

International Assignments Management in a Knowledge-intensive Organisation: A Case Study

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Abstract: Knowledge represents a crucial part of the development of intellectual capital (IC). Therefore, the way knowledge is managed can impact IC creation and/or loss in an organisation. However, the need to manage knowledge resides in the strategic perspective of knowledge to sustain competitive advantage in a knowledge economy, especially in the context of international assignments. This work has the goal of understanding how personnel mobility affects the knowledge and intellectual capital management of a knowledge-intensive organisation. This study therefore applies a qualitative methodology to analyse how knowledge and intellectual capital are managed in the context of international assignments from a Portuguese knowledge-intensive organisation. Exploratory interviews and direct observation were used to achieve the goal of this study. This work identifies three main knowledge management processes that are involved in the context of international assignments, namely knowledge transfer, knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding. The goal is to increase knowledge transfer and sharing behaviours while reducing knowledge hiding ones. This study goes further and identifies that power, motivation and culture can influence the way these processes occur in an organisation. Considering the work here presented, the results cannot be generalised to other organisations and industries due to the nature of the applied methodology, but it can serve as a benchmark for other organisations in the same industry. If other researchers find this topic interesting, it would be pertinent to conduct research in other organisations and industries to achieve a broader understanding and compare results.

Keywords: Knowledge Management, Intellectual Capital, International Assignments, Knowledge-Intensive Organisation

1. Introduction

The importance of managing knowledge from international assignees is crucial in knowledge-intensive business organisations (KIBOs) where knowledge is the most important strategic resource and employees are the main source of that knowledge (Steyn and Kahn, 2008; Nakash and Bouhnik, 2023). Therefore, managing knowledge in these settings becomes a primary focus in developing IC. KIBOs are defined in this study as organisations whose primary activities are dependent on knowledge management (KM) and that can produce exceptionally good outputs using a workforce of an intellectual nature that usually detains a high level of education or training (Millar, Lockett and Mahon, 2016; Nakash and Bouhnik, 2023).

Pharmaceutical companies are an example of KIBOs (Amaya *et al.*, 2022). This industry employs more than 750,000 people with 16% of them working in research and development (Ramy, Af Ragab and Arisha, 2022). In Portugal, the pharmaceutical industry, although important, is not as developed as in other European countries. This is due to a lack of resources and knowledge to move further and remain competitive. However, the pharmaceutical industry in Portugal has a place to grow and improve and can be a fundamental mechanism for the country's economic growth (European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations, 2022).

Over the years, the research field regarding KIBOs has been frequently connected to KM and IC. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the connection of these themes with international assignment management. As mentioned by Millar *et al.*, (2017, p.273), more research is needed to understand how KIBOs, who rely on their people as their most valuable asset, manage the knowledge from their international workforce. Two KM processes are most researched in IAs literature, namely knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer. These two processes are seen as positive processes to foster KM in an organisation. On the contrary, knowledge hiding has emerged in the literature as a process that can negatively impact the previous two processes and compromise the management of knowledge in the organisation (He *et al.*, 2021; Phookan and Sharma, 2021; Issac *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, there is a need to understand which factors can lead to employees engaging in KM activities to develop IC.

Several factors can be identified as antecedents of KM. Knowledge sharing, transfer and hiding are all influenced by personal (e.g., motivation, empowerment, absorptive capacity, power, reputation), organisational (e.g., organisational culture, organisational hierarchy, work design, management support) and cultural factors (e.g., language of a country, culture of the country) (Lee and Al-Hawamdeh, 2002; He *et al.*, 2021; Xiao, 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to consider the relationship between the knowledge holder and the knowledge recipient. To increase knowledge sharing and transfer activities while reducing knowledge hiding ones, knowledge holders need to be motivated to share their knowledge while not fearing losing power in an organisational culture that promotes and rewards knowledge-sharing and transfer activities. On the other hand, the knowledge recipient needs to be motivated to receive and apply the knowledge from the holder by understanding that the received information is crucial for its job while being promoted to engaging in a knowledge sharing culture (Ado, Wanjiru and Su, 2021; Phookan and Sharma, 2021; Yeboah, 2023). From all the factors it seems that there is a stronger focus on motivation, power, and culture.

This work aims to understand how personnel mobility affects the knowledge and IC management of a knowledge-intensive organisation. The following research question then guides this study:

How and why to manage knowledge and intellectual capital in the context of personnel mobility?

2. Methodology

For this work, qualitative methodology was applied which allows maximum access to the human experience since its premise is “that there is no single absolute reality with an external ontic status” (Nakash & Bouhnik, 2023, p.705). The use of a single case study has gained importance in the literature over the years since it allows the generation of new theoretical concepts while giving examples from practitioners (Yin, 2009, 2018; Amaya *et al.*, 2022). In terms of data collection, three methods were used namely semi-structured interviews, direct observation and document analysis.

A first round of exploratory interviews was conducted at BIAL headquarters in Trofa, Porto between April and May 2023. The interviews were conducted both online (via Microsoft Teams) and in person. Also, some interviews were carried out in Portuguese while others were in English. These interviews aimed to understand how the company manages mobility (those who went abroad and those who came to work in Portugal) and if a knowledge management system exists. All participants (n=11) were interviewed and consent for the interviews was signed. For the interviews, different guides were produced with research questions related to the management of knowledge and intellectual capital in their position. The interviews were audio-recorded using the researcher’s phone and laptop and notes were also taken. Interviews last on average forty minutes. The interviews were then transcribed by the researcher both in Portuguese and English according to the language used in the interview. The Portuguese transcriptions were then translated into English to achieve a coherent analysis of the results.

On May 9th, the first observation included an informal meeting with three human resource management team elements to understand how international assignees are managed. This meeting was also important to analyse the existence of systems to manage the human resources of the organisation and the knowledge produced, namely a talent and succession app and a career framework. Another element of observation occurred on May 25th when the researcher met an element of this team to analyse how SharePoint is used in the organisation to share and access information by the employees.

3. The Case Context

BIAL is a Portuguese pharmaceutical company that was founded in 1924 by Álvaro Portela. BIAL is an innovative pharmaceutical company dedicated to the research, development and marketing of medicines. BIAL's mission is to find, develop and provide therapeutic solutions in the field of health guided by the strategic lines of quality, research, and development (R&D) and internationalisation.

In Europe, BIAL has a production and R&D unit in Portugal and affiliates in Spain, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Switzerland. In the US, in 2020, BIAL established BIAL Biotech Investments Inc. (BIAL Biotech). In French West Africa, it has operated since 1999. Through partnerships with local promotion agents, BIAL Francophone Africa operates in 18 countries in the region. BIAL Angola is one of the leading pharmaceutical companies in the country and has a wide range of products (over 40 medicinal products). In Mozambique, BIAL owns Medimport. Established in 1996, the company is engaged in the import and distribution of pharmaceutical specialties, representing several pharmaceutical companies, with which it has licencing agreements for Mozambique. BIAL

also establishes partnerships/licensing agreements with leading pharmaceutical companies to be able to access other markets. This is the case in some European countries, the USA, Japan, China and South Korea. This broad network of partnerships has enabled BIAL to share innovative products in the neurosciences field in various countries.

Therefore, considering the previous description of the organisation and what is mentioned in the literature regarding KIBOs and pharmaceutical companies, BIAL is identified as a KIBO in this study. Moreover, the existence of subsidiaries in different locations suggests that the organisation has cross-border mobility as part of its business operation, making it a fit for the study of international assignments. Because BIAL can be considered a KIBO and to a certain extent a multinational company with IAs, it fits the goal of this research to be used as a case study. This study is then important for theoretical as well as practical reasons since the pharmaceutical industry in Portugal can be a fundamental mechanism for the country's economic growth, namely BIAL (BIAL, 2024).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Interviews

In terms of interviews, three groups of employees were included, namely auto-expatriates, expatriates and HR employees since these are the ones involved in cross-border mobility in the organisation. This study finds it pertinent to include different types of international assignees and different hierarchical levels to achieve a more detailed understanding of the analysed theme.

4.1.1 Expatriates

For this study, from the few available expatriates, two agreed to participate. These are two long-term expatriates since they have been in foreign countries for more than 20 years. Both occupy senior director positions which gives them the knowledge to speak about the subject from a managerial perspective. In terms of the expatriation process, both were career progression opportunities.

In terms of the interaction between the headquarters and the subsidiaries, INT1 believes that headquarters must be responsible for the main guidelines and corporate rules while monitoring the processes and practices in the various subsidiaries. For that to happen, there must be a permanent exchange of knowledge through meetings. In BIAL's case, there are local as well as global meetings. For example, INT2 comes to the country periodically to make a personal update on the activities and develop further strategic plans.

Regarding the reduced number of expatriates in the organisation, INT1 believes that this happens because Portugal does not have all the resources it wants, and BIAL still does not have the dimension to externalise. From the literature, it is possible to conclude that the reduced number of expatriations can then be associated with the difficulty of creating subsidiaries in Europe in the pharmaceutical market since it is very regulated (European Commission, 2020; European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations, 2022) Therefore, BIAL ends up hiring local labour instead of using expatriates since it depends on the candidate profile and business needs that leads to the hiring of locals. Still, companies must keep in mind and prepare staff to externalise (Alexandre and Martins, 2023). This preparation must be a bidirectional process of culture management and INT2 believes that the expatriation process can be improved by giving greater support.

In terms of KM in the organisation, INT1 believes that the "(...) *sharing of information must come naturally*" to employees to work for the common good which must be the maximum sharing of information with the different layers. However, considering the information given by the interviewees, there is no guarantee that this information sharing will happen at all the subsidiaries since it depends on the country manager. At the same time, INT1 and INT2 believe there is no guarantee that people are willing to freely share the information they possess because information means value and power. BIAL can then educate its people to believe that information sharing is an added value and not a threat to reducing knowledge-hiding behaviour. This can be done by developing career models for future perspectives, so it reduces the fear of people losing their positions. Still, both expatriates believe that BIAL has improved its knowledge-sharing culture through the hierarchical change that took place. However, improvements are still needed. INT1 agrees that the creation and implementation of a proper KM mechanism in the organisation is crucial. This can be done by ensuring that people the organisation recruits the right people (those open to a knowledge-sharing culture), keeps them motivated (through the

development of career plans) and is ready to collaborate (hold accountable the people who want to own the information).

4.1.2 Self-Initiated Expatriates (Sies)

To start, to be considered a SIE, people need to move to a different country from that of origin and this decision must be a personally motivated choice. All involved confirmed that the decision to move to Portugal was an entirely personal decision motivated by the search for a new career opportunity and to live in a different country. Moreover, all of them are part of the R&D division since this is the division in the organisation that must look out for international talent to fulfil its needs. The search for international talent in the R&D department is motivated by the need of the organisation to have the best experts to guarantee its success in the pharmaceutical industry.

In terms of the recruitment process, all SIEs received a relocation package and sufficient support from the organisation. This package includes the travel expenses for the interviews and relocation to Portugal. Also, it includes two-month accommodations with a storage place to keep personal belongings as well as participation in Portuguese classes to develop their knowledge of the language. Finally, informal support is given regarding the obtention of identity cards and social security as well as fiscal numbers. In this aspect, the interviewees all agree that the organisation could provide additional emotional and informal support to family members as confirmed in the literature (Black and Stephens, 1989). Lastly, regarding the integration of new elements, participants feel that the time for the introduction could be reduced or more focused on the division they will be working in. The implementation of this relocation package must be seen as a good practice for companies with mobility since it allows a smoother relocation for the employee while promoting integration both in the organisation as well as the country's cultures.

Considering the contact of the interviewees with subsidiaries this is reduced as mentioned by INT6: *"(...) working in R&D division we don't have any contact with them because they are working in the marketing. So, they are not part of our direct network."* Participants feel that as they integrate the most important division of the organisation, additional knowledge could be shared. This leads to a sense of disconnection from the members of this division to the rest of the organisation. Some participants feel that more connection with subsidiaries could increase their motivation and reduce this sense of loss.

Regarding KM processes, the R&D division has been implementing some changes to facilitate the integration of new elements and improve the workflow and knowledge sharing. The participants feel that the hierarchical change in the organisation facilitates information sharing while fostering a knowledge-sharing culture in the organisation and has brought some fundamental improvements to KM. However, some barriers to knowledge sharing still exist and are perceived by the interviewees. As mentioned by INT5: *"I think that now there is perhaps more transparency, above all (...) but all this openness only comes from the top. I think that in Portuguese culture, the lower levels, still don't open doors to each other"*. The participants recognise that information sharing is highly dependent on individual motivation and individual perception of the use of knowledge. At the same time, they still feel that some people hold knowledge as a way of maintaining power and their positions in the organisation. Also, the participants feel that these changes have improved communication within the teams but not among the teams. This implies that Team A does not know what Team B is doing which can reduce the chances of collaboration among team members. Lastly, due to the nature of the knowledge in the R&D division, it can be difficult to implement a proper KM mechanism that considers all the regulations of this division due to the confidential nature of knowledge. However, BIAL is trying to stay up to date with a new electronic system, derived from the hierarchical modification, to help manage knowledge. Although significant and positive changes are being made regarding the creation of a knowledge-sharing culture, the organisation still lacks control mechanisms that ensure that people are motivated and actively engaged in information-sharing activities without the fear of losing their position or power.

4.1.3 Human Resource Employees

The interviews included three human resource employees. In terms of the mobility processes, there is a general approach adopted by the team to recruit whether employees are going to a foreign country to work at a subsidiary (expatriation) or coming from a foreign country to work at the headquarters (self-initiated expatriation). To note that the company is much more flexible when it comes to timings for starting a role as a foreigner, because of the moving from one country to another and the various administrative processes that also must be completed. Also, the HR team needs more time to prepare.

In terms of expatriation, these are punctual processes in the organisation that are used to serve certain purposes normally associated with the creation or renovation of a subsidiary. Also, due to the seniority of the HR employees involved in this study, the participants did not have the experience of managing an entire expatriation process. In terms of other mobility processes, they exist for specific business needs and are transversal to the organisation. In total these people move for about a week of work outside.

Considering KM, there is no formal process or tools in the organisation. What exists is a culture of sharing in terms of work. This culture of sharing starts with the onboarding process (when someone new enters the organisation) which allows contact with different areas of the company to quickly get to know or identify key people for specific matters. Normally it ends up being the manager who transfers the knowledge of what happens in a team, the work that is supposed to be done, and the project to work on. And then the transfer of knowledge is very much out of necessity. Since a knowledge mechanism is lacking in the organisation, the three participants find it useful for future management and it can make the work easier.

4.2 Direct Observation and Document Analysis

The direct observation for this study was conducted to understand how BIAL uses online systems to manage knowledge from the employees and share it in the organisation which leads to document analysis. Namely, training plans and the talent and succession app were observed in detail since they are the ones with the most information.

In terms of general management, BIAL uses Sharepoint to have all the documents each department and employee needs to access and use. Furthermore, it uses DocX as a platform for recording standards and procedures.

In terms of training, for each employee, there is a record of training carried out since joining the company. The HR team, together with the heads of each department, also create annual training plans where each department has a plan. A training plan is then drawn up containing the following information: name of the person or team to receive training (team when there are many people in the division and name of the person when there are few), the training that will be received, the date of the training and its total cost. After going through HR, this plan must be approved by the administration board. HR always seeks to monitor whether training is being completed to guarantee that the total number of training hours is achieved. Additionally, to facilitate the work of HR regarding training management, an application is being implemented that helps to plan the budget and see if the training was carried out.

In terms of the talent and succession mapping app, the organisation has a biannual analysis conducted in March and October. This is based on the 9-box grid which is a well-known talent management tool in which employees are divided into nine groups, based on their performance (in this case, (under, effective, outstanding) and potential (in this case, (low, medium, high)). In terms of functioning, when entering the application, the manager can see the talent and succession tabs as well as a box next to it with the names of the people to be evaluated. Only people who have been with the company for more than 6 months (and excluding temporary employees) are mapped and the mapping is common to all hierarchical levels, with the only person not mapped in the company being the chairman.

In the succession tab, only the management levels are mapped, and a list of names is presented to map immediate, short-term, and long-term successors. However, this term is not mandatory to identify for these three periods. Afterwards, people are identified by the HR team and a career development plan is prepared so that the successor can be ready when necessary. To emphasise that the organisation has plans to extend this mapping to different levels to improve succession management.

The introduction of these new human resource management tools allows the employees to feel heard and valuable within the organisation giving them the possibility to progress in their career in different ways. At the same time, it allows employee mobility in the organisation (cross-border as well as internal) because it opens the possibility of being selected and promoted to different positions in the organisation.

4.3 Conclusions

Regarding the management of knowledge in cross-border mobility, this study aimed to confirm if all processes of KM are crucial for this context. Considering the context of this research and aligned with previous authors, this work confirms that while talking with people involved in IAs, the main processes that need to be managed are knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer and knowledge hiding (e.g., Ado et al., 2021; Chang, 2012; Huang et

al., 2013). Second, this exploratory part of the work made it possible to understand that three main concepts can act as antecedents of KM in this context, namely motivation, culture, and power as mentioned in the literature (Tams and Arthur, 2015; Santos and Gonçalves, 2018; Linder, 2019; van Bakel and Salzbrenner, 2019; Issac *et al.*, 2022).

Considering the creation of IC in the mobility context, IC is seen as the result of KM activities in cross-border mobility processes. In terms of structural capital, it is positive to notice that BIAL has been up to date by creating and promoting the use of digital tools for internal management and use by its employees. Regarding, relational capital this is positively developed by the development and promotion of culture sharing in the organisation motivates people to relate with one another in the pursuit of a common goal. Considering human capital, at BIAL this is a crucial IC dimension due to the nature of its core work. Therefore, the organisation has developed several tools that allow to keep employees motivated and equipped with the right skills to develop their work. Lastly, regarding social capital, it seems that the network of resources for international assignments can be further expanded both for SIEs as well as expatriates. SIEs working at the headquarters could engage more with colleagues working at subsidiaries to increase their knowledge of the work abroad and the results obtained that can influence their performance. On the other hand, expatriates need to feel more connected with the headquarters to reduce the fear of not belonging. Social capital is then crucial to be developed for knowledge workers who engage in international assignments (see Millar, 2016, p. 851).

From the development of this work and answering the research question “How and why to manage knowledge and intellectual capital in the context of personnel mobility?” it is possible to conclude that a robust mechanism to manage knowledge in the context of cross-border mobility is lacking. The development of such a tool is seen as an improvement and helpful resource for both the collaborators as well as human resource managers because it could help to reduce the complexity of some tasks (such as initial training to perform a job) as well as to integrate knowledge in a transversal way to the organisation. The overall feeling is that the organisation has been given important steps to see KM from a more strategic perspective to create IC.

Considering the work here presented, the results cannot be generalised to other organisations and industries due to the nature of the applied methodology, but it can serve as a benchmark for other organisations in the same industry. It would be pertinent to conduct research in other organisations and industries to achieve a broader understanding and compare results.

Acknowledgements

This work is financed by Portuguese national funds through FCT – the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, under the project UIDB/05422/2020 and through a PhD Scholarship 2022.09437.BD that was awarded to the author. This work was financially supported by the Research Unit on Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policies (UIDB/04058/2020) + (UIDP/04058/2020), funded by national funds through FCT - the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology. This work is financed by Portuguese national funds through FCT - the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, under the project UIDB/05422/2020.

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