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**PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS OF INTERNATIONAL  
BUSINESS TRAVELLERS**

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**PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVELLERS**

***Introduction***

Since the late 1980s, the global economy has grown rapidly with an associated expansion in the field of International Human Resource Management (IHRM) (Collings et al., 2007). While IHRM's focus has shifted from managing staff expatriation to broader organisational, contextual and HR-related issues (Björkman et al., 2012, Björkman and Welch, 2015), much research remains preoccupied with traditional, long-term international assignments. Only recently there has been a growing research interest in alternative forms of international assignments (Mäkelä et al., 2017, Pate and Scullion, 2017). Here we focus on an emergent, non-traditional form of international employee, the international business traveller (IBT). We define an IBT as a professional who works across countries for business purposes on a regular basis and for a maximum of consecutive three weeks per assignment (Shaffer et al., 2012). We explore IBT employment relationships using a psychological contract framework which explores employee perceptions of their own and their employer's obligations (Pate and Scullion, 2010), provides a fruitful construct for analysis and explanation (Rousseau, 1995) and offers a mechanism for effectively working to attract and retain scarce employees (Rodwell et al., 2015). There are no existing studies of IBT psychological contracts and we develop in-depth understanding of how Belgian IBTs experience and interpret their psychological contracts. Belgium is an interesting context as it plays a 'pivotal role' within the global economy (Sleeuwaegen and Peeters, 2012: 7), assuming a strategic location on the north-western side of Europe and being one of the most globalised countries

1 in the world (OECD, 2013). Our research makes a number of important  
2 contributions. First empirically to IHRM, in developing understanding of an  
3 emergent form of international employee, the IBT. Second, to psychological  
4 contract theory in developing understanding of contract nature. Finally, to  
5 practice in developing understanding of how to manage the valuable strategic  
6 resource that is the IBT.  
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17 The paper is organised as follows: first we discuss extant research on  
18 IBTs and psychological contract, synthesising these to establish our research  
19 focus; second, we present our research methods and third, we report the  
20 findings. Finally, we discuss and draw conclusions on the contributions and  
21 implications our research.  
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### 30 ***International Business Travel(lers)***

31 Globalisation not only creates an increasingly complex environment, it also  
32 requires more internationally-prepared workers, occasioning new forms of  
33 international employment (Harvey et al., 2010). Alongside traditional, long-  
34 term expatriate assignments, short-term international missions are emerging  
35 that meet organisational operational objectives and individual career  
36 objectives within today's dynamic business environment (Mayerhofer et al.,  
37 2004, Collings et al., 2007). Traditional expatriate assignments require the  
38 employee and family (where present) to move countries for work purposes,  
39 usually for over a year, to address a specific task or organizational goal  
40 (Petrovic et al., 2000). IBTs, by contrast, are professionals for whom regular  
41 international travel for periods of up to three consecutive weeks, without their  
42 family, constitutes an 'essential component' of their work (Welch and Worm,  
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2006: 284, Shaffer et al., 2012). IBTs tend to be utilised for specialised and complex tasks, often in challenging or dangerous environments, that occur intermittently and determine the duration of visit (Collings et al., 2015). The flexibility which characterises IBT assignments, avoiding the need for permanent relocation, is often more acceptable to employees than longer-term expatriate assignments (Tahvanainen et al., 2005). It also benefits organisations, as it does not incur the huge financial and other costs associated with employee and family/spouse relocation (Welch et al., 2007). IBT assignments are thus attractive to employees, cost effective and allow companies to respond more swiftly than with traditional expatriate placements (Tahvanainen et al., 2005).

Understanding of IBTs is, however, lacking (Welch and Worm, 2006, Welch et al., 2007), against a backdrop in which there is no widely agreed classification of various short-term international work experiences (Shaffer et al., 2012). This is a serious omission given the increasing prevalence of international business travel in the modern global economy (Beaverstock et al., 2010). Drawing on Welch and Worm (2006), we suggest that IBTs form a diverse group, perhaps more diverse than traditional expatriates. Assignments can typically include project-work, maintaining client and supplier engagement/relations, monitoring business development, skills transfer, participation in meetings or conferences, management development and management control (Mayerhofer et al., 2004). IBTs have the capacity to act as ‘powerful knowledge transfer agents’, implying that they are ‘at the heart of international business’ and play an essential, strategic role within the survival and development of globally operating companies (Welch et al.,

2007:180). Critical to assignment success is an IBT's capacity for self-management, especially in relation to work, cultural issues and planning of leisure time (Mayerhofer et al., 2004). As frequent business travel disturbs everyday routines (Makela et al., 2015), stress both to the travellers and their families (Baker and Ciuk, 2015, Mäkelä et al., 2017), jet lag and health issues are common problems (Espino et al., 2002). Thus, to maximise the strategic potential of IBTs, organisations must understand how to manage and support non-standard international employment (Demel and Mayrhofer, 2010). Yet many find themselves at the beginning of a steep learning curve or in 'organisational silence' where management of IBT assignments are concerned (Tahvanainen et al., 2005: 671, Demel and Mayrhofer, 2010). Our research aims to develop understanding of IBT employment relationship, using a psychological contract framework, to support this management process.

### ***Psychological Contracts***

A psychological contract reflects 'the perceptions of mutual obligations to each other held by the two parties in the employment relationship, the organisation and the employee' (Herriot et al., 1997:151). Since its first formal introduction in the 1960's, the concept has been a prominent part of human resource management and its related organisational discourse (Conway and Briner 2009). Given the perceptual and socially constructed nature of the contract, however, it is neither possible nor advisable to establish 'the' content of the psychological contract, that is, one set of obligations that holds good in all situations (Authors). A wide array of possible obligations has been identified and we discuss these in more detail

below, noting here that these may differ according to organisational setting and across nations or cultures (Rousseau and Schalk, 2000). Despite this, psychological contract theory represents a useful framework for understanding workplace relationships and developing insights on how to address employee (here IBTs) perceived obligations and those of their employer (Guest, 1998). While some have challenged the construct as a vague ‘container concept of questionable value’ (Guest, 1998: 650), its basic premise of reciprocal social exchange holds good (Coyle-Shapiro and Conway, 2010, Conway and Briner, 2009). Lack of research and clarity on content is not considered problematic here as this is inherent to the reality of organisational experience (Tetrick, 2010). Rather, our focus is the nature of psychological contract content (Agarwal and Gupta, 2018) which reflects the distinction between contract exchange types, that is, transactional or relational (MacNeil, 1985).

**Transactional** contracts are specific economic, monetisable exchanges between parties over a finite, typically short, term. They are characterised by competitive wage rates and the absence of long-term commitments (Robinson et al., 1994). Terms and conditions tend to be objectifiable and remain static during a specified period of time (Chambel et al., 2016). **Relational** contracts, on the contrary, imply open-ended, less specific agreements that establish and maintain a relationship involving both monetisable and non-monetisable exchanges and emotional investment from both employees and employers (Robinson et al., 1994). While a useful heuristic, relational/transactional distinctions are far from clear cut (Conway and Briner, 2009) with many arguing that to categorise an entire contract is

too blunt an approach (Authors). Rather than polar opposites, relational and transactional contracts may co-exist (Conway and Briner, 2009) or be viewed along a continuum (Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefall, 2008). A more nuanced approach is to consider categorisation of obligations within contract content, rather than the contract itself. Even here it is not always clearcut how particular obligations are best categorised (Authors). We draw on our earlier work (developing that of Robinson et al., 1994), to present categorisation of typical employer and employee obligations (Table 1). This forms the theoretical base of our study and these obligations are explored from the employee perspective.

Table 1 here

We draw on our earlier definition to argue that both parties, employer and employee, have obligations and that these are both transactional and relational in nature. Employers have transactional obligations of advancement, high and merit pay and relational ones of training, job security, development and support. Employees have transactional obligations of giving adequate notice, transfers, not supporting competitors and protecting the organisation, and a minimum stay and relational ones of working overtime and demonstrating loyalty and extra role behaviour. We explore these for Belgian IBTs, considering only the employee perspective of their own and their employer's obligations. A focus on only one party to the relationship is common practice and does not detract from overall understanding (e.g. Rodwell et al., 2015).



As there are no previous studies of Belgian IBT psychological contracts, we draw on and synthesise existing psychological contract studies of both traditional expatriate employees and Belgian workers. Taking first expatriates, research has traditionally suggested a tendency to more relational contracts than typical employees (Guzzo and Noonan, 1994). This results from the employer's broad sphere of influence over both work and non-work conditions whereby almost all aspects of the expatriate's daily life are affected. This creates a strong emotional bond with the employing organisation. Further, expatriate assignments are typically open-ended employment and offer high autonomy which contributes to their relational nature. This has, however, been contested. Pate and Scullion (2010), for example, evidence that expatriates reflected a relational contract focus in terms of promotion upon return as well as recognition of skills development, but employers adopted a transactional approach reflected in aggressive contract negotiation and offering less organisational support (Pate and Scullion, 2010). Further, existing research pays little attention to the intentions that organisations have towards expatriation, especially in increasingly flexible economies, where more permeable boundaries (between both organisations and countries) are becoming more common (Thomas et al., 2005). Employees become 'boundaryless careerists' (Thomas et al., 2005: 341), adopting a transactional approach whereby 'highly qualified mobile professionals who develop their career competence levels and market value through continuous learning and transfer across borders' (Stahl et al., 2009: 92). There are clear parallels here to IBT roles that indicate their contracts will be more transactional than relational in nature. Suggestions of

1 a predominantly transactional psychological contract are also allied to a  
2 general shift away from relational psychological contracts as changes in the  
3 economic environment, such as increased international competition, lower  
4 growth, and essential cost reduction amongst companies shift the  
5 employment deal onto a more transactional basis (De Meuse et al., 2001).  
6 Here employees are supposed to take responsibility for their own career  
7 development and commitment to the job or organisation has been replaced  
8 by commitment to the specific work performed (Hiltrop, 1996). The transition  
9 also involves a more learning oriented and project-based contract focus with  
10 reduced consideration to loyalty (Yan et al., 2002) which is particularly  
11 relevant given the typically project-based nature of IBT work (Meyskens et  
12 al., 2009). Indeed the IBT psychological contract may not be relational in  
13 nature given an often short-term rather than a long-term assignment focus  
14 (Stahl et al., 2009).

15 In summary, the IBT psychological contract might be less relational  
16 than traditional expatriate contracts. The flexible nature of the IBT  
17 employment relationship, the dynamic business context and the impact/input  
18 of the individual (and not the employer-employee partnership) on determining  
19 the success of the assignments could all be considered as factors  
20 strengthening the transactional nature of the contract.

21 The Belgian context is also an interesting aspect of this study. Belgian  
22 psychological contract research indicates a somewhat limited shift towards a  
23 more transactional approach (Sels et al., 2000). De Cuyper et al. (2008)  
24 evidence both transactional and relational employee and employer  
25 obligations, for example, the striving towards individualism and the focus on

monetary compensation is balanced by the upholding of the collective negotiated rules and the need for security or belonging, despite the clear importance of the financial aspect with employment (Sels et al., 2000). Further insight into Belgian psychological contracts can, indirectly, be found in the work of (Soens et al., 2005). Their research, aimed at charting Belgian careers, demonstrates that the traditional career marked by a relational psychological contract still occupies a dominant role. Belgian employees have a preference for a permanent, stable and full-time employment deal (Soens et al., 2005). The 'old' (relational) psychological contract is thus not entirely 'dead' (Rousseau, 1995: 110). Nevertheless, new, diverse and transactional career-related trends are also evident. A more competitive and broadening market with changing economic circumstances is recognised as driving more transactional and individualistic working relationships (De Meuse et al., 2001, Pate and Scullion, 2010). Societal factors also play a key role, particularly where there is a prevalence of highly educated employees, as in Belgium (Soens et al., 2005). Erosion of the strictly relational and non-individual career is acknowledged by Vloeberghs et al. (2005) who evidence the ad hoc nature development policy of Belgian companies in relation to their high potential employees. Further, career elements such as attention to performance, marketability and identification with a job (instead of the organisation) appear to be less-developed policy components within Belgian companies. (Van den Brande et al., 2002) likewise remark in their study of Flemish employees that one out of five employees still holds on to an 'old' contract with their employer. The conclusion of the researchers is that the so-called transformation from traditional employment relationships towards 'new deals' is restricted to a very small group of young and highly educated

professionals (Van den Brande et al., 2002: 174). Given, however, that this reflects typical IBT characteristics, we may expect them to have predominantly transactional contracts.

Current research thus presents a mixed picture of the extent to which Belgian IBT psychological contracts might be relational or transactional in nature. Our study aims to develop understanding of this issue.

### **Methods**

We adopted an interpretive approach to developing understanding of the nature of (Belgian) IBT psychological contracts, which is appropriate to their socially constructed nature (Authors). Situation with a subjectivistic paradigm serves to expand existing psychological contract research and addresses the 'methodological (quantitative) rut' into which psychological contract research has fallen (Taylor and Tekelab, 2010: 279). Our interpretive approach responds to increasing pressure to focus psychological contract research on individual employment experiences and their complexity (Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefall, 2008). This indicates reliance upon a qualitative research strategy which supports exploration of new, seldom-researched phenomena. We used semi-structured interviews to obtain descriptions of the life world of the IBT participants (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The interview guide adopted was constructed from the extant literature and offered space and flexibility for the interviewees to share their lived experiences (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The flexibility characterising qualitative and interpretive data collection techniques allowed for adjustment of the initial guide to reflect the learning

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process of conducting interviews and the expanded knowledge offered by the respondents (Miles and Huberman, 1994, Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

A purposive sampling technique was adopted through which nine participants, two women and seven men, meeting the definitional criteria of an IBT were identified. Contact was made via the networks of one of the authors who works in an environment where IBTs are commonly found. Participant details are outlined below and indicate the job title and age (average 35 years) for each participant as well as their current employer’s business activity and the total number of employees working at the firm, with a reference to the location of operation (Table 2). The participants are listed in the order in which they were interviewed, stating their assigned pseudonym.

Table 2 here

The small sample size is acknowledged but the principle of data saturation was followed (Mason, 2010), that is, little new information emerged during the eighth interview and a ninth was conducted to confirm that consistent themes had been established. Data collection ceased at that point. We also draw on others’ work on appropriate sample sizes within the context of interpretive research (Smith et al., 2009, Mason, 2010) to argue that our sample size is adequate, particularly that of MacLean et al. (2011) who evidence that data saturation typically occurs within six to 12 interviews.

Obligations were identified by using a practical set of 'phenomenologically inspired' rules, in particular two of the three approaches proposed by (van Manen, 1990: 92-3) were followed, namely: the selective or highlighting approach and the holistic or sententious approach. The approaches generated both explicit and implicit concepts that were clustered into sub-themes and themes and became apparent through 'dialogue with the text' (van Manen, 1990: 21). In this way, we surfaced 18 employer and employee obligations, although we present only employee (not employer) perceptions of these.

We note the inevitable limitations of our study. It draws on a small number of participants and is highly dependent on their willingness to share views and experiences. Additionally, it is situated only within a Belgian context. Consequently, we do not seek to generalise our findings but representativeness was not our aim and we argue that its absence is unproblematic. On the contrary, the findings allow for exploration of in-depth experiences and rich descriptions of the IBTs involved.

### ***Findings***

As noted, the interviews surfaced 18 obligations within contract content, four employee obligations, 10 employer obligations and four shared by both parties (Table 3). Our analytical focus is on contract nature and space precludes detailed discussion of how this content was established (for further information see Authors). In brief, IBTs perceived themselves to be obligated to conduct certain in-role behaviours (e.g. doing the job well) together with extra-role and proactive role behaviours (e.g. going above and beyond what

1 could be reasonably expected within the role). Additionally, IBTs perceived  
2 that they owed loyalty to their employers. Turning to employer obligations,  
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4 IBTs perceived that their employers were obligated to support them (e.g.  
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6 finding them accommodation during their international travel) and offer them  
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8 flexibility in work and working patterns. Job content was an important  
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10 employer obligation, there being an expectation that IBTs would be offered  
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12 responsible work, the opportunity to travel and varied work assignments.  
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15 Autonomy was also a vital aspect of job content. Employers were expected to  
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17 offer development to the IBTs whether this be vertical (promotion), horizontal  
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19 (secondments to widen experience) or personal. High financial reward was  
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21 also expected by most of the IBTs. Certain obligations were perceived to be  
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23 held by both parties. This included social atmosphere and open relations. In  
24  
25 the former, a family-like atmosphere was felt to be important and collegiality,  
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27 respect and trust were core to the psychological contract. Honesty and  
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29 candour were also central to an effective psychological contract.  
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36 Here, we explore in more detail the nature of these obligations. Each is  
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38 categorised as transactional or relational according to Author's (year) work  
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40 (see Table 1). Most categorisations were widely agreed, other than support  
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42 which was presented as transactional by some participants and relational by  
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44 others. Obligations were predominantly relational in nature, although  
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46 transactional obligations also featured, supporting the idea that contracts are  
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48 not wholly transactional or relational, but a combination of sets of obligations  
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50 which may differ in nature (Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefall, 2008). Given space  
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52 constraints, we explore in most detail those obligations which provide insight  
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54 into contrasts with a typical expatriate psychological contract.  
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Table 3 here

### Employee obligations

Three of the four obligations identified were relational. Within role behaviour, IBTs perceived that in-role behaviour, doing the standard job they were paid for, was transactional, that is, an economic exchange in which '*the work must be done*' (Bill). This is not a new finding (see Sels et al., 2000) but we argue that 'just' doing the work is nevertheless extremely complex and challenging, given the inter-country/cultural context that characterised the IBT role (see Authors). Extra-role and proactive role behaviour, both relational, were also IBT obligations. Extra role behaviour is defined as 'all obligations that fall outside the work-package of duties, such as commitment, being flexible about hours and volunteering to do extra tasks' (Bal et al., 2010: 382). There were numerous examples of this:

*(...) I always have something in my suitcase, I say my suitcase but my computer bag is actually my suitcase, and in it there's always a shirt and underwear for one overnight stay. That means I can always go somewhere for one night. And that sometimes happens. (Kevin)*

And in similar vein:

*Between Christmas Day and New Year, I had a huge problem, a contract of [customer] that could not be delivered. I therefore left on Christmas Eve and I got back at New Year, on New Year's Eve. That was such a major issue, I wasn't able to resolve it from here. They don't celebrate Christmas and New*



1                   *Year in [country],. For me, that's... I shouldn't think about it... sure I had to*  
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4                   *organise it, that's something else. But I shouldn't think about whether or not*  
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6                   *I'm going to do that....* (Florence)  
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10                   Here we see a highly relational extensive exchange in which the IBTs work to  
11  
12                   accommodate organisational demands at, potentially, the expense of their  
13  
14                   own domestic convenience. The flexible nature of their travelling schedules  
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16                   created an obligation that would not be within a typical expatriate contract.  
17  
18                   Finally within role behaviour, we surfaced proactive role behaviour which  
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20                   refers to 'the obligations that employees feel in order to enhance the  
21  
22                   operation of the organisation as a whole' (Bal et al., 2010: 382). Proactive  
23  
24                   behaviour is considered broader than in-role and extra-role behaviour and is  
25  
26                   not widely featured in psychological contract literature. Again it is relational  
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28                   as it demonstrates a strong sense of identification with the employer's  
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30                   position. Marc for example suggested that he '*fights for the company*' as if  
31  
32                   married to it in order to '*push it forward*'. This links closely to the final  
33  
34                   employee obligation, loyalty, which was also relational. IBT accounts  
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36                   reflected expectations of long-term open ended employment relationships  
37  
38                   was envisaged and this was particularly important to them:  
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41                   *I start in every new working partnership with the idea of 'for the rest of my*  
42  
43                   *life'. You never know how it's going to go, but I think that's the only way to*  
44  
45                   *start out...* (Nils)  
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51                   The IBT's concerned offered their employer a form of security in relation to  
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53                   the potential tem of their employment relationship. Surprisingly, however, the  
54  
55                   IBTs did not expect employers to reciprocate with a job security obligation:  
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1 *I certainly never take my position for granted. And I don't think that's so bad,*  
2  
3 *it doesn't bother me that that's how it is. (Andy)*  
4  
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8 While lack of job security reflects Belgian research in which a more  
9 transactional career trend is observed amongst highly educated employees  
10 (Soens et al., 2005), it is at odds with the loyalty displayed by the IBTs.  
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### 16 **Employer Obligations**

17 Of the ten employer obligations identified, seven were relational, two  
18 transactional and one lacked clear categorisation, again reflecting a  
19 predominantly relational contract. Taking support first, IBT constructions of  
20 the obligation varied and related mainly to support while undertaking  
21 international assignments. Walter expressed a transactional view in that '*I*  
22 *want a good bed and a good shower*' while Kevin had a more relational  
23 interpretation:  
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34 *And then once you're there, (...) that you're taken care of there, by the host,*  
35 *that you're received in the company as a guest (...). That means that they'll*  
36 *eat with you, they show you where you can go in the area, etc., that you're*  
37 *not left to fend for yourself.*  
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45 The support obligation expressed by the interviewees is consistent with the  
46 importance Mäkelä et al. (2017) attach to this in order to keep satisfaction  
47 with work-related travel high. Nevertheless, no IBT suggested that the  
48 employer should provide functional support for the IBT's home base or family  
49 which again differs from expatriates who desire support in and alongside  
50 work for both themselves and their family (Guzzo and Noonan, 1994).  
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The flexibility obligation reflects much of the extant literature and ranged from *‘adjusting hours in the working day’* to *‘taking 3 months off to build a house following a period of extensive travel’* (Kevin). However, little specific to the IBT role emerged, whereas job content more clearly reflected the nature of IBT role. Central to this was travel, which all IBTs expected and enjoyed provided there was a clear purpose:

*That you aren’t just travelling to show your face, but that there’s also something connected to it...* (Cindy)

While there was recognition of potential inconvenience (as substantially illustrated in the study of Baker and Ciuk, 2015), it was also stimulating and Nils suggested that it was something *‘he could not do without’*, albeit within certain boundaries:

*It’s always like searching for a balance, like at a certain point you also get a feeling of guilt. You know you aren’t leaving your wife and three children behind, but I mean dumping all of the week’s worries on her, and that’s just how it is...* (Nils)

This again contrasts with a typical expatriate experience in which the family relocates together. There were other benefits to traveling:

*I really like being on aeroplanes, for eight hours or so.... There’s no telephone, no computer because you can’t get any network, so it’s real time for me. I can do a report and for once I can think a long time about it.* (Florence)

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4 This reflection or 'me time' was also suggested to facilitate the proactive role  
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6 behaviour obligation by creating space to prioritise the company's agenda.  
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8 The travel obligation linked closely to variety, as IBTs perceived that  
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10 employers '*really have to continually give you new challenges and*  
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12 *satisfaction*' (Kevin). This reflects Demel and Mayrhofer (2010) notion of  
13  
14 'getting high (internationally)' which refers to interesting and new job-tasks  
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16 that must be strategic and international in nature. Cindy reflected powerfully  
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18 that she would find it '*horrible*' having to do the same thing '*for the rest of*  
19  
20 *your days*'.

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26 Responsibility, for people or projects, and autonomy, Bill almost '*being*  
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28 *his own boss*' and being able to work '*without too much control*' were both  
29  
30 important and relational obligations and broadly reflect extant research.  
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35 Development obligations, both vertical and horizontal were identified.  
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37 Vertical development centred largely on promotion and was seen to be part  
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39 of a largely economic exchange (Rousseau, 1995). IBTs further recognised  
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41 that opportunities may be limited given their current seniority. Horizontal  
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43 development, through perhaps job rotation or *assignment of challenging*  
44  
45 *projects* (Florence), was more relationally viewed. Interestingly, personal  
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47 development was both relational and reflective of the IBT role. Personal  
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49 growth was achieved by both role execution and travel, for example:  
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1                                   ... I want to gain different experiences in my life. I want, when I'm old, to be  
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4                                   able to look back onto different experiences, I want to have tried out different  
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6                                   things. (Bill)  
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10                               Sam suggested that international experience was 'enriching' which  
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12                               was supported by Kevin's experiences:  
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14                               I was in Bahrain, for instance. In Islam you don't shake women's hands.  
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16                               Although they're just in the same office and do the same work as anyone  
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18                               else, they don't shake hands with women. So I didn't know that... a person  
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20                               explains it. You don't feel embarrassed because it's explained to you, and  
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22                               that's really important.... that there's a local person who takes you along and  
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24                               who shows you everything.  
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30                               Kevin also argued that the intercultural training often offered for expatriate  
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32                               assignments is not required for short international stays provide this local  
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34                               development was available. This contrasts with Mäkelä et al. (2017) who  
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36                               consider cross-cultural education as beneficial for IBTs since they might work  
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38                               in multiple cultures in a rather short amount of time.  
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43                               The final employer obligation was financial rewards which was,  
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45                               perhaps not surprisingly, transactional in nature. There was substantial  
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47                               emphasis on this in light of the individualised nature of the IBT employment  
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49                               relationship, for example, '***I have to [emphasised] get paid well.***' (Walter)  
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53                               This related in part to the demanding and open ended nature of the IBT role:  
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1 *Er, extremely important. I'll come out with it, I think regarding the role you*  
2 *perform, that you should get for it what is required. Also regarding the*  
3 *travelling, all that working, the number of hours that you do. We don't get an*  
4 *hourly wage, we don't have hours, I think they [the employer] then have to*  
5 *pay enough. (Kevin)*  
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14 This emphasis on financial obligations reflects the importance of monetary  
15 reward within the Belgian context (Sels et al., 2000), although Cindy (like  
16 others) suggested that balance was required in that *'For me, what's very*  
17 *important is the job content, more than the actual financial aspect.'*  
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## 25 **Joint Obligations**

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27 The final four obligations were shared between employer and IBT and,  
28 accordingly, were relational in nature. Social atmosphere was important and  
29 comprised obligations of family, collegiality and respect and trust. A familial  
30 and personal work environment was important, despite the international  
31 nature and volatility that characterises the IBT role:  
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39 *You could describe it [working with colleagues] as a family. It also feels like,*  
40 *everywhere you go you're always welcome, there's very little conflict, it really*  
41 *feels like a family. (Kevin)*  
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48 Collegiality related to working with people who were *stimulating and*  
49 *triggering'* (Sam) while respect and trust constituted core obligation for  
50 operating professionally. These were linked to both the relationship between  
51 colleagues and with the connection with their employer or manager. Florence  
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suggested that trust ‘on both sides’ offered her the possibility to achieve what is best for her and the company. Open relationships were clearly linked to this:

*That [social relationship with the employer] is actually an extremely important aspect of my life, if I don't feel right in my job, then yes... for me it certainly isn't just economic, that's of course part of it. (...) The social aspect is definitely important and I'm someone who has to be in a good group. Feeling recognition, not just financially but also getting the feeling of what I do being appreciated and being taken into account... (Nils)*

Florence expressed the mutual openness as follows:

*They [the employer] know me, they know how I think, they're in so many meetings with me (...) a very open relationship, that's very important for me, being able to have an open discussion. I can't stand having to hide things, or that I can't say things for some reason or another, if there's something I should be able to say it. Straightforward and very open. I'm extremely direct, even towards my employer, otherwise I can't perform this role. That's always with respect. For me, that's also very important.*

In summary, the IBT contract portrayed reflects an open-ended relationship with autonomy and a strong sense of responsibility for managing the work contract. Travel, support and financial rewards were also prominent. While predominantly relational, transactional aspects were also obvious in the contract. This observation is not entirely surprising given extant literature

(Authors; Conway and Briner 2009) but is nevertheless an important contribution to understanding the nature of the IBT psychological contract.

### ***Discussion and Conclusions***

That the IBT psychological contract is predominantly relational is an interesting finding and perhaps contrary to much recent IHRM research. For example, the expatriate psychological contract literature indicates the increasingly transactional nature of international employee psychological contracts (Thomas et al., 2005, Stahl et al., 2009, Pate and Scullion, 2010). Our findings are more reflective of original expatriate studies in which the psychological contract was still principally seen as steeped in relational elements (Guzzo and Noonan, 1994). Wider research on 'boundaryless careerists' also argues for a relational to transactional shift, i.e. from 'old' to 'new' deal (Rousseau, 1995, Hiltrop, 1996). Yet, despite the highly educated, career-focussed nature of our participants, their psychological contracts were still predominantly relational in nature. As well as informing understanding of international employment relations, our findings more widely call into question the extent to which the much-discussed relational/transactional transition has taken place. We support Conway and Briner (2009: 49) who suggest that 'it is difficult to evaluate whether or not there was an actual transition from an old contract to a new contract because no decent historical data with which to test the proposition are available'.

The Belgian context may also be important, as the mix of both relational and transactional IBT obligations reflects wider Belgian psychological contract research (Sels et al., 2000, De Cuyper et al., 2008). The findings



also provide strong support for previous research on Belgian high potential employees (Van den Brande et al., 2002, Vloeberghs et al., 2005) whereby the individual assumes a certain responsibility for his/her career and related psychological contract formation. For example, while participants expected the employer to provide growth opportunities, they perceived it to be an IBT responsibility to realise the potential of these opportunities. The IBT also had responsibility for clearly signalling his/her career needs. As Sam stated: *'If you don't say anything yourself, you won't get anything. You have to continually share your thoughts.'* Differences between IBT psychological contracts and wider Belgian research did, however, emerge. The job content, (in-/extra-) role behaviour and loyalty obligations, all relationally categorised, are somewhat at odds with typical psychological contract characteristics of Belgian employees (Sels et al., 2000, Soens et al., 2005). While according to Sels et al (2000), the Belgian psychological contract reflects a strong connection between employer and employee, Soens et al (2005) suggest that loyalty is reducing amongst highly educated employees such as IBTs. However our findings evidence a clear role for IBT loyalty, albeit the converse employer obligation, job security, was little in evidence. IBTs did not explicitly voice that the employer must offer them job security which diluted the strong employer/employee connection (Sels et al., 2000).

In conclusion, we argue that our research makes a number of contributions, empirical, theoretical and practical. First and in light of the relative scarcity of focus on non-expatriate international work (Baker and Ciuk, 2015) we contribute empirical data to the IHRM field in developing understanding of a newly emerging form of international employee, the IBT. Further, the adoption of an established concept such as the psychological

contract contributes to the 'maturing nature of the IHRM as a field of scientific endeavour' (Björkman and Welch, 2015: 136) and serves to develop the scope of its multi-disciplinarity. Second, we contribute to the psychological contract theory. In studying a new employee group, we develop general understanding and additionally inform the unresolved debate on the relational/transactional shift (Conway and Briner, 2009). Contrary to much extant research, we demonstrate the continuing relational nature of many psychological contracts. Further we add to the relatively small body of qualitative psychological contract research, allowing for nuanced and in-depth insights into the little-researched IBT group (Gibson and Hanes, 2003). Our findings offer a unique insight into the nature of the IBTs' employment relationship which lays the foundations for further exploration of the IBT psychological contract.

Third, we make a contribution to practice in that our work develops insight into effective management and maximisation of psychological contracts (Rodwell et al., 2015), which is essential to realising IBTs' strategic potential (Tahvanainen et al., 2005). We provide HR practitioners and/or organisations with a rich and expanded understanding of the IBT employment relationship. Insight into IBT perceptions of their employment deal offers the opportunity to tailor it accordingly. For example, job content, support and autonomy are vital within IBT working relationships and assignments. Importantly, we evidence that it was not possible to propose a psychological contract categorisation that was applicable for all of the IBTs in this study, let alone for the entire population given its idiosyncratic, socially constructed nature. This highlights the importance of individual negotiation

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and understanding between IBTs and their managers to ensure the offer of a deal appropriate to that particular IBT. In this way transparent working partnerships that serve to avoid breach of the contract can be established (Robinson and Morrison, 2000). Given both the strategic importance (Mäkelä et al., 2017) and ‘marketable’ nature of IBTs (Stahl et al., 2009: 92), the understanding developed through our research is extremely valuable to organisations operating internationally wishing to develop and retain their high potential employees (Tahvanainen et al., 2005, Collings et al., 2007, Welch et al., 2007).

We recognise, however, that there is further work to be done. Our findings address only the employee perspective and the employer perspective provides a fruitful avenue for future study. As we noted in our original definition, the psychological contract is bilateral and thus understanding the perspectives of both parties is essential to its effective operation. Further, a larger sample of both IBTs and organisations is required to confirm and build upon our work. Finally, we note that we have adopted a content approach to our investigation while others have called for use of process perspectives to further develop understanding (Conway and Briner, 2009). Such future research would also provide a valuable complementary perspective to our findings.

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**Table 1: Nature of obligations within the psychological contract**

TRANSACTIONAL EMPLOYER OBLIGATIONS	TRANSACTIONAL EMPLOYEE OBLIGATIONS	RELATIONAL EMPLOYER OBLIGATIONS	RELATIONAL EMPLOYEE OBLIGATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Advancement</li> <li>▪ High pay</li> <li>▪ Merit pay</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Notice</li> <li>▪ Transfers</li> <li>▪ No competitor support</li> <li>▪ Proprietary protection</li> <li>▪ Minimum stay</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Training</li> <li>▪ Job security</li> <li>▪ Development</li> <li>▪ Support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Overtime</li> <li>▪ Loyalty</li> <li>▪ Extra-role behaviour</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Profile of Participants**

PSEUDONYM	JOB TITLE	AGE	APPROXIMATE % OF TIME SPENT ABROAD	BUSINESS ACTIVITY OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANT'S EMPLOYER	N° OF EMPLOYEES
Nils	Sales Manager	37	30-40	Production of (laminated/wooden) flooring-solutions, panels and roofing elements	4,000 (world-wide)
Cindy	Global Category Manager	31	15	Steel wire transformation and manufacturing of coatings	27,000 (world-wide)
Bill	Senior Consultant	40	15-20	Business (IT) consulting	750 (Belgium)
Kevin	Solution Integration Manager	35	80	Production of compressors, construction and mining equipment, power tools and assembly systems	35,000 (world-wide)
Sam	Export Manager	35	40	Production of kitchen and bath linen	200 (Belgium)
Florence	Import Director – Mgt.	42	10-15	Production of kitchen and bath	200 (Belgium)



	Committee member			linen	
Marc	Export Sales Manager	29	40	Production of linen/fabrics for upholstery and curtains	24 (Belgium)
Andy	Business Analyst – Corporate Mgt. Team member	28	50	Heavy lifting manufacturing and engineered transport	3,000 (world-wide)
Walter	Technical Manager	40	10	Glass mould manufacturing	3,500 (spread over 6 sites in the EU and 1 in the US)

Table 3: Summary of contract obligations categorised according to nature

EMPLOYER OBLIGATIONS	EMPLOYEE OBLIGATIONS
	Role behaviour:

	(1) in-role behaviour: transactional (2) extra-role behaviour: relational (3) proactive role behaviour: relational
(4) Support: transactional/relational	
(5) Flexibility: relational	
Job content: (6) responsibility: relational (7) travel: relational (8) variety: relational	
(9) Autonomy: relational	
	(10) Loyalty: relational
Development: (11) vertical: transactional (12) horizontal: relational (13) personal: relational	
Social atmosphere: (14) family: relational (15) work atmosphere – collegiality: relational (16) respect and trust: relational	
(17) Financial rewards: transactional	
(18) Open relation: relational	