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## Role of Social Ties in Long-Term Settlement of Highly Skilled Migrants in Finland

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### Abstract

*Highly skilled migrants are often assumed to move from place to place at low thresholds, following the best job offers and easily integrating into new host societies. This study problematizes these assumptions and provides empirically based knowledge on the integration of highly skilled migrants working in the information and communication technology (ICT) sector in Finland, with a particular focus on social relations and plans for long-term or permanent settlement. The study investigates migrants' social relations in their work environment and free time, taking into account the role of migrant communities as well as families and relatives in Finland and abroad. Finland forms an interesting research context because of its linguistic isolation, remoteness and increasing interest in attracting highly skilled migrants. The investigation adds evidence to the central role of social ties in migration decisions and long-term settlement of highly skilled migrants.*

**Keywords:** *highly skilled migration, social ties, long-term settlement, ICT, Finland.*

### Introduction

European knowledge economies and countries with declining populations have become increasingly dependent on a highly skilled foreign workforce, which has increased the attention on attracting international talent (Cerna & Czaika, 2016). However, little attention has been paid to their retention, long-term settlement, and integration processes (Van Riemsdijk & Wang, 2017), although social relations, family and kinship are known to be highly important from the perspective of migration decisions (Boyd, 1989) and integration processes (Ager & Strang, 2004). The question of the role of social relations in migration started to gain increasing interest in the late 20th century; it allowed deeper analysis of the social dimensions and complexity of migration that were not considered in the individual-centred economic push-pull theories (Boyd, 1989). Highly skilled migration was initially absent from these discussions.

The slow awakening to these questions regarding highly skilled migration can be explained by at least three problematic assumptions: first, that all highly skilled migrants are highly mobile, moving from place to place on a low threshold (Van Riemsdijk, 2014); second, highly skilled migrants integrate smoothly into new host societies because of their employment (Plöger & Becker, 2015); and third, highly skilled migrants can work

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anywhere without a need for any kind of local networks, as if social relations with the host community would not matter to them (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014a). However, recent studies have noted that migration decisions, place attachment and sense of belonging among highly skilled migrants are closely connected with the formation of social relations (e.g., Plöger & Becker, 2015; Plöger & Kubiak, 2019). Although the importance of social ties is now recognized in the highly skilled migration literature, more empirical and theoretical knowledge on their role in different types of migration, e.g. different fields and regional contexts, is needed to gain profound understanding of social integration in highly skilled migration.

This article contributes to the discussion by providing new empirically based knowledge on the role of social relations in the migration decisions of highly skilled migrants working in the information and communication technology (ICT) sector and investigating how social ties have affected their migration trajectories, local incorporation and decisions regarding long-term or permanent settlement in Finland. The specific focus is on their work environment and free-time interactions, taking into account the role of migrant communities as well as families and relatives in Finland and abroad. The analysis pays attention to the bonding and bridging nature of social ties, of which the first type of relationships can be seen as binding a migrant closely to a narrow social group (e.g. an ethnic community or a family), while the latter type of relationships connect a migrant more loosely to a local community (e.g. work-related connections and other local social connections) (see Chuatico & Haan, 2022; Nannestad et al., 2008). The paper is structured to first introduce the research area, materials and methods for the study, and after that, the findings related to social interaction at work and free time as well as the roles of migrant communities and families in social integration and migration decisions. The final chapter summarizes the most important results.

## **Research design and context**

Finland offers a specific regional context for studying the social ties of highly skilled migrants. It has a paradoxical image as a country that should be among the most attractive in the world with its numerous success stories in the ICT sector and gaming industry and leading positions in international rankings; however, it still has difficulties attracting highly skilled migrants. Habti and Koikkalainen (2014, 9) suggest that the problem is ‘closely associated with the geographical, cultural and linguistic isolation of the Northern European periphery’. Immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon in Finland compared to its neighbors Sweden and Norway and many other European countries. However, between 2010 and 2020, the number of persons with foreign backgrounds almost doubled, and today, it is approximately 8.0% of Finland’s total population (Statistics Finland, 2021).

The growth in the share of foreign ICT professionals has also accelerated from 4.4% in 2010 to 8.9% in 2018 (Statistics Finland, 2020), but the total number of foreign employees is still not enough to meet the labor demand of ICT companies. The challenge of attracting highly skilled migrants has pushed decision-makers in Finland to pay attention to retaining the migrants already living in the country and providing more resources for facilitating and supporting local and work community-related integration processes (see Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2022).

This paper studies social ties and their role in the migration processes of highly skilled migrants in Finland. The study is based on a survey of foreign ICT specialists living and working in the country, which was conducted between June and September 2020. The specialists were contacted through ICT companies in the biggest city regions, including the Oulu, Tampere and Turku regions and the capital city region, which includes the cities of Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa. Of the 941 companies contacted, a total of 135 companies took part in the research, and further, 35 companies had foreign employees working as

ICT specialists. Questionnaires were sent directly by e-mail to 33 foreign specialists whose e-mail addresses were obtained from their employers. In addition, questionnaires were sent to 19 ICT companies that could not disclose the contact details of their employees because of privacy policies. The companies were asked to forward the questionnaires to their foreign employees, totaling 102 individuals. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the responses were handled confidentially and anonymously.

After several reminders, 27 specialists responded to the survey, the response rate being 20. All respondents planned to stay in Finland long-term or permanently, which provided an interesting starting point for the study. Over half (14 of 26) of the respondents had non-European citizenship, little less than a half (11 of 26) were citizens of European countries and a fifth (5 of 23) had Finnish citizenship. Further, more than a fourth (7 of 26) of the respondents had a native Finnish spouse/partner and a third (7 of 22) had completed higher education degree(s) in Finland. The survey responses were interpreted qualitatively, with an emphasis on open-ended responses. Due to the small number of respondents, it was not possible to use statistical analyses. The analysis of the role of social ties is based on direct questions about respondents' social contacts and factors that the respondents themselves brought up in open-ended questions related to their migration decisions and working and living in Finland.

## Findings

### Good colleagues, but not friends

For highly skilled migrants, the work environment is important and usually also the first setting for local social interaction (e.g., Plöger & Becker, 2015; van Riemsdijk, 2014). In this study, most of the respondents were very satisfied<sup>3</sup> with working in their current work community, and many responses stated that 'good colleagues' or 'good relationships with bosses and colleagues' increased satisfaction with working in Finland. Social interaction between migrants and other employees was considered mundane and occurred regardless of not being mandatory for performing work tasks. For example, over half of the respondents had lunch or coffee with their colleagues *regularly* or *often* (Table 1). One of the respondents described the importance of social relations in the workplace and mutual understanding in the ICT industry:

'People make companies, in my opinion. Therefore, people contribute the most to the satisfaction from working in particular places. [...] ICT engineers are typically open-minded regardless of race/nationality so it's easy to understand each other even in an argument, it's mostly constructive [...]'. (Respondent #9)

In non-English-speaking countries, language still often forms a barrier to integration and employment (e.g., Osanami Törngren & Holbrow, 2016). However, in this study, all respondents worked in companies that used English as their working language<sup>4</sup> and they did not report any significant communication problems at work; most respondents had *never* (9 of 26 respondents) or *very rarely* (10 of 26 respondents) had language-related communication problems with their colleagues<sup>5</sup>.

Despite functioning social relationships and integration in the work environment, collegial relations do not always develop into friendships. Previous studies have shown that, except for occasional meetings outside working hours, it is often difficult to form meaningful, in-depth relationships with colleagues (e.g., Plöger & Kubiak, 2019;

<sup>3</sup> The respondents were asked to evaluate how satisfied they are with working in the work community of the company currently employing them choosing a value between 0 and 10. They were told that 0 means 'not at all satisfied' and 10 means 'extremely satisfied'. The mean of the value was 8.5. Of the 27 respondents, 11 gave a value of 10.

<sup>4</sup> English was the only working language in just over half (14 of 27) of the companies that the respondents worked for, as almost half (11 of 27) of the companies were bilingual (English and Finnish) and some (2 of 27) even multi-lingual.

<sup>5</sup> The rest of the respondents (7 of 26) experienced communication problems 'sometimes'.

Povrzanović Frykman & Mozetič, 2020). This also seems to apply in this study; only one respondent spent free time with their colleagues *regularly*, and most of the respondents *sometimes* (11/26) or *very rarely* (8/26) (Table 1). This reinforces the notion of colleagues as bridging social ties that loosely connect highly skilled migrants to the local community.

Table 1. The respondents' social interaction with Finnish and foreign colleagues and non-colleagues.

How often do you do the following?	Never	Very rarely	Sometimes	Often	Regularly
<b>Eat lunch or have a coffee break with colleagues (n = 27)</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>11</b>
Eat lunch or have a coffee break with Finnish colleagues (n = 27)	1	1	9	6	10
Eat lunch or have a coffee break with foreign colleagues (n = 23)*	0	3	9	3	8
<b>Spend free time with colleagues (n = 26)</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>
Spend free time with your Finnish colleagues (n = 26)	5	10	7	3	1
Spend free time with your foreign colleagues (n = 23)*	5	7	10	1	0
<b>Spend free time with non-colleagues (n = 27)</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>10</b>
Spend free time with Finnish non-colleagues (n = 27)	2	5	8	4	8
Spend free time with foreign non-colleagues (n = 27)	3	7	6	4	7
<b>Spend free time with colleagues or non-colleagues (n = 26)</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>
Spend free time with Finnish colleagues or non-colleagues (n = 26)	1	4	8	5	8
Spend free time with other foreign colleagues or non-colleagues (n = 23)*	2	2	9	4	6

Note: \*23 respondents reported that other foreign employees were working in the same company

### Struggling with free time social interaction

Finnish working culture includes the idea of a balance between work and free time. This balance may enable migrants to form and maintain social ties with local people, yet without a family or other close social contacts, free time can heighten feelings of loneliness and isolation. However, in this study, all respondents had occasional or more frequent free time social interaction, indicating at least some degree of local social integration. Almost half of the respondents (10/26) had regular free time social contacts (Table 1). Although no actual experiences of loneliness were reported, the fact that the majority (10/13) of respondents considered loneliness a reason that would make them at least to some extent consider moving out of the country infers something about the importance of social relationships for integration (Figure 1).

Some respondents described the difficulty of forming social ties, illustrating the emotional burden of lacking social contacts and its impacts on the integration and sense of belonging: 'We arrived just this year, and we don't know many people yet, which makes us feel like outsiders still in the country and city' (Respondent #24). Another respondent, with a three-year experience of living in Finland, was still struggling with social relationships or with a lack of them: 'Finland in general is very good from a study or work, perspective. However, what I struggle with is the harsh weather and some social interactions [...]' (Respondent #26).

As Koskela (2014, 2019) has argued, positive attitudes towards highly skilled migrants can facilitate their social integration and sense of belonging in a host country. Thus, a good starting point for the social integration of highly skilled migrants in the ICT sector is that in Finland attitudes towards migrants working in the ICT sector are rather positive. As one respondent stated, there is a 'high social status for IT specialists (in countries like USA and India it is [the] opposite)' (Respondent #10). The respondents did not mention

any experiences of racism or social exclusion, but in general these were factors that would make them consider moving out of the country (Figure 1).

### **Social relations with other migrants**

Previous studies have shown that highly skilled migrants are likely to form bonding local ties with people from similar cultural backgrounds (e.g., Chuatico & Haan, 2022; Nannestad et al., 2008), sometimes leading to isolation from a host society, especially if there have been difficulties in forming local social relationships (Butcher, 2009). However, the survey did not offer evidence of social isolation or cultural seclusion; for example, the respondents reported eating lunch or having a coffee break with both foreign and native Finnish colleagues in a similar manner, and most of the respondents who spent their free time with other foreigners *often* or *regularly* (12 of 27 respondents) also spent some free time with native Finns (Table 1).

Although ethnic or cultural isolation did not seem to be common among the respondents, one of them had noticed that the lack of integration efforts by companies as well as language problems had caused obstacles to adaptation and integration for highly skilled migrants and also produced cultural isolation. As a solution, the respondent suggested organised local gatherings:

‘There are no integration efforts by companies when people move over and it takes time to understand what is going on specially when language is the biggest barrier. This could be reduced by having meetups between Finns and foreign professionals who have moved recently. Instead, it happens so that people from same cultures end up finding their own communities and further isolate themselves from the Finnish culture and society.’ (Respondent #19)

This suggests that from the point of view of social integration, the problem is not the social interaction within migrant communities per se, but the challenges related to mutual adaptation, interaction and communication between highly skilled migrants and Finns.

### **Family ties inform migration decisions**

Migration decisions are usually collective decisions within a family where balance is sought between professional opportunities and family preferences (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014a). In this study, almost three-quarters (19 of 26) of the respondents had a spouse or a partner and almost a half (12 of 26 respondents) had children. Except for one spouse/partner, who lived in another country because of work, the whole family had moved to Finland with the respondent. The decision to move to Finland was often made together with respondents’ spouses, and family preferences also played a decisive role in decisions to stay in the host country, even more significant than work-related factors (Figure 1). The importance of family relations, the sense of rootedness and children’s educational opportunities were mentioned by several respondents, as in the following quote, illustrating a period of settlement and family building, which has been found to follow early spatial mobility in a person’s career (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014a): ‘Until my child grows up, I’m staying in Finland, it’s enough to learn three languages simultaneously in my opinion.’ (Respondent #9)

Previous studies have underlined the role of an accompanying spouse/partner, in building local social networks and promoting the social integration of the whole family (e.g., Föbker & Imani, 2017; Ryan & Mulholland, 2014b). However, this survey did not show evidence of highly skilled migrants with a spouse/partner having more social contacts in their free time, except that having a native Finnish spouse/partner increased the likelihood of regularly spending free time with native Finns. In fact, all spouses/partners of respondents in this study had completed higher education. In dual-career families, accompanying spouses/partners are not just passive co-migrants, but instead actively seek professional opportunities in the migration process (Kõu et al., 2017). Four respondents had arrived in Finland as an accompanying spouse/partner and later found employment in

the ICT sector. Thus, spouse's/partner's employment and career opportunities were highly important factors influencing decisions to stay or leave (Figure 1).

In addition to a spouse/partner and children, migrants are connected to larger families, including parents and relatives, and friends in Finland and abroad, who also influence their migration decisions. Based on the results, extended family ties may firstly attract migrants to Finland, as one respondent describes: 'After graduation [...], I couldn't find job in my country, at that point my cousin [had] just found [a] job in Finland, and he invited me to come here.' (Respondent #17) Secondly, extended family ties may pull migrants away from Finland (Figure 1), or thirdly, they can influence the choice of country of residence in general, as in the following quote: 'I and my husband wanted to live in country with good work-life balance and good ecologic. And at the same time stay close to our origin country, to stay in touch with parents.' (Respondent #16)

Further, social relations, including family ties, are dynamic and may significantly change during migration trajectories. Moving in and out of social relationships may simultaneously shape the sense of belonging and local integration (Butcher, 2009) and form a turning point in a migration trajectory, as illustrated in the following quote regarding factors that would make one respondent consider moving out of Finland: 'Amazing job elsewhere. If break up with a girlfriend, then why not.' (Respondent #10)

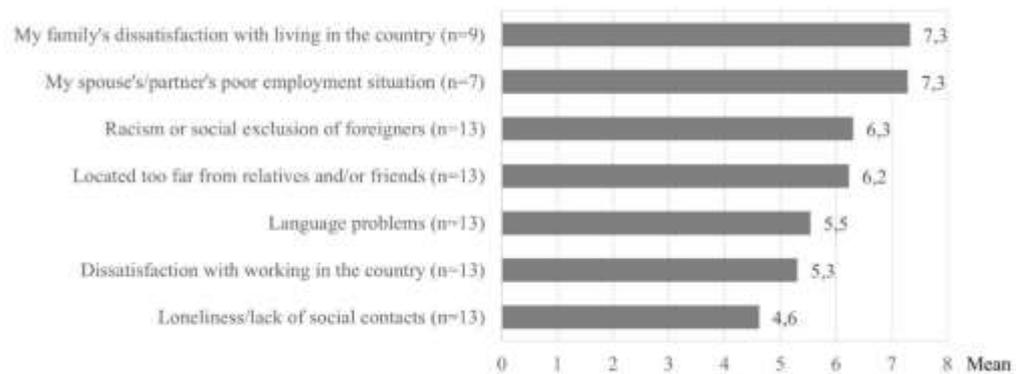


Figure 1. The significance of imaginary negative experiences related to social relations, language and work in considering moving out of Finland.

Note. The respondents were asked to evaluate whether the possible imaginary negative factors in question would make them consider moving out of Finland and to what extent on a scale of 0-10. 0 = not at all and 10 = extremely much.

## Conclusion

This study has provided empirically based knowledge on the integration of highly skilled migrants working in the ICT sector in Finland, with a particular focus on social relations and plans to settle in the country long-term or permanently. The respondents represent a special, politically preferred group of migrants – highly skilled labour working in a nationally significant industry with a high labor shortage, and who also plan to stay in the country long-term or permanently. When interpreting the findings of the survey, recognising the social context and specific characteristics of Finland is important, e.g., geographical remoteness, linguistic isolation and a short history of migration and the formation of migrant communities.

Understanding the contextual factors is important because the formation of social relations and integration is a two-way process that takes place in interactions between a migrant and other people in a new host country, starting from the first encounters with, for example, migration officers and other public authorities, and developing into longer-term or regular interaction, even a friendship, with colleagues, neighbors or other free

time social contacts. Atmosphere and attitudes towards migration have a significant effect on the sense of being welcome and, further, social integration of highly skilled migrants. This is recognized at the policy level in Finland and the government has set as a policy target to support ‘a positive climate of attitudes and friction-free relations between population groups’, to strengthen labor migration and ‘help migrant workers find their place in Finland’ (Ministry of the Interior, 2018, 30).

Most of the highly skilled migrants participating in this study were socially well integrated into their work communities in the ICT companies, which also increased their satisfaction with working in Finland. However, social interaction with co-workers seemed to be limited to the work environment, and for most migrants, this interaction took place in their free time only *sometimes* or *very rarely*. The findings reinforced the notion of colleagues as bridging social ties, supporting the integration of highly skilled migrants into local communities.

An important finding in terms of social integration was that all respondents had at least occasional free time social contacts, although some more or less struggled with the lack of local social interaction outside working hours; some respondents did not have any kind of free time relationships with Finns that would have bridged them to a local community. This problem has also been raised in previous studies. Language barriers probably only provide a partial explanation, as the same phenomenon has also been observed in English-speaking countries (e.g., Ryan & Mulholland, 2014b). Therefore, further research is needed to explain the underlying factors for this phenomenon. Another important finding was that social interaction with other migrants does not seem to have prevented the formation of social relationships with Finns, nor was significant ethnic or cultural isolation observed.

Furthermore, the study confirmed the decisive role of family ties in the decision to stay in the country long-term or permanently; family ties seemed to be even more important than work-related factors. We also found that, in contrast to previous studies, the spouses/partners did not play a specific role in the formation of highly skilled migrants' free time social connections. The spouses/partners of the respondents were generally highly educated professionals themselves, actively looking for new employment and career opportunities. Therefore, supporting the employment of spouses/partners is especially important for retaining highly skilled migrants with dual-career families.

We recommend that both the state and employers pay attention to and facilitate migrants' social well-being and integration into local communities. Understanding the important role of social ties in a decision to stay in a host country long-term and facilitating free time social interaction as well as contacts between migrants and natives would enable the state and companies to better retain highly skilled migrants. Finally, the most important policy recommendation is to support the employment, satisfaction and integration of families and spouses/partners living in Finland, which can directly increase the chances of highly skilled migrants staying in the country long-term or even permanently.

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