

Knowledge Management and HRM Innovation Through Expatriates

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Abstract: In this study, the main objective is to understand how the international assignment is related to the acquisition and transfer of knowledge. As specific objectives, we intend to understand the international assignments motivations and to explore how the international assignment can impact the employee's career development. Through an exploratory case study approach, a qualitative research methodology was used to collect data, using a semi-structured interview with a group of stakeholders from an international company (five expatriates and two organisational representatives of expatriations process) in order to answer to the following research questions *which factors contribute to the acquisition and transfer of knowledge of expatriates in companies?* and *how does the acquisition and transfer of knowledge of expatriates in companies take place?* The interviews were verbatim transcript and data analysed according to thematic analysis procedures. Our findings show that expatriates are simultaneously agents of knowledge acquisition and knowledge transferring. In addition, expatriates have many high expectations about the useful of their knowledge transferring to home company, specifically in their organisational career evolution and for business innovation and competitiveness. Using the findings, on the one hand international companies can improve human resources system to fit their support practices to needs and expectations of their expatriates after return to home company. On the other hand, the knowledge brought from expatriation, helps organisations at the strategic level through market knowledge and enables the implementation of international innovation human resources policies and practices, contributing to the globalisation of the company. Some conclusions to the contributes to the knowledge management will be highlighted in the last part of the paper.

Keywords: Expatriates, International assignment, Knowledge management, International HRM, International career

1. Introduction

The number of expatriates on international assignments continues to grow (Renshaw, Parry & Dickmann, 2021) and during COVID-19 pandemic, expatriates became more than just people who work abroad. They became a strategic element to enhance business strategy and opportunities, and to foster knowledge transfer (Marques, Miska, Crespo & Branco, 2021). Furthermore, in context of international organisations, expatriates can serve as agents of knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing (Wu et al., 2023). Given their importance, they are seen as more than just a set of employees. However, knowledge management related to expatriation process remains limited (Canestrino, 2010; Osland et al., 2020). Among this concern, Mockaitis, Zander and Cieri (2018) suggest that there are radical changes in the way organisations are operating, underlining whether traditional models of organisations and the HR function in international organisations need new perspectives. One of them is the benefits of global teams for international firms which can contribute positively to the performance of organisational units, and people.

The expatriation process comprises a set of strategies aimed at internationalising the company's management, increasing the repertoire of knowledge for the development of a specific project or unit. Training new leaders, raising the level of coordination of geographically dispersed units, increasing the strategic diversity of human resources (HR) in the face of global markets, and exemplifying important aspects of the culture of the parent company (Bertolini & Larentis, 2019) generate that expatriates assume great importance in the implementation of these strategies inside of international organisations. Diverse international human resource management (HRM) literature (e.g., Elahi et al., 2019; Martins, 2013; Renshaw et al., 2021) attributes to expatriation the purpose of transferring organisational knowledge between different organisational units, even if they are more geographically dispersed, while the hiring of new employees to operate in the international market aims at transferring the knowledge held by these employees during the international assignment.

Knowledge management is increasingly recognised as an essential aspect of management and international business (Shao & Ariss, 2020) and expatriates function as key agents for sharing this knowledge (Martins, 2013). In this regard, the study made by Martins and Tomé (2015) shows that the knowledge acquired, and the knowledge transferred by Portuguese expatriates have directly contributed to their career development after returning from the international assignment. In addition, the research conducted by Mohammed (2015)

suggests that knowledge management contributes to the resolution of organisational issues through the application of thoughts and practices with a view to a better orientation. As referred by Nisula and Kianto (2016, p. 1920), “the success of all types of organisations increasingly depends on how the individuals’ specialised knowledge is employed and integrated into organisational capabilities”. It is important to understand (1) how acquisition and transfer of knowledge of expatriates in companies take place as well as (2) to explore how the international assignment can impact the employee's career development.

This research intends to contribute to the theory and practice of knowledge management, namely at the level of the implications that the international assignment of employees may bring in the improvement of organisational performance and personal motivation, through the knowledge acquired and shared during the international assignment, and the purpose of this study is to help us fill this gap.

The following sections present the literature review related to Knowledge Management and HRM Innovation through expatriates (section 2), followed by the description of the methodology (section 3). Section 4 presents the main results of the study, and section 5 underlines main conclusions.

2. Literature Review

In the literature there is no consensual definition regarding the concept of expatriation. Some authors (e.g., Briscoe & Schuler, 2011; Dasari et al., 2012) present a generalised definition of expatriation, considering that an expatriate is an employee of an organisation who performs functions in a foreign subsidiary of that organisation, in order to achieve their professional, economic and financial goals.

On the other hand, there are definitions that present more specific requirements. For example, Martins (2013) postulates that expatriation consists of a means by which companies place employees to live and work in another country, which requires the following conditions, namely: 1) placement abroad for an increased time interval, usually 3 years, renewable for similar or extraordinary periods, if there is an agreement between the parties; 2) retaining the labour link to the parent company (Home Country); 3) the hierarchical relationship, as well as the expatriate's duty to pay retribution, presenting transfer benefits to the destination organisation (Host country); 4) having the right to reintegration in the home company to a compatible position, counting for their seniority the time of expatriation. Caligiuri (2000) also presents a more specific definition, arguing that the expatriate is an employee sent by the home company to live and work in another country, for a time interval between two and several years. According to Gallon et al. (2014), expatriation should be thought of as strategic for the HR area, involving three moments: the preparation for the international assignment; the international assignment itself; the return from the international assignment (repatriation). In the literature, repatriation is characterized as the return to the Home Country, that is, when individuals return to their country, the expatriates are referred as repatriates (Gallon, 2011). This phase of the international assignment is characterized by being a complex process, which involves renegotiation, readaptation, rebuilding professional networks, and anchoring the career in the company (Gallon et al, 2017).

The experience that the repatriate had as an expatriate assumes great importance, both for him and for the organisation (Gallon et al., 2014). Often, the primary purpose of expatriation is to bring knowledge to subsidiaries, and consequently, the focus of expatriation is the international assignment itself, making repatriation the end of a cycle (Gallon et al., 2014). In this regard, Wu and colleagues (2023, p. 708) remind us that “Knowledge sharing is especially important in expatriation, because one of the main Knowledge sharing for expatriates’ purposes of expatriation is to develop talents and strengthen the flow of cultural knowledge between headquarters and offices in different countries”. The same authors consider that through Knowledge sharing, expatriates can learn and improve internal processes, which can result on positive influence on financial performance of organisation. This argument makes sense specially when expatriates can effectively share knowledge, they are able to exchange their ideas, which leads to collective learning and motivate them to be more innovative (Wu et al., 2021). From this perspective, it is important to do an effective knowledge management. By knowledge management is meant the interaction and communication of implicit knowledge, the former must be evidenced, that is, codified, transformed into words or numbers so that any individual can access, understand and transfer (Martins, 2010).

In this sequence, any company that intends to have a knowledge management, will need to correctly perform the organisational knowledge transfer, considered as one of the elementary agents of the overall knowledge management process (Martins, 2010). According to Serrano and Fialho (2005), the success of a company is based on its ability to originate and transfer knowledge more effectively than its competitors.

Through several transfer procedures, knowledge must be spread quickly and effectively throughout the company, because ideas have greater repercussion when they are widely shared (Martins, 2010). The knowledge brought from a repatriation, helps organisations at the strategic level through market knowledge and enables the implementation of international HR policies and practices, contributing to the globalisation of the company (Gallon, 2014; Wu et al., 2021). Prior research (e.g. Barba-Aragón & Jiménez-Jiménez, 2020; Krammer, 2022) suggests that innovation allows the development of valuable and scarce resources in the organisation, namely, HRM has also extensively linked to innovation performance (Easa & Orra, 2020; Wikhamn et al, 2022).

Although the literature highlights that knowledge transfer is one of the most critical activities within organisations (Joshi et al., 2004; Osland et al., 2020; Shao & Ariss, 2020), multinationals rarely systematically collect and use expatriate knowledge, despite the competitive advantage it represents in a global knowledge economy (Osland et al., 2020). In this regard, Nisula and Kianto (2016) argue that organisations have been paying increasing attention to knowledge management, because they are becoming aware of the importance that the collective knowledge of an organisation can contribute in creating value to help an organisation to compete, stressing that knowledge management "is typically seen to consist of knowledge processes (such as knowledge creation, sharing, acquisition, transfer and application) and infrastructures or management activities that support and enhance the knowledge processes" (Nisula & Kianto, 2016, p. 1923).

The literature suggests that there are several factors that contribute to the acquisition and transfer of knowledge within organisations. Oddou et al. (2013) show that expatriates after an international assignment acquire new perspectives, highly relevant global knowledge, a more globalised mindset, new networks as sources of information and personal growth, and improved managerial and global communication skills. It is therefore important that organisations are able to: (a) create an organisational culture that promotes knowledge sharing, (b) incorporate expatriate knowledge in decision-making or (c) create mentoring programmes that enable expatriates to share their knowledge transfer skills with future expatriates. In line with this perspective, Doherty & Cormican (2017) and Elahi et al. (2019) reinforce that verbal communication should be considered as a knowledge transfer tool used between expatriates and local workers for the diffusion of organisational knowledge, while Burmeister and Deller (2016) highlight the promotion of seven high-performance work practices (selecting and hiring staff, training, career development, job design, performance appraisal, compensation and rewards and internal communication) throughout the international assignment period as the factors that could positively facilitate knowledge transfer. Przytuła et al. (2018) conducted a study whose objective was to develop a model of knowledge transfer between the company's headquarters and the local subsidiary and to empirically evaluate the knowledge transfer process in five foreign subsidiaries based in Poland. The results showed that local employees recognised the usefulness of expatriates' knowledge and highlighted their knowledge transfer skills, motivation for learning and knowledge acquisition (Przytuła et al., 2018). Other studies (e.g. Bucher et al., 2019; Doherty & Cormican, 2017; Wu et al., 2021) mention the role of leadership in the knowledge transfer process. On the one hand, Bucher et al. (2019) found that leadership facilitates knowledge transfer through the perceived trustworthiness of expatriates' co-workers. On the other hand, Doherty and Cormican (2017), report that one of the factors related to effective knowledge transfer in a multinational technology organisation is leadership. In turn, Suutari (2019) highlights that the ability of expatriates to engage in knowledge transfer is closely associated with their position or function in the organisation.

3. Methodology

Through an exploratory case study approach (Yin, 2014), a qualitative research methodology was used to collect data, using a semi-structured interview with a group of stakeholders from an international company (expatriates and organisational representatives of expatriations process). This semi-structured interview had three groups of questions, one related to interviewees characterisation, another related to the international assignment motivations, and the last related to the exploration of how the international assignment can impact the employee's career development. Two interview guides are developed based on general themes (e.g. motivations to transferring/sharing/acquisition of knowledge and contribution of expatriation for career advancement) which include 13 questions, namely about function, duration of international assignment, motives (individual and organisational) for carrying out the international assignment, expectations related to international assignment, contribution of international assignment to transferring/sharing/acquisition of knowledge, contribution of international assignment to career advancement or future perspectives about professional career in the organisation. In the case of expatriates, two criteria are identified to select the

participants: i) to be currently expatriates and to be in an international assignment, at least, 6 months. To select the organisational representatives, it is just necessary they have expatriates on their team and hierarchy report. Five expatriates and two organisational representatives were invited to participate in this exploratory research, between February and March 2023. Their personal contact (email and mobile phone) was obtained from the HMR Head. An informed consent document was also developed and sent to all the study participants to be signed. The average duration of each interview was 20 minutes. Confidentiality was granted to interviewees and to the organisation, as well. The interviews were recorded. The next phase involved the treatment and analysis of the information collected according to the content analysis method. The data analysis was supported in a detailed description of the theme categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006), each one including interview quotes. This analysis was carried out manually and it followed a cross-case synthesis analytical technique (Buchanan, 2013). In each of the empirical data collection phases, a pre-coding framework was developed, created from a set of thematic categories arising from the reviewed literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure validity, the analysis of the empirical data was conducted separately by two researchers (King, 2013).

3.1 Case Description

The Alpha company is a subsidiary of a German multinational dedicated to the manufacture of semiconductors for renewable energy and has been present in the Portuguese market since 2007. In the Portuguese subsidiary it has around 2000 employees. Currently, Alpha has 200 expatriates. To preserve anonymity, we do not provide more demographic characteristics of company.

3.2 Participants Description

Five expatriates were interviewed (all males; aged 40 in average). All expatriates had a technical position (installation, assembly, maintenance functions), and they are within the company for 1 year at least (minimum 13 months and maximum 14 years) with an average of 4,5 years of international assignment. The research also includes two organisational representatives with responsibilities on expatriation process (1 male and 1 female, aged 44 in average). Both organisational representatives are management positions (expatriates team leaders). Their seniority in the organisation is 12 years.

4. Results

4.1 The Motivation to Transferring, Sharing and Acquisition of Knowledge

International assignments are predominantly for sharing and transferring, although the acquisition of knowledge is also valued:

"They will transmit more than acquire because as a rule they already know what they are going to do when they are going to work abroad, but I would say that they always acquire some knowledge as well." (Interviewee 6, organisational representative)

"They acquire more cultural knowledge, but they mainly transmit technical knowledge to the teams. If this transfer did not exist it would not be positive at all for the company, so it is very important that these expatriates are trained to transmit, because if they refuse it will have negative consequences on the company's results and when they share it we have other colleagues from other plants of the group asking for help from our expatriates, given the experience and technical knowledge they hold" (Interviewee 7, organisational representative)

"... seeing a project from start to end, a person learns and acquires a lot of knowledge. And for new colleagues who also join the company, a person can also pass on that knowledge to those colleagues." (Interviewee 5, expatriate)

While, from the expatriate's point of view, the international assignment may have both monetary and technical enrichment motivations for the expatriate himself, the organisational representatives emphasise the benefits of expatriation in terms of greater productivity for the organisation, greater speed in carrying out the work and the ability to transfer knowledge to other colleagues, freeing these expatriates from the workload that they end up having to take on while other colleagues do not master the knowledge that they are sharing. For this reason, expatriates are encouraged to share knowledge in order to be more efficient and, inherently, to make the company more productive, as the following accounts clarify:

"It's not only the monetary factor, it's also because renewable energies are the future for me. From my point of view that will be the future, hence also investing in that area (...) if I know that my colleague

does not know, if I do not transmit them the knowledge I have, the work will be all for me, because the colleague does not know how to do it." (Interviewee 4, expatriate)

"For the company it has benefits because it allows greater productivity, greater speed and efficiency in the execution of work. The company wins because it becomes more efficient in the execution of the work, so we encourage our expatriates to acquire knowledge in order to have more knowledge and to be more efficient, and therefore being more efficient the company will also be more efficient. We also encourage the sharing of knowledge to free the more experienced in knowledge so as not to overload them and also because if there is no sharing of knowledge, this decreases the efficiency both of the worker who has more knowledge and the one who has less knowledge and also the one from the company. The more knowledge they pass on to the less experienced the easier the day-to-day life of the more experienced becomes." (Interviewee 6, organisational representative)

"They acquire knowledge to transmit to other colleagues later, (...) for example we had technicians that went to Germany to acquire knowledge in a new type of machine and then these technicians were assigned to a project in the Netherlands to transmit the acquired knowledge to new colleagues that were in that team in the Netherlands (...) having that knowledge makes them perform well and, obviously, this makes our organisation achieve better global results and to be chosen to take on new international projects since organisation's work is recognized for having new knowledge and new international experience." (Interviewee 7, organisational representative)

4.2 Contribution of Expatriation for Career Advanced

Both expatriates and organisational representatives admit that the effects on career development may be more related to their career as expatriates than to management positions in the home company. One of the expatriates (expatriate 2) states that "since I joined the company, I feel that I grew as a worker and even as a person, in all the places I went I always learned something, no matter how small it was, but I was always able to learn something and I was able to grow a lot, yes. This idea is reinforced by the account of one of the organisational representatives interviewed (organisational representative 6) who assumes that "international assignments do not help in internal career progression because it doesn't take place where they are needed, so we cannot consider international experience as a differentiating factor for internal career progression."

However, some expatriates expect the international assignment to have positive effects on the development of their career in the home company: "I usually say that I am giving up my family and social life for the sake of something and that something is to enrich an area where they may give me a good financial return immediately, yes, but that may open doors for me in the future as well. Without any doubt, that may help me to have greater opportunities for growth and continuity in the organisation" (Interviewee 4). This expectation is confirmed by one of the organisational representatives who was once an expatriate and today has a project team coordination role testifying that: "we have examples of technicians who were in the international and who were chosen to take on project Management coordination roles as a result of the knowledge they acquired over the years. They were expatriates and if they had not been expatriates, they would never have acquired this knowledge." (Interviewee 7, organisational representative)

5. Discussions and Conclusions

The results show that motivation can influence knowledge sharing, transferring and acquisition by expatriates of this case-study company. These results are in line with previous studies by Wu et al. (2023) because: (1) these expatriates were recruited based on their expertise and skills; (2) they may be not afraid of losing personal value if they transferred their knowledge with local colleagues and; (3) the rewards obtained in the future within the home company are attractive, such as salary increase, bonuses, career promotions, better learning and growth. Furthermore, the results obtained denote that expatriates who are sharing more knowledge, gathering more information and knowledge are enabled to manage global processes (cost reduction, low prices, reduction of delivery times and promotion innovative ideas) as underline Wu et al. (2023). Recent researchers (Li et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2023) also add that organisational support represents an important factor on knowledge sharing, considering crucial to promote more willing to share knowledge with their team colleagues (Wu et al, 2023) as well as will strengthen the influence of trust, commitment on knowledge sharing (Osland et al., 2020).

Regarding this organisational case study, expatriation is considered a strategy to meet the main organisational objectives through expatriates (e.g., new organisational techniques and processes). Taking into account the results presented here, it is suggested that for a better management and transfer of knowledge, companies

should provide adequate organisational support to their expatriate employees, and it is important that they perceive this support; they should motivate them so that the transfer of knowledge occurs, not only from the employee himself; they should invest in frequent and informal communication, improving the internal organisational communication mechanisms, as referred to Li et al., (2022).

Some conclusions can be obtained from this study. First, the effectiveness of knowledge transfer is a crucial issue for the successful operation of a business unit. Secondly, the study results show that, through expatriates, the home company can promote knowledge sharing to facilitate knowledge acquiring and consequently to increase the effectiveness of knowledge transferring. Third, our study shows that HRM and team leaders support in a home company could play an important role in employees knowledge acquiring, transferring and sharing, namely through promoting performance assessment, training opportunities and career advance within the home company. These conclusions are in line with previous literature (Li et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2023) which refer that organisational support can increase favourable employees' outcomes, including willingness to share knowledge. Furthermore, our results show that knowledge sharing can help expatriates collaborate with then colleagues and develop new ideas to facilitate organisational innovativeness and competitiveness as well as to improve the productivity and performance of MNE (headquarter and their subsidiaries) as recently also concluded Li et al. (2022).

Although the results of this research have provided several conclusions with implications to the managers and specifically to the HRM function, this study presents some limitations, which encourage future research directions. One limitation is related to research design centred on qualitative methodology and a specific time. We propose that future research can carry out longitudinal study. Therefore, the number of participants of this study are limited to expatriates involved on the same project at the same time, this number of participants may be small to represent all expatriates from the study company. Finally, this study adopts the semi-structured interview approach to acquire the perceptions from expatriates and organisational representatives. Future research studies should carry out quantitative study to investigate the correlations between some hypothesis involved with the phenomenon of expatriate's knowledge sharing, transferring and acquiring. For instance, to compare the different antecedents' mediators and moderators' factors to enhance expatriate performance related to knowledge sharing.

More studies in this area are desirable, namely in Portugal, to better understand this knowledge transfer process through expatriates. Future studies could replicate and extend our study in different subsidiaries within this MNE as well as different industries. However, given the current context of internationalisation of Portuguese companies, as well as the high costs inherent in an expatriation process, the development of further studies is urgent to contribute to scientific knowledge that can be applied in practice in Portuguese organisations, to optimize and maximize the benefits of an expatriation process, both from the employee and the organisation point of view. Such studies would help to expand theoretical understanding related to knowledge management and expatriation management, such as job attitudes and behaviours on knowledge sharing, transferring, and acquiring.

This study helped us to clarify that knowledge acquisition/sharing/transfer through expatriation is motivated differently by organisational representatives and expatriates. On the one hand, organisational representatives want the acquisition/sharing/transfer of knowledge to enable them to increase organisational productivity, on the other hand, expatriates consider that the acquisition/sharing/transfer of knowledge could be financially beneficial for them in the short term along with the opportunities for enriching technical skills. Expatriates perceive that the opportunity of acquiring/sharing/transferring knowledge may have repercussions on their professional growth in terms of their organisational career, either as expatriates or as supervisors of international teams.

Finally, the results of this study allow us to extract some managerial implications. Specifically, how expatriation can be an organisational strategy for the acquisition/sharing/transfer of knowledge between different subsidiaries and provides hints on how those responsible for expatriate management. It can guide activities related to the recruitment and selection of expatriates as well as the importance of investing in attractive short-term reward systems in order to ensure the retention of expatriates. In other words, those responsible for expatriate management should be prepared to manage two interlinked human resources management processes: the attraction and retention of expatriates. Therefore, this research may help managers to reflect carefully on how they manage expatriates to satisfy opposite motivations, and not always easy to align, especially when the organisation wants efficiency and effectiveness gains and expatriates want more money and internal career development.

Acknowledgements

"This work was financially supported by the research unit on Governance, Competitiveness, and Public Policy (UIDB/04058/2020) + (UIDP/04058/2020), funded by national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia."

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