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Article

Intraorganizational mobility and employees' work-related contact patterns: evidence from panel data in the European Commission

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Abstract

Programs to encourage staff to move *within* public-sector organizations have become increasingly widespread in recent decades. Yet, although there are some anecdotal accounts, the effects of such intraorganizational mobility remain largely unexplored. Building on insights from organization theory and social psychology, we argue that intraorganizational mobility entails an important trade-off: it undermines movers' depth of work-related contacts *within* the (new) department, while it increases the breadth of their work-related contacts *outside* it. Our empirical analysis evaluates this trade-off using a two-way fixed effects model for a longitudinal dataset of movers ($N = 149$) and stayers ($N = 473$) across two survey waves among European Commission officials in 2014 and 2018. Our main findings confirm that intraorganizational mobility is connected in opposing ways to employees' intra- and extra-departmental work-related contact patterns. In line with theoretical expectations, we find these relationships to be stronger for employees who have previously experienced intraorganizational moves ("repeat-movers").

Key words: social interactions; job mobility; European Commission.

Introduction

Intraorganizational mobility can be defined as the movement of staff members between different positions *within* the same organization. Such moves can be lateral—without a change in rank—or diagonal—which includes a change in rank—and may, but need not, involve adjustment of an individual's task portfolio. Intraorganizational staff mobility and rotation schemes in the public sector increased in popularity with the New Public Management reforms of the 1980s, and have in recent decades become a widespread feature of public-sector human resources management (De Caluwé et al. 2014; Lægreid and Lois 2015; Williams 2002; Wise and Barbara 2007). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recently reported that nearly half of its member countries have mobility schemes that are either mandatory or encouraged for (mainly senior) civil service staff (OECD 2023).[1]

They include Australia, Belgium, Costa Rica, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (Australian Public Service 2023; Caluwé et al. 2014; Van Blijswijk et al. 2004), while, outside the OECD, Singapore has such a scheme. International bodies, including the European Commission (2016, 2022a, 2022b) and the World Health Organization (Klarner et al. 2008), have also sought to encourage mobility.

The costs, benefits, and best practices of intraorganizational mobility in public organizations have been debated extensively for at least five decades (Fulton 1968; Sasse and Emma 2019; Slater 2022; Wise and Barbara 2007). This article aims to advance the debate by addressing theoretically and empirically how intraorganizational mobility affects the work-related contact patterns of employees *both* within *and* outside their organization. We define work-related contacts as interactions on the part of an individual with interlocutors inside and outside the organization to discuss issues of relevance to his or her daily work. This mobility–contacts relationship has not received much attention in public administration scholarship thus far, but is an important issue for three main reasons. First, internal and external contacts are part and parcel of the work of most employees in any public-sector organization. Hence, it is important to understand whether and how mobility programs affect the contact patterns of individual employees. Second, close and frequent contacts are well known to foster cohesion as well as information gathering and sharing across the organization (Burt 1992; Granovetter

[1]The implemented mobility schemes vary in type, scale, and range. They may make mobility mandatory or voluntary, they can be formal or informal, they may relate to short-term exchanges or long-term rotations, and they offer differing levels of encouragement for staff to be mobile (Fišar et al. 2021; Malis 2021; OECD 2023; Wise and Barbara 2007). Mobility schemes also have varying motivations and objectives. Stated aims include, for example, improving connectivity between departments; expanding employee experience or knowledge of the organization; enhancing skill acquisition; spreading best practices; creating a generalist cadre or preparing employees for management responsibilities; or bolstering motivation, commitment, and performance (Cyan and Obed 2017; European Commission 2016, 2022a, 2022b; Lægreid and Lois 2015; OECD 2023; Wise and Barbara 2007).

1974; Siciliano 2015). As such, enhanced contact patterns inside and outside the organization following instances of intraorganizational mobility would be a clear instrumental benefit of such schemes. Finally, an earlier literature in public administration held that mobility programs create a cadre of generalists who specialize in administrative coordination within and between organizational units rather than a specific subject matter (Cohen 1970), and can therefore act as boundary-spanners, fostering cohesion and coordination within increasingly complex organizations dealing with increasingly challenging policy problems (Williams 2002). Such an interpretation presupposes a positive mobility–contacts relationship, however, which, as we argue below, is not self-evident.

From a theoretical perspective, we build on insights from organization theory and social psychology to argue that intraorganizational mobility entails a trade-off between the breadth and the depth of work-related contacts. On the one hand, mobility may broaden an employee's contacts across (intra)organizational boundaries, leading to the development of more diverse work-related contacts *outside* the department (Australian Public Service 2023; Campion, Lisa, and Michael 1994; Corredoira and Lori 2010; Edström and Jay 1977; Kleinbaum 2012). On the other, it may lead recently relocated staff to be less embedded *within* their own (new) department (Adkins, Elizabeth, and Bruce 1996; Kristof-Brown and Cynthia 2001; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Erin 2005; Schaubroeck and Simon 2002; Witt 1998), sacrificing depth of relations at least in the short term. While the former constitutes an oft-stated aim of mobility schemes, the latter would be an unintended negative consequence.[2]

Empirical evidence on the effects of mobility on staff contact patterns has been scarce hitherto because longitudinal data on individual-level intraorganizational movements is difficult to collect or obtain (Campion, Lisa, and Michael 1994; Edström and Jay 1977).[3] The availability to us of a dataset tracking the *same* staff members of an international organization (the European Commission) before and after their intraorganizational mobility allows us to answer the following question: *How, if at all, does staff mobility within a public organization affect the strength of employees' work-related contact patterns*?

Our answer to this question sheds light on an important trade-off related to intraorganizational mobility. We find that intraorganizational mobility programs foster a broader range of contacts across and beyond the organization, but at least in the (relatively) short term reduce interaction between employees who moved (i.e., "movers") and their colleagues in their new departments. It takes "movers" almost three years on average to establish frequent, routinized contacts with colleagues in their new departments comparable to the level of such contacts if they had never moved. These findings are particularly strong for "repeat" movers (i.e., employees who have moved more than once), which suggests that the effects of intraorganizational mobility schemes are compounded with the frequency of mobility within the organization. Therefore, our findings caution against high-frequency intraorganizational mobility. Employees need time to become embedded in their new position before the organization can fully benefit from the wider networks generated by their mobility.

Theoretical framework

Organization theory maintains that the formal, structural characteristics of public-sector organizations both enable and constrain the room of maneuver for their employees (Christensen and PerKjell 2021; Egeberg and Jarle 2018; Scott and Gerald 2015). Since formal structures—such as organizational boundaries as well as the set of prescribed roles and reporting relationships—create biases in human behavior and decision-making processes (Egeberg 1999; Olsen 2018), administrative behavior reflects organizational structures. In this theoretical framework, a central notion is that "contact patterns and exchange of information to a large degree reflect the formal structure of the administrative apparatus" (Egeberg 1999, p. 162; see also Christensen and PerKjell 2021; Murdoch and Jarle 2013). A direct implication is that if the structure of the organization is segmented, employees develop an allegiance to their unit, and may not share knowledge with colleagues elsewhere (Egeberg and Jarle 2018; Peterson 2017). This can result in missed opportunities for knowledge sharing, and may lead to turf wars, duplication of efforts, and inconsistent practices between organizational units (Finke 2019; Vantaggiato, Hussein, and Sara 2021).

The organization-theoretical perspective suggests that intraorganizational mobility affects an employee's work-related contacts with other employees as well as with actors external to the organization. As formal organization "emphasizes some interactions over others" (Gulati and Phanish 2009, p. 427), contacts specific to the old position and its associated tasks can be expected to wither away following a transfer to another part of the organization, and be replaced by new contact patterns reflecting the formal organizational boundaries of the new department. Yet, how immediate or complete this replacement process is remains both theoretically and empirically unclear. For instance, it could be that pre-existing contacts are *not* dissolved as fully, or replaced as rapidly, as organization theory suggests (Agrawal, Iain, and John 2006; Corredoira and Lori 2010; Gulati and Phanish 2009). A key reason is that the separation between old and new organizational structures may not be particularly sharp for individuals moving *within* the same organization (Murdoch and Benny 2012). Or, the integration of movers into a new unit or department may not be straightforward (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Erin 2005; Malis 2021), thereby affecting the frequency of contact between newcomers and their new colleagues and superiors.

We argue that two implications follow for the impact of intraorganizational mobility, which represent two sides of a trade-off between breadth and depth: employees who

[2]There may be other downsides to mobility. Frequent job rotation has been linked to loss of an organization's "institutional memory" (Corbett et al. 2018; Sasse and Emma 2019), and reduced willingness of employees to invest time and energy in their new posts due to the expectation of future mobility (Hakenes and Svetlana 2017; Slater 2022; Suvarierol, Madalina, and Martijn 2013). Moreover, workflows may be disrupted and job-specific human capital lost while rotated staff members become accustomed to their new positions (Geys et al. 2023; Malis 2021).

[3]A key exception is Kleinbaum and Stuart (2014), who analyze individuals' communication networks before and after their mobility within a large IT company. They show that some pre-existing network ties persist while new ones are formed after internal mobility, consistent with the generation of a more diverse network. Within the field of public administration, there exists also a significant scholarship indicating that staff mobility helps mitigate concerns about rent-seeking and corruption by breaking ties between (street-level) bureaucrats and their clients (Banik 2001; Cyan and Obed 2017; Fišar et al. 2021; Van Blijswijk et al. 2004).

move—henceforth, "movers"—gain a broader range of contacts across the organization, but at the cost of shallower work-related contacts with colleagues in their new department, at least in the short term. We investigate this possibility through three interrelated hypotheses that are stated below.

Starting with the effect of mobility on a mover's contacts *within* their own (new) department, movers need to bring themselves up to speed with the tasks, aims, and agenda of their new department. As a result, they might require a period of particularly intense interaction with colleagues and superiors/subordinates (or both) upon joining a new unit or department in order to make sure that they understand the exigencies of their new environment. This could take the form of, for instance, informal "guidance from supervisors and colleagues in relation to the performance of tasks" (Westerman 2021, p. 936), formal on-the-job training schemes, or getting-to-know-the-team sessions. Either way, such integration practices would lead to the expectation that contact frequency with members of the new department *increases* immediately after mobility.

Research in organizational psychology, however, suggests an important counter-argument. These studies highlight that mobility can adversely impact an individual's integration in the organization, and his or her engagement with colleagues (Adkins, Elizabeth, and Bruce 1996; Kristof-Brown and Cynthia 2001; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Erin 2005; Schaubroeck and Simon 2002; Witt 1998).[4] As a result, recently relocated staff are initially *less* well embedded in their new department relative to staff members who do not move ("stayers"). The same would follow if work-related contacts specific to new functions, tasks, and organizational structures are slow to develop, because movers take time to assimilate the routines and contact patterns with their immediate colleagues and superiors (Egeberg 1999; Murdoch and Benny 2012; Scott and Gerald 2015).

Existing empirical evidence appears to be more supportive of the prediction that the development of informal relationships is a process (Atakhan-Kenneweg, Leon, and Jörg 2021). Research on rotation systems in the diplomatic service, for example, shows that recently arrived diplomats "need time to build relationships" (Malis 2021, p. 1029; see also Leguey-Feilleux 2009; Suvarierol 2009). Relating to one side of a trade-off—a mover's lower level of integration in their new department—this leads to our first hypothesis.

H1: Intraorganizational mobility is associated with a *decrease* in frequent contacts within a mover's own (new) department—at least in the short term.

Moving to the effect of mobility on a mover's contacts *outside* their own (new) department, we maintain that intraorganizational mobility may work to create a perception of blurred organizational boundaries (Drori, Amy, and Shmuel 2013; Wilner, Tania Pereira, and Mario 2017). While organization theory often implicitly assumes that formal structures create firm intraorganizational borderlines (Christensen and PerKjell 2021; Egeberg 1999; Murdoch and Jarle 2013), mobility across such structural divisions can undermine the perceptions of (the importance of) these boundaries. This matters since the presence or perception of blurred organizational boundaries implies an influence of previous organizational structures on movers that becomes "stickier and harder to dislodge" (Murdoch and Benny 2012, p. 1363). This can result in lags in the adjustment to the new environment, which Agrawal, Iain, and John (2006, p. 573) term the "enduring social relationship hypothesis." Furthermore, from an organizational psychology perspective, working closely together for any period of time tends to forge strong contact networks that might extend beyond the immediate work relationship. Pre-existing informal networks may then persist because people are loath to give up on the relationships they have built up (Gulati and Phanish 2009; Kleinbaum 2012). At least some of the connections a mover has with his or her "old" department, as well as links across and outside the organization developed in the previous role, can thus remain after a transfer. One might furthermore expect such effects to be stronger in a compulsory mobility set-up, as individuals do not (necessarily) choose to sever ties under such conditions.

The roles, tasks, and reporting relationships prescribed by the new position and organizational affiliation will, however, lead to the development of new contacts inside and outside the organization (Christensen and PerKjell 2021; Egeberg 1999; Murdoch and Jarle 2013). As a result, a mover's contacts *both* within *and* outside the organization are, almost by construction, likely to expand. If the new task portfolio requires frequent interaction with external stakeholders or counterparts in other departments, new contacts will be layered upon existing relationships. This line of argument relates to the other side of a trade-off that intraorganizational mobility entails—the development of wider relations across as well as beyond the organization—leading to our second hypothesis.

H2: Intraorganizational mobility is associated with an *increase* in frequent contacts outside a mover's own (new) department—both within and outside the organization.[5]

The breadth-for-depth trade-off we highlight in hypotheses H1 and H2 has thus far remained unexplored in existing literature. Previous research—largely focusing on private-sector firms—has mainly evaluated *external* contacts, and assumes typically that these will expand after mobility (Campion, Lisa, and Michael 1994; Corredoira and Lori 2010; Edström and Jay 1977; Kleinbaum 2012). Hence, our hypotheses add to—and, to some extent, challenge—existing knowledge by adding nuance to the debate. Mobility programs, we argue, do not only have positive effects in terms of broadening movers' contact patterns, but can also involve an undesired side-effect in the form of substantial (re)integration costs.

Nonetheless, an important source of potential heterogeneity with respect to the propositions in H1 and H2 relates to a mover's level of past experience with intraorganizational moves. One of the implications of staff mobility and rotation schemes is that a heightened expectation of future mobility leads employees to invest less in building contacts with new colleagues (Hakenes and Svetlana 2017; Slater 2022;

[4]Organizational psychologists have mostly focused on the relationship between internal mobility and job satisfaction and/or organizational commitment (e.g., Kalleberg and Arne 2001; Liljegren and Kerstin 2008), and have thus far ignored any potential impact on individuals' contact patterns. Our research speaks directly to this literature by pointing out that moving can have real costs in terms of social embeddedness into a mover's new department, which may put downward pressure on their satisfaction and commitment.

[5]Note that staff mobility can lead to an increase in frequent contacts outside a mover's own (new) department even when their contact network stays exactly the same. That is, some contacts that were *within* the old department now simply become redefined as contact *outside* the new department. Even so, this still means that, from the perspective of the organization as well as the new department, a useful increase in contacts *outside* the new department has taken place.

Suvarierol, Madalina, and Martijn 2013). Accordingly, "repeat" movers in particular could be expected to invest less in the development of frequent contacts in their new department compared to "first-time" movers, as they anticipate moving on again in the (near) future. At the same time, "repeat" movers are likely to perceive organizational boundaries as increasingly permeable with every move (Gulati and Phanish 2009; Murdoch and Benny 2012). As a result, it becomes easier for such individuals to maintain strong work-related contacts outside their own department following mobility events. Our third and final hypothesis therefore is:

H3: The *decrease* in frequent contacts within one's own new department (H1) and *increase* in frequent contacts outside one's own new department (H2) is stronger for repeat movers compared to first-time movers.

Method and data

Context

The European Union (EU) is widely viewed as one of the most far-reaching attempts at regional political and economic integration (Olsen, John Olsen, and John 2018; Shore 2000). Within the EU system, the European Commission occupies a central position. It has a near monopoly over the submission of new policy proposals, monitors implementation and enforcement, manages the EU budget, and represents the EU in trade negotiations (Ellinas and Ezra 2012; Kassim et al. 2013). To carry out this panoply of tasks, the Commission employs approximately 32,000 staff members across its administrative departments—called Directorates-General (DGs)—as well as other services.

Staff mobility has received increasing emphasis in the organization with an aim to improve connectivity between departments, spread best practices, and develop management career potential (European Commission 2016, 2022a, 2022b). The rotation policy introduced for senior managers (i.e., Directors and Directors-General) under the Prodi Commission (1999–2004) was a first major step (Kassim 2008; Schön-Quinlivan 2008). Senior managers became eligible to move positions after five years and required to move after seven. Guidelines on the mobility of middle managers (i.e., Heads of Unit) were introduced in 2016. Middle managers are expected to serve at least two years in a role, to rotate after between five and seven years, and to move to a different DG after ten years. Mobility at other staff levels has been encouraged within the Commission, but has remained at very low levels, especially between DGs (Connolly, Hussein, and Pierre 2019; Kassim et al. 2013). The Commission sought to address this in its new Human Resources Strategy, launched in 2022 with the aim of creating a culture of mobility and "regular internal and external mobility at all levels, in all places of employment" (European Commission 2022c, p. 16). Overall, therefore, the Commission has increasingly formalized its mobility policy over the years, where mobility is mandatory at higher levels within the organizational hierarchy and (strongly) encouraged at lower levels. While the goal of the mobility policy is increasing breadth of contacts and interactions across the organization, its potential implications for the depth of contacts within departments are not explicitly mentioned in the Commission's documents and, to the best of our knowledge, have not been examined or evaluated.

The Commission is an interesting case to study since it is in many ways typical of public-sector organizations with a hierarchical structure, which divide tasks according to specialist expertise and professional background (e.g., national and local public administrations in most Western democracies, as well as most other international organizations). Internal and external contacts are critical within such organizational structures to foster internal cohesion and coordination, which benefits the generalizability of our findings. Yet, the Commission also has a number of more distinctive features relative to other public organizations, particularly when it comes to its size, its multinational staff, and its wide range of activities (all of which are commonly observed in any large international organization in the private sector). These features arguably make cross-cutting contact patterns particularly important for the organization, which may affect the potential for generalizing beyond our empirical setting. This should be kept in mind when interpreting our findings below.

Sample

Our dataset derives from combining the responses to two surveys conducted among *all* Commission staff in March–April 2014 ($N = 5{,}545$; response rate = 17.7%) and May–June 2018 ($N = 6{,}539$; response rate = 15.4%). The same research team organized both surveys, with significant overlap in the questionnaires at the two time-points. At the time of the first survey, the Commission had a formal rotation policy in place for senior managers only. The extension of this policy to middle managers was introduced just before the second survey, but its conditions were not yet binding for most employees when the survey was fielded (see above).

Since the main concern of our analysis lies with changes over time in the strength of work-related contacts of employees (operationalized by the reported frequency of interactions), it is important to observe the *same* employees in both survey waves. Unfortunately, stringent anonymity requirements did not allow the inclusion of individual identifiers. We therefore implemented the cross-survey matching strategy pioneered in Murdoch et al. (2019) to construct an (anonymous) panel dataset. This approach exploits sociodemographic background characteristics of individual staff members, which either do not change over time—such as year of birth, gender, and nationality—or change at a fixed pace—such as age and length of service. When repeated cross-sectional surveys target the same respondent population and a large number of background variables is available—thereby increasing the discriminatory power of the analysis—a system of unique identifiers can be created, from which a panel dataset covering a subset of individual respondents can then be extracted (for technical details, see Geys 2023).

Since these conditions are met in our setting, we are able to match respondent profiles across both surveys using data on year of birth, gender, nationality (in terms of primary nationality and presence of a second nationality), education (in terms of level, field and international study), and year of entry in the Commission. We can verify that these respondents have (near-)identical pre- and within-Commission career histories in type as well as length. The probability of observing more than one individual sharing all these characteristics at the same time is extremely low given the distributions of these variables observed in our dataset (i.e., below 0.00001%). As such, we can be confident that observations displaying the

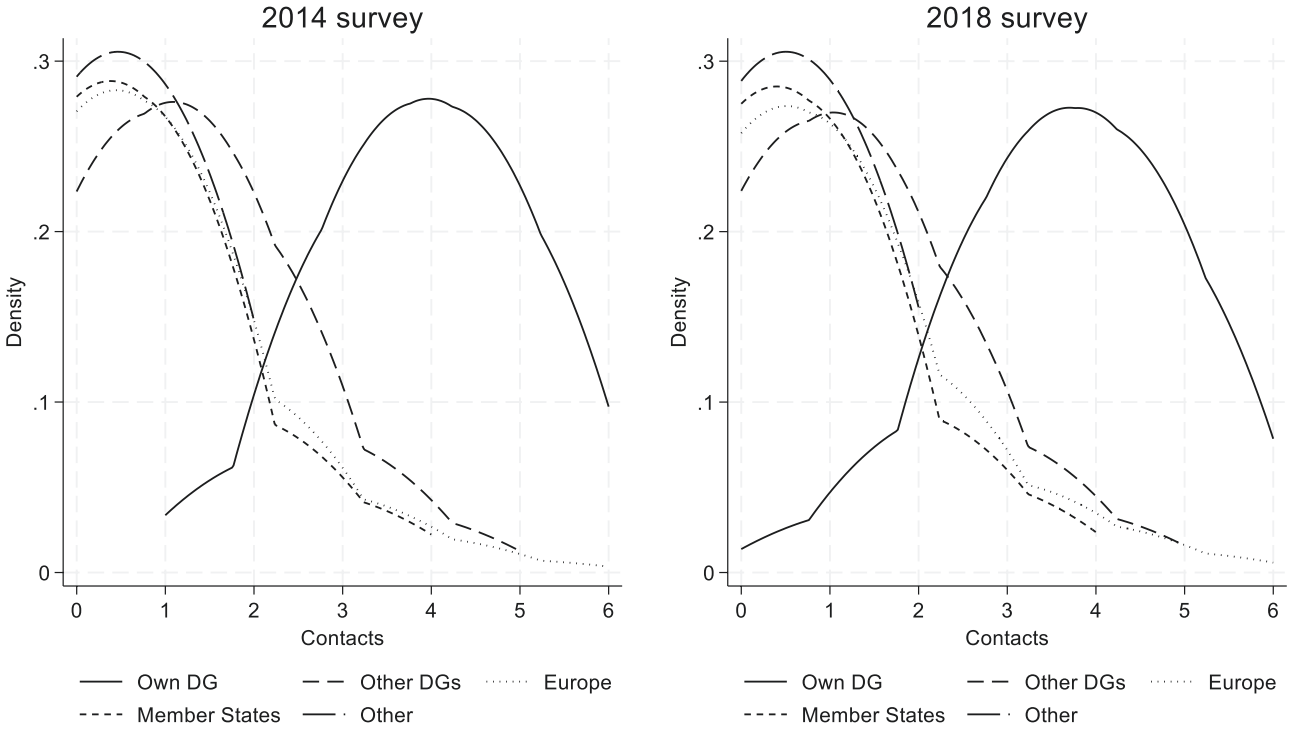

Figure 1. Distribution of staff by number of contacts across contact category. Note: The figure displays the density of respondents (on the y-axis) declaring at least monthly contacts with a given number of interaction partners (on the x-axis) within five categories of counterparts: that is, internal within the DG (ranging from 0 to 6), internal outside the DG (ranging from 0 to 5), external to other European institutions (ranging from 0 to 6), external to member states (ranging from 0 to 4), and other contacts (ranging from 0 to 2). The left- and right-hand diagrams plot the distribution of these variables for 2014 and 2018, respectively.

same combination of background characteristics across both survey waves concern the same individual in 2014 and 2018.[6] Using this methodology, we find 893 unique respondents that appear in both surveys. Throughout the analysis, we focus on the 622 unique respondents in AD-level positions (i.e., managers and policy administrators). Of these, 149 respondents worked in a different DG in 2018 compared to 2014 ("movers"), while the remaining 473 worked in the same DG ("stayers"). Summary statistics for this sample are in Online Appendix Table A1. The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to a confidentiality agreement with the provider. All authors have signed confidentiality agreements with the data provider to that effect.

Measures

Dependent variable

Our dependent variable measures the strength of employees' work-related contacts within and outside the organization building on the following survey question: "In order to get your job done, how frequently are you in contact with the following individuals inside/outside the Commission?" This question formulation links closely to our definition of work-related contacts set out in the introduction: that is, interactions on the part of an individual with interlocutors inside and outside the organization to discuss issues of relevance to his or her daily work. Answers are coded on a six-point scale: 0 "Does not apply/Never"; 1 "Less than once a year"; 2 "Several times a year"; 3 "At least once a month"; 4 "At least once a week"; 5 "Daily." This question is asked with respect to eleven types of interlocutors of the respondent within the Commission and twelve types of interlocutors outside the Commission. We then count the number of at least monthly contacts with five categories of interlocutors:[7] that is, within the respondent's own DG (i.e., colleagues in my unit; my head of unit; colleagues in my directorate; colleagues in my DG; my Commissioner; members of my Cabinet), within the Commission but outside her own DG (i.e., Colleagues in other DGs; Legal Service; Secretariat General; Other Commissioners; Members of other Cabinets), external contacts to other European institutions (i.e., European External Action Service; European Council; Council of the European Union; European Parliament officials; European Parliament political groups; European agencies and networks), external contacts to member states (i.e., national officials in Brussels; national officials at home; national officials in European capitals; national parliaments), and other external contacts (i.e., interest groups; international organizations). Each of these variables thus ranges from 0 to the total number of interlocutors in each given group, and the distribution of these variables for 2014 and 2018 is depicted in Figure 1.

[6]Simulation exercises reported in Geys (2023) show that the matching approach employed here works well for datasets with a high number of, and high level of detail in, individual characteristics. That is, it uncovers most repeat responders in the data (i.e., few false negatives) and rarely indicates a "match" inaccurately (i.e., few false positives).

[7]The same cut-off is applied in, for instance, Geuijen and Paul 'tSebastiaanKutsal (2008) and Geys et al. (2024). In a series of robustness checks, we look at different frequency thresholds (i.e., at least weekly contacts and all levels of contact) as well as the Herfindahl–Hirschman and Shannon diversity indices calculated using the entire set of contact variables (more details below). Note also that contact frequency has been used as a measure of tie strength since, at least, the work of Granovetter (1974). This includes more recent work by, for instance, Raeder et al. (2011) and Schaefer et al. (2010).

Figure 1 shows that in both years most respondents have many frequent contacts within their own DG, while the vast majority of respondents have few frequent contacts outside their DG or outside the Commission. As might be expected, frequent contacts with other DGs within the Commission are more common than frequent contacts with external partners. A very similar pattern is revealed in the heat maps presented in Online Appendix Figure A1, which give a more detailed picture of the strength of Commission staff members' work-related contacts within and outside the organization.

Empirical strategy

Our dataset includes two observations for each respondent (one for 2014 and one for 2018), which we stack for each individual i across both time periods t to obtain a panel dataset. We then specify a two-way fixed effects model to evaluate whether changes in employees' contacts from period 1 (i.e., 2014) to period 2 (i.e., 2018) are different among those who did and did not move to a different DG between both survey waves (i.e., "movers" versus "stayers").[8] Specifically, our main regression specification is:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \theta_1 \ Wave2018_t + \theta_2 \ Wave2018_t * Moved_i + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

where Y_{it} reflects our measure of an individual's work-related contacts described above. $Wave2018_t$ is 1 for responses in the 2018 survey (0 for responses in 2014). $Moved_i$ equals 1 for individuals who moved to another DG between the 2014 and 2018 survey waves, 0 for those who made no such move. We extend the model with a full set of respondent fixed effects (α_i), which capture all time-invariant aspects of, and pre-existing level differences between, respondents, including their gender, hierarchical position, nationality as well as unobservable characteristics such as sociability or openness. Thus, we derive inferences from variation over time *within the same respondent*. Our specification also directly controls for any effects of changes between time period 1 and time period 2 that affect all respondents in the same way via the inclusion of $Wave2018_t$. Note, finally, that $Moved_i$ is a time-invariant variable reflecting whether an individual moved (or not). Hence, it is perfectly collinear with the individual fixed effects (α_i), which explains its absence from equation (1).

In terms of interpretation, the coefficient of $Wave2018_t$ (θ_1) captures any difference over time in the number of frequent contacts for respondents who *did not* move between survey waves. The same difference over time for respondents who *did* move is given by the sum of the coefficients for $Wave2018_t$ and $Wave2018_t * Moved_i$ (i.e., $\theta_1 + \theta_2$). A comparison of the size and significance of these two marginal effects allows us to assess whether and how the frequency of contacts develops *differently* between both survey waves for individuals moving to a different DG compared to individuals who did not move (Brambor, William, and Matt 2006). Since the same individual answers the same questions on multiple occasions, we cluster standard errors at the individual level—the level at which individual mobility takes place.

Before we discuss our main findings, we should note that our data only covers two time-points. While this offers a critical opportunity to study *within*-individual changes over time (Imai and In Song 2021; Kleinbaum and Toby 2014), this short time dimension comes with two constraints. First, it precludes an in-depth investigation of temporal dynamics. Our point estimates reflect the average difference in the development over time between stayers and those who moved at *some* point between both survey waves. They cannot indicate whether any difference between both groups strengthens or weakens over time, nor whether it arises immediately after the move or takes some time to materialize. We return to this below, but explicit verification of such dynamics remains an important avenue for further longitudinal research (see also Murdoch, Muiris, and Benny 2023). Second, our short timescale does not allow us to verify whether movers and stayers were developing similarly in terms of our outcome variables *before* intraorganizational mobility took place. Such parallel pretreatment trends are important for making strong causal claims. Although our individual fixed effects (α_i) control for pre-existing *level* differences across movers and stayers, we cautiously opt for associational rather than causal interpretations of our findings (Keele, Randolph, and Felix 2020).

Results

Main findings

The main findings from estimating equation (1) are summarized in Table 1, where each column reflects one of the five sets of counterparts our respondents are asked about. As mentioned above, our interest lies in any *difference* in how the number of frequent contacts develops over time for movers ($\theta_1 + \theta_2$) relative to stayers (θ_1) both within and outside their organizational unit at the time of the survey (note that, for movers, this relates to their new unit after the mobility event). For ease of interpretation, the results are also graphically illustrated in Online Appendix Figure A2.

Starting our discussion of the results in Column 1 of Table 1, the top panel shows that those who moved between survey waves report fewer frequent contacts *within* their own (new) DG. This observation is in line with H1, and the observed effect size suggests that movers on average miss out on approximately one-third of a frequent contact within their own (new) DG: that is, $-0.057 + (-0.279) = -0.336$ ($P < .01$). Given that the average respondent maintains 3.81 such frequent contacts, this is substantively meaningful. No statistically significant development over time is observed for "stayers" (-0.057; $P > .10$). Panel II illustrates that these findings are predominantly driven by repeat movers rather than first-time movers (as hypothesized in H3); that is, the F-tests in the bottom row of Panel II indicate that there is no statistically significant effect of mobility on the number of frequent contacts *within* the own DG among respondents moving for the first time, whereas this effect is statistically significant at the 5 percent level for respondents who report previous experience with intraorganizational mobility. Taken together, the results in Column 1 are consistent with the idea that it may take some time to build up relationships with new colleagues after experiencing (repeated) internal mobility (Atakhan-Kenneweg, Leon, and Jörg 2021; Banik 2001; Kampkötter, Christine, and Dirk 2018), and that any expectation of future mobility may undermine investment in cultivating contacts with new colleagues (Hakenes and Svetlana 2017; Slater 2022; Suvarierol, Madalina, and Martijn 2013). These

[8]Given that our dataset only includes two time periods, this is equivalent to a Difference-in-Differences estimator (Imai and In Song 2021).

Table 1. Intraorganizational mobility and employees' work-related contacts.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Contacts within own DG	Contacts with other DGs	European contacts	Member State contacts	Other contacts
			Panel I: Mobility vs. no mobility		
2018 (θ_1)	−0.057	0.088**	0.098	0.006	0.017
	(0.050)	(0.044)	(0.061)	(0.050)	(0.043)
	0.25	*0.05*	*0.11*	*0.90*	*0.69*
Moved * 2018 (θ_2)	−0.279**	0.155	0.120	0.062	−0.077
	(0.112)	(0.113)	(0.139)	(0.124)	(0.090)
	0.01	*0.17*	*0.39*	*0.62*	*0.39*
Observations	1,198	1,191	1,075	1,075	1,041
F-test ($\theta_1 + \theta_2$)	11.31***	5.40**	3.06*	0.36	0.29
	0.00	*0.00*	*0.05*	*0.70*	*0.75*
			Panel II: Separating first-time and repeat mobility		
2018 (θ_1)	−0.057	0.088**	0.098	0.006	0.017
	(0.050)	(0.044)	(0.061)	(0.050)	(0.034)
	0.25	*0.05*	*0.11*	*0.90*	*0.62*
First Move * 2018 (θ_2)	−0.083	0.052	−0.021	0.046	−0.053
	(0.171)	(0.163)	(0.244)	(0.188)	(0.159)
	0.63	*0.75*	*0.93*	*0.81*	*0.74*
Repeat Mover * 2018 (θ_2)	−0.369***	0.203	0.189	0.070	−0.089
	(0.134)	(0.141)	(0.157)	(0.153)	(0.103)
	0.01	*0.15*	*0.23*	*0.65*	*0.39*
Observations	1,198	1,191	1,075	1,075	1,041
F-test (First move)	0.73	0.79	0.11	0.08	0.05
	0.60	*0.56*	*0.99*	*0.97*	*1.00*
F-test (Repeat mover)	11.81***	4.68***	3.92***	0.28	0.54
	0.00	*0.00*	*0.00*	*0.92*	*0.75*

Note: The dependent variable is the number of interlocutors within each category (indicated in the top row of the table) that a respondent claims to have at least monthly contacts with. In Panel I, we estimate the average effect of mobility, while in Panel II, we differentiate between movers who report previous intraorganizational mobility and movers who experience their first intraorganizational relocation. *Moved* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for individuals who moved to another DG between the 2014 and 2018 survey waves, 0 otherwise. *First Move* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for individuals who moved to another DG between the 2014 and 2018 survey waves and did not move previously, 0 otherwise. *Repeat Mover* is an indicator variable equal to 1 for individuals who moved to another DG between the 2014 and 2018 survey waves and also document having made similar moves previously, 0 otherwise. Models are estimated using linear regression models, and standard errors are clustered at the individual level in parentheses.
***$P < .01$, **$P < .05$, *$P < .1$, exact P-values in italics.

findings do *not* imply that the social networks of (repeat) movers shrink after mobility events. Movers by construction will see their network expand to encompass new colleagues in their new unit. Yet, they report less frequent contacts with these colleagues. Movers thus maintain weaker (less deep) contact patterns within their DG relative to stayers, a finding we will return to in more detail below.

Turning now to Column 2, Panel I indicates a statistically significant increase in the number of frequent contacts with staff in other DGs among those who did *not* move (0.088; $P < .05$). Yet, in line with H2, this development is about three times stronger among those who *did* move (0.088 + 0.155 = 0.243; $P < .05$). These findings are again meaningful since the average respondent maintains about 1.15 frequent contacts with staff in other DGs. As before, Panel II again highlights that these findings are particularly prevalent among repeat movers (see H3). Although, unfortunately, we cannot observe within which DGs these interactions occur, a natural explanation based on the "enduring social relationship hypothesis" (Agrawal, Iain, and John 2006) is that movers maintain at least some of their existing contacts in their former DG. This is consistent with results observed by Kleinbaum and Stuart (2014) in a large private-sector company.

Overall, our results in Column 2 of Table 1 thus suggest that movers—and, particularly, frequent movers—extend work-related contacts across internal organizational boundaries following intraorganizational mobility. This is particularly important since previous research suggests that frequent (in)formal interactions between staff members across organizational units is critical to reduce the type of turf wars that have long plagued the European Commission (Peterson 2017; Vantaggiato, Hussein, and Sara 2021). They help avoid competitiveness or ill-will, while increasing recognition and understanding of viewpoints from elsewhere in the organization (Busuioc 2016; Finke 2019; Jennings and Dale 1994; King 2007).[9] Yet, these

[9]An alternative explanation might be that individuals merely changed their primary affiliation within the organization during the mobility event, but retained a secondary affiliation in their original organizational unit. This would allow them to retain regular contacts with their old DG following mobility events. Although we have no data on such secondary affiliations, the practical implication would still be that intraorganizational mobility fosters more frequent work-related contacts across organizational units and thereby helps to undermine a "silo mentality."

Table 2. Postmobility development of work-related contacts.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Contacts within own DG	Contacts within own DG	Contacts within own DG
Years in position	0.083	-	–0.037***
	(0.062)		(0.008)
	0.16		*0.00*
Year 0 (ref. cat.)	-	-	-
Year 1	-	0.028	-
		(0.253)	
		0.91	
Year 2	-	–0.023	-
		(0.287)	
		0.94	
Year 3	-	0.388	-
		(0.313)	
		0.22	
Year 4	-	0.211	-
		(0.266)	
		0.43	
Moved	-		–0.329**
			(0.159)
			0.04
Moved * Years in position	-		0.120*
			(0.063)
			0.06
Observations	148	148	608

Note: The dependent variable is the number of interlocutors within the respondent's own DG that (s)he claims to have at least monthly contacts with. *Years in position*$_i$ equals the number of years a respondent is in the current position, which by construction ranges between zero and four years for recent movers. *Moved*$_i$ is an indicator variable equal to 1 for individuals who moved to another DG between the 2014 and 2018 survey waves, 0 otherwise. Models are estimated using linear regression models, and standard errors are clustered at the individual level in parentheses.
***$P < .01$, **$P < .05$, *$P < .1$, exact P-values in italics.

increased relationships across the organization come at the cost of lower embeddedness—at least temporarily—of movers within their own new department (see above). This trade-off between breadth and depth of contacts associated with mobility offers novel insights about whether (or not) the intended goals of mobility programs can be achieved. Nevertheless, it is important not to over-interpret our results at the level of the organization. Although these individual-level findings are informative about the ability of mobility programs to address silo mentality or turf wars in an organization, they do not allow us to assess whether the Commission's mobility program(s) "fulfill" these goals.

Finally, moving to work-related contacts outside the Commission in Columns (3) to (5), we find that the number of frequent contacts with other European institutions remains unchanged among stayers (0.098; $P > .10$), but significantly increases among movers (0.098 + 0.120 = 0.218; $P < .10$). This is once more substantively meaningful given that the average respondent maintains 0.76 frequent contacts with other European institutions, and suggests that relations with European contacts strengthen following intraorganizational mobility—in line with H2. Still, this observation appears to be counterpart-specific as Columns (4) and (5) show no similar findings for frequent contacts with EU member states and other external interlocutors. One potential explanation for this difference across external interlocutors is that such contacts may arise through both formal and informal mechanisms. Organization theory would predict that the former are more likely to be lost when moving to a new position. From this perspective, it is important to observe that contacts with other EU institutions can build on extensive informal networks—such as the College of Europe or simply working/living in Brussels—whereas interactions with EU member states and other external interlocutors are often highly formalized.

It is important to note that our formulation of H1 allows for the possibility that work-related contacts *within* mover's (new) unit or department may "rebound" once these employees become properly integrated in their new place of work. Although our dataset only covers two survey waves, we are able to explore such a trajectory by using information collected on the amount of time that has elapsed since movers took up their new position (ranging from 0 to 4 years, with an average of 21 months). Hence, our significant negative result in Column 1 of Table 1 suggests that it may take more than 21 months on average for a mover's contacts with new colleagues to "rebound." Table 2 explores this issue further by analyzing how frequent contacts within the (new) DG develop in the years after a move. Consistent with our main argument, we find a weak upward trend in frequent within-DG contacts over time among recent movers (Column (1)), which mostly reflects an upward jump in the third and fourth years after a move (Column (2)). Column (3) reconfirms that those who moved between survey waves report significantly fewer frequent contacts within their own (new) DG

(−0.329; $P < .05$), which take approximately 2.75 years to return to premobility levels (0.329/0.120 = 2.742). Overall, this suggests some persistence of shallower within-DG contacts following intraorganizational mobility, and can act as a caution against very frequent rotations.

Self-selection, robustness, and heterogeneity

We verified the robustness of these findings along several dimensions. We briefly summarize these results here, and report full details in the Online Appendix.

First, a key methodological issue with our analysis thus far is that the treatment (i.e., intraorganizational mobility) is *not* randomly assigned.[10] Individuals' potential self-selection into mobility can create difficulties for the causal nature of our inferences particularly when the parallel pretrends assumption cannot be verified (see above). We explore this issue in Online Appendix B. We thereby first show that the probability of moving between both survey waves is unaffected by most background characteristics available to us (including gender, education level and degree, country of origin, and so on; Anderson, George, and Anne 1981). Rather, it is largely determined by the time of entry into the Commission and/or an individual's current position as well as holding a leadership function (Online Appendix Table B1). These findings reflect the specific characteristics of the Commission's intraorganizational mobility schemes (see above), and suggest that mobility in our setting may be more reflective of organizational requirements rather than individual demand (i.e., self-selection). Next, we use these results as the basis of a Heckman-style selection model (Heckman 1979; Puhani 2000) whereby we calculate the inverse Mill's ratio and add it—as well as its interaction with $Moved_i$—to our main regression specification. This indicates that the coefficient on the Mill's ratio is rarely statistically significant. More importantly, the size and sign of the coefficient on our main interaction term of interest is robust to its inclusion (Online Appendix Tables B2 and B3). These auxiliary results suggest that any bias due (self-)selection into mobility appears to be small in our setting.[11]

Online Appendix Table A2 confirms our main results when we focus on "at least weekly" contacts (top panel) rather than "at least monthly" contacts as in the main analysis. When allowing for *any* level of contact, however, a significant increase in frequent contacts is observed for movers as well as stayers across all categories except contacts within one's own DG (bottom panel of Online Appendix Table A2). This same finding is reflected in the general increase in contact diversity observed in Online Appendix Table A3. In other words, infrequent contacts have become more common in the European Commission between both survey waves independent of intraorganizational mobility. This signifies that any influence of intraorganizational mobility is particularly prevalent for regular contacts. Since these frequent contacts are likely to matter more for day-to-day work relationships than more occasional contacts, this observation further strengthens the inferences drawn from Table 1. Finally, one might argue that the change in internal rotation policy for middle managers in 2016 (see above) may distort our results. To address this concern, we replicate our analysis while excluding all managerial staff from the estimation sample. The results are reported in Online Appendix Table A4, and confirm our main inferences.

Online Appendix Table A5 evaluates whether the trade-off between breadth and depth of contacts created by intraorganizational mobility schemes observed in Table 1 is also recognized by staff members themselves. We use questions included in the 2018 wave on respondents' perceptions of the benefits and costs of mobility—to the individual, unit and organization. Online Appendix Table A5 illustrates that respondents generally agree on the personal benefits of mobility, particularly those who moved between both survey waves (Column (1)). Interestingly, however, around 50 percent of respondents acknowledges that unit performance *both* benefits when someone new joins (Column (2)) *and* suffers when someone leaves (Column (3)). This consistency in our results across measures speaks to the broader validity of our findings.

Finally, we explored whether our findings differ by individuals' gender and level of experience within the organization. Online Appendix Table A6 indicates that our main findings arise in a similar fashion across women and men (though we have less statistical power in the female subsample). Online Appendix Table A7 shows that the relationship between mobility and the strength of within-organization interactions is stronger among respondents with less experience within the organization, while the reverse holds for the relationship between mobility and the frequency of European contacts.

Concluding discussion

Staff rotation policies are widely advocated by HRM practitioners, and have become established policy in many public-sector organizations over recent decades (Caluwé et al. 2014; De Australian Public Service 2023; Lægreid and Lois 2015; OECD 2023; Van Blijswijk et al. 2004; Wise and Barbara 2007). Yet, the implications of such schemes for intra- and extra-organizational work-related contact patterns have hitherto not been fully explored, even though such contacts are critical to fostering information sharing (Burt 1992; Granovetter 1974; Siciliano 2015) and administrative coordination within and between organizational units (Cohen 1970; Williams 2002). This article has investigated the relationship between intraorganizational mobility and work-related contacts of employees inside and outside their organization—a dimension that is vital for the employee carrying out the tasks associated with their role as well as for the coherent operation of any organization.

Two main findings emerge from our analysis. The first is that intraorganizational mobility schemes come with substantively meaningful integration costs since movers appear to be less embedded in their new departments. On average, it takes almost three years for frequent contacts with colleagues within the new organizational unit to hit premobility levels. The second is that intraorganizational mobility is associated

[10]Mobility may often at least in part be motivated by various personal considerations. For instance, employees might be motivated to move in order to escape from a manager, supervisor, or peers, or to avoid accountability for an ongoing project. They may also wish to accumulate human capital that can help them land a better job elsewhere (Banik 2001; Cyan and Obed 2017; Fišar et al. 2021).

[11]Naturally, this relates to selection of the observable background characteristics included in our selection equation in Online Appendix Table B1. We cannot exclude that there are other unobservable characteristics—such as career orientation—that may sort people into mobility. While these are likely captured by the individual fixed effects α_i in equation (1), this issue can unfortunately not be fully resolved short of an experimental intervention whereby employees are randomly assigned into mobility (which may raise ethical concerns).

with an increase in frequent work-related contacts across internal organizational boundaries and, albeit to a lesser extent, to external interlocutors. Both of these findings are particularly prevalent for repeat movers, which suggests that both the intended gains from staff mobility schemes—in extending staff contacts across intraorganizational boundaries—as well as their unintended negative implications—in terms of (potentially temporary) integration costs—increase with the frequency of mobility within the organization. Since repeat movers are often regarded as the linchpins of an organization because they embody the knowledge and practices of different parts of the organization, our findings thus highlight a trade-off between breadth and depth of work-related contacts. Any benefits deriving from mobility thus need to be weighed against the cost of a lower degree of embeddedness in the movers' new department.

What are the practical implications of these results? As mobility or rotation schemes create a "class" of repeat movers with broad contacts that cross departmental boundaries, the costs of weaker integration may be offset by the benefits of mobile staff members' connecting role, which creates a public good for the organization as a whole. If so, staff mobility can be seen as a policy that contributes to a more joined-up organization. Nonetheless, mobility schemes appear to give rise to a cohort of employees who sacrifice depth for breadth in terms of intraorganizational relations. This complements the narrower range of contacts and exposure to information of less mobile employees (who maintain higher communication frequency inside their department). It follows that, if they are to optimize organizational outcomes, public-sector leaders should be aware of this trade-off alongside other well-known concerns related to mobility schemes, as established by the literature. These include employees' anxiety or resentment toward (compulsory) mobility policies (Morris 1956), demands limitations on mobility linked to essential jobs, and organizational support for career development and the management of mobility (Murdoch and Jarle 2013). Our findings also highlight a time lag between joining a new department and establishing routinized relationships with colleagues therein. This tempers earlier optimism in private-sector research concerning the ability of internal hires to be immediately productive in a new unit (e.g., Benson and Ben 2020; Bidwell 2011), and should prompt a rethink of the design of organizational mobility programs.

From a theoretical perspective, our study suggests a refinement to the view in organization theory that formal organizational structures strongly determine human behavior (Christensen and PerKjell 2021; Egeberg and Jarle 2018; Olsen 2018). Our findings highlight that intraorganizational mobility may work to create a perception of blurred organizational boundaries, which has the potential to undermine any influence of existing formal structures on employees' attitudes and decision-making processes. This adds to recent debates about the scope conditions under which formal organizational structures are likely to be more (or less) influential (Geys et al. 2023). Our findings suggest that formal organizational structures may play a stronger role when there is intertemporal consistency in employees' exposure to a fixed set of organizational features (which is undermined by intraorganizational mobility)—an issue that could be usefully explored in future research.

As our analysis is based on the experience of a single (European) public organization, examining how the effects of rotation in other (inter)national organizations compare to those observed here for the European Commission is an obvious and important avenue for further enquiry. Similarly, future work could usefully investigate the heterogeneous effects of the specific characteristics of intraorganizational mobility schemes. For example, does (in)formality of the program or the presence/absence of managerial encouragement make a difference? Do voluntary programs have stronger effects than mandatory mobility, and to what extent do (dis) incentives to move play a role? How do the benefits stack up against the costs in systems imposing mobility across policy domains? In similar vein, it could be instructive to investigate the considerations taken into account by individuals contemplating an intraorganizational move, as well as the push and pull factors to which employees are subject. Differences in personal desire or motivation to move may well interact with organizational features to influence the effects of intraorganizational mobility schemes. Our data unfortunately did not allow us to address these questions. Additionally, our dataset lacks information about the length, content, or nature of respondents' contacts. In future work, it would be highly interesting to evaluate whether internal mobility leads, for instance, to shorter contacts, on a narrower set of topics, and in a more formal and/or less friendly atmosphere (or vice versa). This would generate important additional insights into the implications of mobility programs for employees' contact patterns. Finally, the effects of exposure to a broader range of external contacts on the part of (repeat) movers as well as of the terms on which such transactions take place are important to explore. Such an analysis could offer insights into the extent to which employee contacts create an entry point for the influence of external stakeholders (Coen and AlexanderMatia 2021; Yackee 2012, 2020), as well as the extent to which they result in "capture" or, to the contrary, produce benefits for the organization, such as access to information or increased legitimacy.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* online.

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Data Availability

Our confidentiality agreement with the data provider does not allow us to make the dataset available to other users. Researchers can apply for access to the relevant data to H.K. (PI; University of Warwick), subject to signing a data confidentiality agreement.

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