reviews, and strategic workforce discussions to make opportunity visible. Replace vague assurances with credible pathways, readiness criteria, developmental moves, and named sponsorship.

2. Treat leadership quality as an instrumentality signal

Executives infer whether performance will lead to opportunity from the fairness, accessibility, and coherence of leaders. Promotion processes, recognition, and international talent visibility must support—not contradict—the career promise.

3. Audit enacted values

Measure the gap between employer narrative and executive experience. Focus on the moments that reveal culture: assignment allocation, difficult feedback, succession decisions, resource tradeoffs, and the treatment of regional perspectives.

4. Deploy capability deliberately

Review whether the role uses the executive’s distinctive international and functional strengths. A retention-risk conversation should include not only workload and reward, but whether the organization is making meaningful use of the person’s capabilities.

5. Separate hygiene from motivation

Provide strong relocation and family infrastructure because failure can trigger exit. Do not assume that additional place-based support will compensate for a weak career proposition.

11

What Leaders Should Do Differently

THE BEHAVIORAL SHIFT

Move from reactive retention offers to recurring evidence that the executive has a credible, fair, and meaningful future inside the organization.

Make five practices routine

- **Hold future-focused career conversations.** Discuss possible destinations, timing, readiness gaps, and tradeoffs—not only current performance or engagement.
- **Name a sponsor and define the sponsorship work.** Clarify who will create visibility, challenge assumptions, and advocate when opportunities are allocated.
- **Translate strategy into personal opportunity.** Explain how growth priorities, portfolio choices, and geographic expansion could create future scope for the executive.
- **Test values through decisions.** Ask whether recent promotion, recognition, and resource decisions demonstrate the culture the organization claims to have.
- **Invite an appropriate family perspective.** With permission, understand how the organization and role are experienced by those who absorb much of the mobility cost.

Change the questions in talent reviews

- What future does this executive currently believe is available here?
- What evidence have we provided that performance will lead to that future?
- Where is the executive’s capability underused or insufficiently visible?
- Which leadership behavior could be weakening values alignment?
- What might the family be concluding about the organization?

12

A 90-Day Executive Retention Agenda

Days 1–30 — Diagnose

- Identify the globally mobile executives whose departure would create disproportionate strategic loss.
- For each, map two plausible internal futures, current readiness, sponsor strength, capability utilization, and family-related risk signals.
- Conduct a future-focused conversation led by the accountable business leader—not delegated solely to HR.

Days 31–60 — Make the future credible

- Confirm a sponsor, development moves, visibility opportunities, and decision dates.
- Resolve one visible inconsistency between stated values and the executive's lived experience.
- Redesign role scope or assignments where critical capabilities are underused.

Days 61–90 — Institutionalize

- Add career credibility and capability deployment to executive talent reviews.
- Define indicators: internal opportunity visibility, sponsor contact, critical-skill use, values alignment, family endorsement, and retention intent.
- Revisit commitments quarterly and record whether promised actions occurred.

ACCOUNTABILITY TEST

If the organization cannot specify the executive's credible future, the executive will eventually test whether another organization can.

Suggested dashboard

Career pathway	Two plausible roles; readiness criteria; decision horizon
Sponsorship	Named sponsor; recent advocacy; next visibility action
Capability use	Distinctive strengths actively deployed in strategic work
Values	Recent evidence of alignment or contradiction
Family endorsement	Optional, privacy-respecting pulse on organizational fit

13

Boundaries, Conclusions, and Source Note

What the study cannot establish

- **Sector generalizability is limited.** All participants worked in life sciences; replication is needed in technology, financial services, consulting, and other knowledge-intensive sectors.
- **Causality is not established.** The survey is cross-sectional and uses self-reported intention to stay rather than longitudinal turnover outcomes.
- **Common-method risk remains.** The quantitative variables come from a single source, although the preceding interview phase provides independent qualitative grounding.
- **The career ambition mechanism is inferred.** It is supported by convergent qualitative and quantitative patterns but was not directly tested as a mediator.

Conclusion

The study's practical message is clear: globally mobile executives are not retained primarily by making departure more difficult. They are retained by making the internal future more credible. Career growth, lived values, meaningful capability use, and family endorsement together create a forward-looking reason to remain.

The leadership task is therefore to produce evidence—through opportunity, fairness, sponsorship, role design, and behavior—that the organization can still deliver the career outcomes the executive values.

FINAL QUESTION FOR LEADERS

What concrete evidence has this executive received in the past six months that the best next chapter of the career can happen here?

Source and selected foundations

Primary source. Grayeb, F. R., & Smith, B. D. Why Globally Mobile Executives Stay: Career Ambition, Job Embeddedness, and Voluntary Executive Turnover. Submitted manuscript.

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