Expatriates, an Untapped Source of Valuable Knowledge?

A study of how MNCs exploit knowledge from Swedish expatriates

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Abstract
Due to increased globalization, MNCs are increasingly relocating employees on international assignments. During their international assignments, expatriates gain a vast amount of knowledge that can be valuable to the firm. This valuable source of knowledge often remains untapped however and MNCs do often not exploit and harvest knowledge from expatriates. Given this problem we have investigated what the process of knowledge transfer looks like and how MNCs exploit knowledge from Swedish expatriates. We also wanted to find out how factors such as knowledge characteristics, corporate culture, debriefing, and post-assignment position effected this process. By conducting qualitative interviews with former expatriates, we could conclude that formal programs or structured mechanisms to harvest knowledge from expatriates were not very common, the corporate culture had a fairly big impact on expatriates’ well-being, and debriefing sessions varied depending on the size of the company, position of the expatriate as well as the number of expatriates a MNC had. Furthermore, we were able to conclude that the MNCs we investigated utilized knowledge from expatriates by giving them suitable post-assignment positions. Given the tacit nature of expatriates’ knowledge, we recommend managers to assign more time for socialization between coworkers.

Key words: Knowledge transfer, expatriates, international assignments, repatriation
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction ............................................................................................................. 5

1.2 Problem Discussion ............................................................................................... 6

2. Literature Review .................................................................................................... 7
   2.1 Knowledge Management ....................................................................................... 7
   2.2 Knowledge Transfer ............................................................................................. 7
       2.2.1 Knowledge Characteristics .......................................................................... 9
       2.2.3 Corporate Culture ....................................................................................... 10
   2.3 International Human Resource Management ................................................... 11
   2.4 Expatriation ......................................................................................................... 12
       2.4.1 Debriefing .................................................................................................. 13
       2.4.2 Post-assignment Position ............................................................................ 13
   2.5 Conceptual Framework ....................................................................................... 14

3. Method .................................................................................................................... 16
   3.1 Choice of Topic .................................................................................................. 16
   3.2 Choice of Method ............................................................................................... 16
   3.3 The Interviews .................................................................................................... 17
       3.3.1 The Interviewees ....................................................................................... 18
   3.4 Data Analysis ...................................................................................................... 19
   3.5 Operationalization of Variables ......................................................................... 19
       3.5.1 Knowledge Transfer .................................................................................. 19
       3.5.2 Knowledge Characteristics ....................................................................... 20
       3.5.3 Corporate Culture ..................................................................................... 20
       3.5.4 Debriefing ................................................................................................. 20
       3.5.5 Post-assignment Position .......................................................................... 21
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Analysis and Empirical Findings - Interview Results</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Knowledge Transfer According to Former Expatriates</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Corporate Culture</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Debriefing Sessions</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Post-assignment Position</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conclusion and Discussion</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Managerial Implications</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Limitations</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Future Research</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. References</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1 - Interview Questions</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Introduction
The number of employees relocated on international assignments abroad has steadily amplified due to increased globalization (Bonache & Brewster 2001). Relocated employees are called expatriates and have traditionally been used as a way for headquarters (HQ) to control, coordinate, and establish culture and practices in overseas affiliates. Expatriate assignments have however lately evolved into becoming a mechanism of transferring and sharing knowledge between organizational units (Collings et al, 2007).

International assignments allow expatriates to develop extensive knowledge about the local market, culture, and ways of doing business in a foreign country (Berthion Antal, 2001), which can constitute a valuable asset for multinational corporations (MNCs). In a case study made by Berthoin Antal (2001), the author states that expatriates possess a wealth of knowledge, gained abroad, that can be useful for organizational learning. The significance of personal contact, face-to-face interactions, and personal relationships that expatriates develop abroad should not be underestimated according to Bender and Fisher (2000) and state that an understanding of cultural differences such as business behavior, attitudes, mindsets and language can be critical to an organization’s success. However, instead of exploiting and harvesting this valuable knowledge expatriates possess the resource often remains untapped by corporations (Berthoin Antal, 2001). Berthoin Antal (2001) furthermore concludes that when organizational learning does take place, it is more commonly initiated by expatriates than the organization and the firm many times learns “by accident”.

In a global economy where uncertainty is the only thing certain, knowledge is the one source of a lasting competitive advantage for organizations and it is therefore important that organizations are able to retain their employees since knowledge often is embedded within the individual (Nonaka, 1991). Because of the importance of knowledge and knowledge renewal today, only learning by accident will not be enough and retaining knowledgeable workers will be vital for firm success. In a study made by Tung (1998) it was found that even though many expatriates were pleased with their expatriation the majority was dissatisfied with the whole repatriation process. Many studies have been done concerning expatriation and repatriation but a gap still remains between academic literature and actual management practices (Berthoin Antal, 2001).
1.2 Problem Discussion
This thesis is an explanatory study of expatriates where our aim is to investigate how expatriates experience that their home organizations exploit and harvest the knowledge they have gained abroad. Firstly, we find this topic relevant since many MNCs have troubles taking advantage of knowledge from expatriates (Berthoin Antal, 2001). Secondly, knowledge often resides in employees and is embedded within individuals (Nonaka, 1991, 1994) and if firms cannot retain their human resources, knowledge will walk out the door (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). We have chosen to investigate this from the expatriates’ point of view since many expatriates feel that their companies do not value the knowledge they have gained during their international assignments (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007).

By looking at two concepts, knowledge transfer and expatriates, we want to see how expatriates experience that their knowledge and experiences gained from international assignments are being harvested and exploited. Our research question is therefore as follows: What does the process of transferring knowledge from expatriates look like? And how do factors such as knowledge characteristics, corporate culture, debriefing, and post-assignment position effect this process?

Chapter two will give a brief background to knowledge management and knowledge transfer as well as human resource management and expatriates. Thereafter a conceptual framework will be developed by combining theories from knowledge transfer and expatriates. Chapter three will describe our choice of topic and the methodology we used to gather empirical data. Moreover, in chapter four we will present our empirical data and analyze it in conjunction to the theories presented in chapter two. Lastly, chapter five will present our conclusions, managerial implications due to our findings, and suggestions for future studies.
2. Literature Review

This section will give a short background to the concept of knowledge management and later on to knowledge transfer. Further down, international human resource management (IHRM) will be described and we will go more deeply into the concept of expatriation. Lastly, these notions will be combined into a conceptual framework which will constitute the foundation of this study.

2.1 Knowledge Management

Although the concept of knowledge management might still be relatively new, knowledge is not. Philosophers such as Platon and Aristotle discussed the notion of knowledge several hundred years ago. The modern discussion of knowledge did not however pick up until Michael Polanyi published *Personal knowledge* in 1962 and *The Tacit Dimension* in 1967 respectively. Polanyi (1967) stated that *we can know more than we can tell* and argued that certain types of knowledge is very hard to put into words. Another great development in the field of knowledge management was the publications of Ikujiro Nonaka in 1991 and in 1994. While Polanyi mainly focused on human knowledge, Nonaka’s research focused on organizational learning and knowledge creation within companies.

As have been mentioned before, knowledge is not new but to acknowledge it as a corporate asset, and treat it as one, is however new (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). For example, 50 years ago, companies mainly produced standardized products and focused on reaching a huge population by mass marketing and mass distribution. Due to the shortages of World War II, customers had many unmet needs and were therefore satisfied with standardized products at reasonable prices (Seth et al, 2000). Global competition has however intensified and firms cannot expect that products and practices that used to constitute a competitive advantage will continue do so in the future. According to Davenport and Prusak (1998) companies in today’s economy differentiate themselves more and more based on what they know and many practitioners view knowledge as the key to a sustainable competitive advantage.

2.2 Knowledge Transfer

Knowledge transfer is a subject that has been taken up under the topic of knowledge management and can be seen as a movement of knowledge, where knowledge gained in one part of the company is transferred to another organizational unit (Bender & Fisher, 2000). A similar
interpretation is presented by Argote and Ingram (2000), who describe it as a process where one unit e.g. group, department, or division is affected by the experience of another unit within the same organization.

The goal of knowledge transfer is, according to Davenport and Prusak (1998), to improve an organization’s ability to do things and by doing so increasing its value. In order to do so, they argue that there has to be interaction between two parties: a transmitter and a recipient. When the recipient receives knowledge from the transmitter it has to be absorbed and used in a new context. If it is not, knowledge transfer has not occurred.

According to Nonaka (1991) companies have to be innovative in order to stay competitive and it is also vital that new ideas and knowledge can flow freely within the organization. Davenport and Prusak (1998) do also acknowledge this fact, and state that if the knowledge transfer is to be useful the recipient has to absorb the knowledge and apply it in a new context. Applying it in a new context should lead to a change in behavior or the development of a new idea or product (Davenport & Prusak. 1998).

There are plenty of strategies and tools that can be used when managing knowledge transfer but arguably the most effective one is to let knowledge transfer be spontaneous and unstructured within organizations (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). Hence, hiring smart people and letting them talk to one another can therefore be a good way of ensuring effective knowledge transfers. The downside on the other hand is that the larger and more complex a company becomes the harder it gets to locate specific knowledge and/or employees with specific expertise (Davenport & Prusak. 1998).

Only hiring smart people and letting them talk might seem too simplistic and hinders often exists that slow down the process of knowledge transfer. Szulanski (1996) developed the term internal stickiness which refers to the difficulty of transferring knowledge between people and organizational units. Many researchers have focused on motivational barriers to knowledge transfer while Szulanski focused on knowledge related barriers (Szulanski, 1996). He concludes that there are three knowledge related barriers associated with knowledge transfer; the recipient's
lack of absorptive capacity, causal ambiguity, and the arduousness of the relationship between the source and recipient. He argues that organizations ought to emphasize on developing the learning capacities of organizational units and encourage close relationships between units. Because this will, according to Szulanski (1996), lower the internal stickiness within companies. Furthermore, Szulanski (1996) states that when knowledge transfer is impeded by internal stickiness a gap between what organizations knows and what it puts to use is formed.

2.2.1 Knowledge Characteristics
The knowledge that is being transferred within organizations can be categorized into two main subgroups. One type of knowledge that is commonly transferred within organizations is tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is knowledge gained from personal experiences and observations and is therefore hard to codify and teach, i.e. the knowledge is embedded within the individual. Michael Polanyi, who was the first to divide knowledge into tacit and explicit knowledge, exemplifies tacit knowledge by riding a bike. How one rides a bike and how one can balance on only two wheels is rather hard to articulate and reading a book on how to ride a bike is therefore difficult. In other words, tacit knowledge can be seen as a type of knowledge which the individual possess but have difficulties communicating to others (Polanyi, 1967).

Nonaka has focused much of his research on how firms can convert tacit knowledge into explicit and vice versa. In his article from 1994, he presents four modes of conversions between tacit and explicit knowledge. All modes of conversions are however not relevant to this thesis and we will therefore only explain one mode, socialization. The goal with socialization is to transfer tacit knowledge from one person to another which can be done by for example letting two employees interact (Nonaka, 1994). Davenport and Prusak (1998) agree and state that transferring tacit knowledge requires extensive personal contact.

Since transmitting tacit knowledge requires extensive personal contact and interaction (Davenport & Prusak, 1988) the only feasible solution when transferring tacit knowledge might be to move an employee, a so called expatriate. Riusala and Suutari (2004) state that firms should focus more on face-to-face interactions, by for example sending an employee, rather than trying to codify tacit knowledge into explicit in order to make it transferable.
According to Riusala and Suutari (2004), expatriates gain mostly tacit knowledge during their international assignments and if an expatriate resigns there will be a loss of organizational tacit knowledge, i.e. knowledge that is embedded within the expatriate. Quite different from what Riusala and Suutari stated above, Tsang (1999) argues that firms must constantly try to convert tacit knowledge into explicit and if that is done successfully, knowledge can stay within the firm despite resignations.

Companies that are committed to transferring tacit knowledge often establish formal mentoring programs by for example assigning young employees to senior employees with plenty of experiences. Doing so enables transfer of tacit knowledge from one individual to another through socialization (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). Another way to ensure that tacit knowledge stays within the organization is through job-rotations, where employees switch departments. Job-rotations are very common among companies in Japan and allow managers and workers to get a complete understanding of what the value chain looks like within the organization (Nonka, 1991; Nonaka, 1994; Davenport & Prusak, 1998).

Another type of knowledge that is highlighted in the literature of knowledge transfer is explicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is, in contrary to tacit knowledge, easy to codify and share which for example can be done through formal reports (Nonaka, 1991; Riusala & Suutari, 2004). Explicit knowledge is unlikely to be a source of competitive advantage since competitors easily can imitate it while tacit knowledge, on the other hand, has the disadvantage of being hard to transfer but is more likely to constitute a competitive advantage (Gooderham, 2007). It is very important for organizations to be able to distinguish between various kinds of knowledge since certain types of knowledge might be more valuable than others (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005).

2.2.3 Corporate Culture
Bender and Fisher (2000) emphasize that organizations ought to create a knowledge-sharing environment, where employees who are willing to share their knowledge and expertise will be rewarded. For example, a repatriated expatriate who has valuable knowledge of a local market in a foreign country may be more willing to share knowledge with fellow coworkers if there is an
incentive to do so. However, organizations that value knowledge too much might find it hard to create such an environment since employees most likely will want to keep the knowledge for themselves as a personal competitive advantage and to increase their own employability. So accordingly, the more an organization values knowledge the less incentives it will be for employees to share knowledge within the organization (www.economist.com, 2011-05-06). Other problems that might occur when organizations adopt a new knowledge management initiative is that people do not like to apply ideas that are not their own; the so called “not invented here syndrome”. Furthermore, people like to think of themselves as experts and might therefore not like to collaborate with others (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Bender & Fisher, 2000).

In organizations with a strong culture, core values and beliefs are shared throughout the whole organization. The more the employees acknowledge the core values and commit to them the stronger the culture becomes. Strong corporate cultures are usually characterized by shared values and beliefs among employees and a unanimous understanding of what the culture stands for. A strong culture helps reinforce employees’ commitment and employees’ loyalty to the firm (Robbins & Judge, 2009).

Furthermore, according to Robbins and Judge (2009) organizations that have a strong culture are in less need of formalization and management to establish rules and norms since the strong culture naturally steers employee behavior. According to Davenport and Prusak (1998) the company’s culture, including shared values, norms, and behaviors are all principal determinants of successful knowledge transfers whiles culture differences and lack of trust are examples of hinders to knowledge transfer. Also, people who share the same corporate culture can communicate better with each other and transfer knowledge more effectively then people who do not (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). Thus, the character of the corporate culture is an important determinant to successful knowledge transfer from expatriates.

2.3 International Human Resource Management
International human resource management (IHRM) has developed mainly during the last two decades (Harzing & Ruysseveldt, 2004) and can be seen as an extension of the human resource management (HRM) stream. HRM primarily focus on developing staffing policies and manage
employees but due to internationalization and the increased number of MNCs, it has however evolved into including international mobility of employees and so called expatriates as well. Laracova and Cerdin (2007) define expatriates as an employee who voluntarily chooses to be sent off from its country of origin and/or permanent resident to a foreign country to work temporarily for a period of one to five years.

Due to increased globalization corporations are no longer active on one single market but rather present in several regions and markets worldwide. In order to stay competitive, MNCs must be able to control and coordinate their dispersed affiliates which can be done by for example assigning employees from the parent company. By doing so the company is able to avoid opportunistic behavior and align the objectives of subsidiary managers with those of the HQ, but also create a shared understanding of values and beliefs (Collings et al, 2007). Initially, expatriates were used solely as a way to circumvent agency problems within MNCs but have however lately evolved into a mechanism of knowledge transfer and sharing between organizational units (Collings et al, 2007).

Firms may have different reasons and motives for sending employees abroad that may vary depending on size, strategy and industry. Edström and Galbraith (1977) analyze the transfer of employees as a means of control within MNCs and present three reasons to why firms transfer personnel. Firstly, companies transfer employees as position fillers when no suitable candidate can be found locally, that is within the subsidiary or in the region. Secondly, MNCs use expatriates in order to develop managers with a long-term potential and provide them with international experience. The third motive for using expatriates is organizational development by for example letting managers socialize and create relationships vertically and laterally within the organization.

2.4 Expatriation
The process of expatriation is a fairly wide topic and can easily be divided into several subgroups; identification of potential candidates, selection, training and development, compensation, performance appraisal, retention and turnover, and lastly succession planning and repatriation (Harvey & Moeller, 2009). Repatriation is problematic and several potential
impediments have been identified concerning the repatriation process such as job insecurity, reversed culture shocks, and withdrawal of allowances (Harvey & Moeller, 2009, Berthoin Antal, 2001). In a study made by Tung (1998), she found out that even though many expatriates were pleased with the expatriation period and their life abroad, many of them were at the same time very unhappy with the repatriation process. Upon return, repatriates were expected to acclimatize and deliver good results fast and no consideration was taken to their recent move. The interviewees were dissatisfied with the fact that not enough resources were devoted to repatriation policies and programs. If companies cannot handle returning expatriates successfully it could lead resignations and to severe consequences in the long run (Tung, 1998).

2.4.1 Debriefing
In order to enhance organizational learning, Berthoin Antal (2001) takes on a knowledge management approach to managing expatriates and concludes that the expatriation process should be viewed as a complete cycle starting before the assignment and ending after the expatriate has returned. She argues that corporations should debrief expatriates on a regular basis during their assignments and start planning the reentry process well in advance in order to enhance knowledge transfer. Debriefing on a regular basis will force the expatriate to reflect on what he/she has learnt as well as increase former colleagues’ and managers’ awareness of the wealth of knowledge the expatriate has gained. Planning the reentry process early will allow the home organization to find an optimal post-assignment position (Berthoin Antal, 2001).

2.4.2 Post-assignment Position
In their article from 2005, Lazarova and Tarique develop a framework on how knowledge transfers upon repatriation are affected by different factors and conditions. They conclude that companies must create a fit between expatriates’ readiness to transfer knowledge and organizations’ receptivity to knowledge in order to maximize knowledge transfer. The corporation must also strive to create and maintain a motivation to share among its employees which for example can be done by offering career development opportunities that match the individual’s career goals (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005).
Berthoin Antal’s findings of expatriates’ contribution to organizational learning are similar to Lazarova and Tarique’s results and according to her, returning expatriates are most likely to share when they are in a position of power. Berthoin Antal (2001) furthermore states that expatriates returning to top management positions should use their status and power to influence the organization to become more supportive of sharing ideas and trying different working methods. So in order to enhance organizational learning and knowledge transfer, an expatriate should be given a position that corresponds to individual career goals and gives the employee some decision-making rights as well as motivation.

Status will undoubtedly affect the performance of knowledge transfer according to Davenport and Prusak (1998). The authors furthermore argue that people most likely will judge information and knowledge given to them based on who the sender is. Factors such as reputation or trust will bias the receiver’s judgment (Davenport & Prusak, 1998).

2.5 Conceptual Framework

Knowledge is commonly categorized into tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is difficult to codify and imitate while explicit knowledge easily can be transferred and written down in e.g. manuals and reports. **Knowledge characteristics** will decide how easily and smoothly knowledge can be transferred within units or, in our case, between expatriates and the organization and between expatriates and its fellow coworkers. However, many researchers conclude that motivation has a vast influence on knowledge transfer and that corporations must facilitate and maintain an environment which supports sharing and transferring of knowledge. Thus, establishing management practices and a **corporate culture** that support organizational learning is therefore the second factor that will be investigated.

Expatriates often gain valuable knowledge on international assignments but according to several researchers, corporations rarely harvest this kind of knowledge. A possible explanation might be that much of the knowledge is tacit which makes it hard to both transfer and articulate. Human beings can often know more than they can tell (Polanyi 1967) which in this case implies that expatriates might not be aware of everything they have learnt. A solution to this problem, presented by Berthoin Antal, is therefore to **debrief** the home organization on a regular basis. This
will force the expatriate to reflect on what he/she has learnt as well as increase managers’ awareness of the wealth of knowledge the expatriate has gained.

An environment that encourages knowledge transfer and sharing is however not enough and former expatriates should be given adequate career development opportunities in order to be motivated to share their knowledge and expertise with coworkers (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). The third factor which will be investigated is therefore the *post assignment position*.

![Factors affecting knowledge transfer from expatriates](image)

*Figure 1.*

Figure 1 represents our analytical model which our research will be based upon. Knowledge characteristics, corporate culture, debriefing, and post-assignment position are our independent variables while knowledge transfer from expatriates is the dependent variable.
3. Method

3.1 Choice of Topic
Due to the importance of effectively being able to transfer knowledge and also due to the fact that many MNCs actively harvest this type of knowledge we would like to investigate how expatriates experience the knowledge transfer process during their repatriation periods. Given the time and space limitations of this thesis we will only focus on the repatriation process and how firms reintegrate returning employees and harvest the knowledge homecoming expatriates have gained abroad. This is important since corporations most likely would like to retain talent within the organization and by doing so enable knowledge transfers between expatriates and employees.

3.2 Choice of Method
In order to really understand how the knowledge transfer process looks like and how returning expatriates experience it we have chosen to conduct non-standardized interviews with former Swedish expatriates. Non-standardized interviews can be divided into in-depth and semi-structured interviews but since this thesis is explanatory in nature, semi-structured interviews are preferable according to Saunders et al (2009). Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed us to ask follow-up questions during the interviews and probe answers by letting the interviewee explain things further which we found advantageous compared to other methods.

Given our research question we wanted to find interview candidates who had been on international assignments, maybe even several, and who later on had returned in order to investigate how the different expatriates experienced the repatriation process and how each firm dealt with knowledge transfers from expatriates. We used a deductive approach by applying theories from the literature review to formulate questions (see 3.5 operationalization of variables) to answer our research question. Our interviewees were selected by a so-called snowball sampling technique which is commonly used when possible candidates are hard to identify (Saunders et al, 2009). Our first interview was set up by personal contacts, and thanks to our first candidate’s wide network, we were able to get in contact with more expatriates. A disadvantage with snowball sampling is however the big probability of biased answers since our first respondent most likely identified other candidates similar to himself and thereby making our
sample homogeneous (Saunders et al., 2009). Although the likelihood of bias is huge, we hope to have reduced it some by interviewing candidates from different companies.

3.3 The Interviews
We conducted five interviews in total; three face-to-face, one telephone interview, and one through email. Our respondents, who wanted to remain anonymous, work in Sweden right now and are employed by MNCs which operate worldwide. A complete list of the respondents can be found in section 3.3.1 The interviews were approximately 40 minutes long and the respondents received our questions prior to the interviews in order for them to prepare properly except for the email interview candidate who had a couple of days to answer the questions. Two of our respondents work for the same company and we are aware of the fact that they may have discussed or talked through the questions in advance and hence making it irrelevant interviewing more than one person.

There is always a slight risk for interviewer bias when conducting interviews, meaning that the respondents may answer differently depending on how the interviewer ask questions in terms of comments, tone, or non-verbal behavior. Interviewer bias means that the interviewer imposes his or her own believes which may cause the respondent to answer differently than he or she would have done otherwise (Saunders et al. 2009). To avoid this we focused not only on how we presented our questions, but also on our tonal language and how we signaled our body language to the respondents.

With the approval from our respondents we recorded the interviews, which were transcribed within 24 hours. Recording the interviews allowed us to really focus on what was being said. Although transcribing was a rather time consuming process we choose this method as it gives reliable data which is harder to misinterpret then if only note-taking had been used. (Saunders et al. 2009). There is always a small risk of misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the respondents’ answers, which is why we also took notes separately.

We are aware of the fact that only interviewing five former expatriates will only give us a hint of how MNCs deal with its homecoming expatriates and knowledge transfer. It is not likely that our
empirical results will represent a hundred percent accurate picture of how MNCs deal with these issues in practice and how expatriates experience this process.

3.3.1 The Interviewees

Our first interview was held with a director of strategic sourcing who had been on two international assignments; one in Taiwan and one in Japan. The second interview was set up by the director of strategic sourcing and was held with one of his colleagues. The second respondent, a sourcing and supply manager, had had two international assignments; one in the USA and one in Iran. The third interview was held with a R&D Director from another company who had one international assignment in Italy. Our first interviewee set up this interview as well.

The last two interviews, the telephone interview and the email interview, were set up by the authors of this paper. We were able to get in contact with these expatriates through our own personal network. Our telephone interviewee is a managing director and had done two international assignments; Brazil and China respectively. The email interviewee worked as a senior project leader and had been on two international assignments, one in Pakistan and one in Kenya.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th># of assignments</th>
<th>Assignment countries</th>
<th># of employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Director of Strategic Sourcing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Taiwan, Japan</td>
<td>80 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 2</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Supply and Sourcing Manager</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>USA, Iran</td>
<td>80 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 3</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>R&amp;D Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>170 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 4</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Managing Director</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>China, Brazil</td>
<td>1 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 5</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Senior Project Manager</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pakistan, Kenya</td>
<td>108 000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1.* - Table of respondents
3.4 Data Analysis
After the respondents’ answers had been transcribed we looked through the transcriptions and discussed how we had interpreted the data to ensure that we both had the same idea and understanding of the respondents’ answers, thus minimizing the risk of misinterpretation. Afterwards, we looked for patterns and deviations in the respondents’ answers to get a clear picture of how knowledge transfer was carried out upon repatriation. The empirical data was then analyzed in conjunction to the theories from the literature review.

3.5 Operationalization of Variables
So how did we decide on what questions to use and what to ask? The following section will present an operationalization of our variables which means we will try to make our variables measurable. To see which questions we asked during the interviews, see appendix 1.

3.5.1 Knowledge Transfer
Davenport and Prusak (1998) argue that knowledge transfer is successful when the recipient has absorbed the knowledge being transferred by the transmitter. Furthermore, the absorbed and transferred knowledge should later on lead to a change in behavior or the development of a new idea or product. The knowledge has to be used so to speak. The authors also argue that one of the most effective ways of transferring knowledge is to let it be spontaneous and unstructured within organizations.

Several studies have found that internal stickiness is a problem when transferring knowledge (Szulanski, 1996, Riusala & Suutaris, 2004). Szulanski (1996) mentions three major barriers for knowledge transfers: the recipient's lack of absorptive capacity, causal ambiguity, and the arduousness of the relationship between the source and recipient.

Based on these findings we found it relevant to ask if the companies showed any interest in the knowledge they had gained abroad and if their knowledge had been used in some new context, if any formal mechanisms or structured methods to harvest expatriates’ knowledge had been used,
and lastly what obstacles and hinders they thought existed within the company when transferring knowledge.

### 3.5.2 Knowledge Characteristics

Michael Polanyi (1967) was the first to divide knowledge into explicit and tacit. Tacit knowledge is highly embedded within the individual and is hard to articulate while explicit knowledge easily can be codified and transferred among employees. Tsang (1999) argues that it is important for organizations to try to find means of converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge in order to make it transferable. According to Riusala and Suutaris (2004) it is better to let employees socialize and interact face-to-face rather than trying to codify tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge.

Knowledge characteristics were measured by letting the expatriates explain what they had learned and experienced during their international assignments. We also asked what types of knowledge was being transferred within the company (tacit/explicit) and what that process looked like.

### 3.5.3 Corporate Culture

According to and Davenport and Prusak (1998), shared values and norms are determinants of successful knowledge transfer while culture differences and lack of trust are examples of frictions in knowledge transfer, i.e. depending how the corporate culture is it will affect the employees’ behavior and willingness to transfer and share knowledge. Therefore, we found it relevant to ask how the different companies worked with corporate culture, how the interviewees experienced it, and whether or not it facilitated or impeded knowledge transfer within the organization.

### 3.5.4 Debriefing

According to Berthoin Antal (2001) debriefing expatriates on a regular basis will allow them to reflect and think through what they have learned and what experiences they have gained. We therefore decided to ask if the expatriates had any contact with their home organizations during
the assignment, what that contact looked like and if they ever went back to the home organization during the assignment.

3.5.5 Post-assignment Position

Expatriates are more likely to share when they are in a position of power (Berthoin Antal, 2001) and according to Laracova and Tarique (2005) adequate career development opportunities should be given homecoming expatriates in order to motivate them to share knowledge with their fellow coworkers. Post-assignment position was measured by the asking if the expatriates were given a position upon return or if they had to seek a position by themselves. We also asked what would motivate them to share their experiences and if they supposedly had not received a position of their liking how that would have affected their motivation to share.
4. Analysis and Empirical Findings - Interview Results

The expatriates we have interviewed work for MNCs represented on the international market. According to some of our respondents, almost all of their coworkers had international experience while other respondents stated that international assignments were very rare. In this section we will go through the main findings of our interviews and relate them to the literature presented in chapter two.

4.1 Knowledge Transfer According to Former Expatriates

Davenport and Prusak (1998) claim that if knowledge transfer is to occur, there has to be an interaction between a transmitter and a recipient where the recipient receives knowledge from the transmitter. When the recipient has absorbed the knowledge, it has to be applied in a new context which leads to a change in behavior or the development of a new idea or product (Davenport & Prusak, 1998).

It is hard to tell from our empirical findings if the knowledge the respondents shared with their colleagues actually lead to any changes since we only interviewed one out of two parties, the transmitter. However, some of the respondents experienced that there had been an interest for their knowledge among their colleagues. For example, respondent 2 had actively helped his current colleagues by telling them what the whole process of doing business in Iran looked like, which in turn had helped them to understand the entire value chain within the company. Likewise, respondent 4 explained that his coworkers often asked him questions about China and respondent 1 said that coworkers often asked him about Taiwan, since the company had many suppliers there.

According to Davenport and Prusak (1998) one effective way of managing knowledge transfer is to let the knowledge transfer be spontaneous and unstructured within the organization. In our empirical findings we found that respondent 1, 2, 3 and 4 (who work for company A, B and C) never had seen a structured or systematic method of exploiting and harvesting knowledge from expatriates. They were expected to go back to work without undergoing any formal or structured way of transferring knowledge back to the organization. Respondent 5 was the only one who had experienced a more formal and structured way of harvesting his knowledge and experience as an expatriate. The HR department was very interested in what he had learned and he had to hand in
formal reports on a regular basis during his international assignments. The reports summarized how the business was developing as well as information concerning the living standards in the country. Tsang (1999) argues that it is crucial for companies to try to convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, thereby preventing knowledge from walking out the door. Judging from our empirical data, this is apparently something company D is trying to do by making the expatriates write formal reports.

Another way of effectively managing knowledge transfer is to hire smart people and letting them talk to one another (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). However, the larger and more complex a company becomes, the harder is gets to locate specific knowledge. In our empirical results respondent 2 and 3 emphasized the importance of well-educated and self-motivated employees for successful knowledge transfer. Respondent 2 also said that it was up to the individual to locate knowledge within in the organization that can be relevant to one’s own work. He furthermore stated that the employees at company A were well educated and curious in their nature and having this kind of employee’s naturally led to good results. Likewise, respondent 3 explained that the employees were vital for the company. In other words, respondent 2 and 3 confirm the claim of Davenport and Prusak about the importance of hiring smart people.

“Much of the responsibility rests on the individual, which means that it is up to the individual to do their job and deliver results. It is also up to the individual to find knowledge within the organization that can be relevant to ones’ work”

Respondent 2 – Sourcing and Supply Manager

Szulanski (1996) argues that there are three major barriers associated with knowledge transfer; the recipient’s lack of absorptive capacity, causal ambiguity, and the arduousness of the relationship between the source and recipient. Similar to Szulanski’s findings, Bender and Fisher (2000) argue that it can be difficult to transfer knowledge since people do not like to apply ideas that are not their own since they like to think of themselves as experts and might not prefer to collaborate with others.
In our interviews it became clear that the lack of receptiveness and responsiveness from the company and the coworkers was something that hindered knowledge transfer in all companies. Respondent 3 and 5 explained that it was difficult to transfer their knowledge due to the lack of interest. None of the respondents claimed that they felt any arduousness with the recipient they were transferring knowledge to, it was just that their colleagues were not responsive enough, especially if the knowledge they received wasn’t relevant to their work.

“There is not really any hinders in transferring knowledge within the company it is just that there is a lack of interest among some of the employees”

Respondent 5 – Senior Project Leader

Other barriers that the respondents experienced were the lack of formal tools and mechanisms to transfer knowledge to the organization. Respondent 1, from company A, explained that expatriates who were going on international assignments had to complete a “knowledge transfer plan” where the goal and mission with the assignment was explained. However, unfortunately the “knowledge transfer plan” was often not taken very seriously.

Furthermore, respondent 4 stated that the resistance to new ideas from new cultures probably was the biggest impediment to knowledge transfers. Since company C is Swedish and was founded in Sweden, a lot of employees believe that the Swedish way of conducting business is the best way. He experienced a resistance to learn from other cultures within the company and employees preferred do things the Swedish way (respondent 4). A possible explanation to why employees at company C are unwilling to do things differently might be because of the “not invented here syndrome” described in section 2.2.3.

Nonaka (1991) states that transmitting tacit knowledge from one individual to another requires the parties to socialize. Also, Riusala and Suutari (2004) argue that firms should focus more on face-to-face interaction rather than trying to codify tacit knowledge into explicit in order to make it transferable.
Most of the respondents agreed that the best way of transferring knowledge to their colleagues was through discussions, but as mentioned earlier these conversations usually occurred when there was a need for their knowledge. One of the major problems of transferring knowledge using face-to-face interaction was, according to respondent 2, the complexity and size of the company he was working for. Informal face-to-face meetings with everyone in the company are just not possible in practice.

“Indeed it would be good if one could have informal face-to-face meetings every time you wanted to communicate, but it is not possible in practice.”

Respondent 2 – Sourcing and Supply Manager

Companies that are committed to transferring tacit knowledge often establish formal mentoring programs by for example assigning young employees to senior employees with plenty of experiences. Doing so enables transfer of tacit knowledge from one individual to another through socialization (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). The respondents stated that none of the companies had any formal mentoring program where expatriates could share their knowledge to other colleagues. However respondent 1 explained that company A had a list of former expatriates containing their contact information and so on, so that future expatriates could contact them to get information about the country and the affiliate they were assigned to.

4.2 Corporate Culture

In organizations with a strong culture, core values and beliefs are shared throughout the whole organization and a strong culture furthermore helps reinforce employee’s commitment and employees’ loyalty to the firm (Robbins & Judge, 2009). Similarly, Davenport and Prusak (1998) state that the company’s culture, including shared values, norms, and behaviors can have a positive effect on knowledge transfer.

All of our respondents acknowledged that the corporate culture was very important and respondent 3 even stated that she probably wouldn’t stay within the company (Company B) if it wasn’t for the ethical values of the firm. This can be seen as a token of her commitment to the firm. Furthermore, respondent 3 also stressed that people do not stay within the company because...
of the money but rather because of the corporate culture and the nice working environment. These examples given by respondent 3 provide proof of the strong culture in Company B.

Similarly to how Robbins and Judge (2009) define organizations with strong cultures, respondent 1 and 2 argued that the corporate culture at Company A was very strong and deeply rooted among all employees. Respondent 1 gave us an example of how he had managed to run sales projects successfully during his time in Japan, and even though he was far away from Sweden, the company’s core values were still able to shine through. Likewise, respondent 3 also said that the corporate culture in Italy was similar to the one she experienced in Sweden and she furthermore stated that the company becomes your home country during an assignment.

“The company culture is very strong and reaches across borders; it is almost like the company becomes your home country”

Respondent 3 – R&D Director

Davenport and Prusak (1998) state that people who share the same corporate culture can communicate better with each other and transfer knowledge more effectively than people who do not and that culture differences might impede knowledge transfer. Based on our respondents’ answers, it seems like corporate culture plays an important role for the employees’ well-being and that if the corporate culture is strong enough cultural differences will become less apparent. MNCs with a diversified workforce will still be able to communicate effectively and by judging from the answer given by respondent 3, the MNC itself will become the expatriates’ new home country. As for knowledge transfer, our respondents couldn’t seem to agree upon whether the corporate culture facilitated or impeded knowledge transfer. Respondent 1, 2 and 5 believed that the corporate culture indeed promoted knowledge transfer within the organization while respondent 3 and 4 thought the corporate culture had little or no effect on knowledge transfer.

Bender and Fisher (2000) emphasize that organizations ought to create a knowledge-sharing environment, where employees who are willing to share their knowledge and expertise will be rewarded. Contrary to this, other researchers have found that companies who value knowledge highly might create an internal competition among their employees and that employees become
reluctant to share since keeping knowledge for themselves might improve their own employability. In our empirical data no or very little internal competition was found. Respondent 1 and 5 were the only ones who admitted that it could exist while the other respondents said it did not exist or that they never had heard of it.

Furthermore, Bender and Fisher (2000) discuss how employees should be rewarded for sharing knowledge but according to our respondent no incentives for sharing knowledge existed within the companies. The only reward expatriates could get was the appreciation by their fellow coworkers and colleagues according to respondent 2.

4.3 Debriefing Sessions
According to Berthoin Antal (2001) companies should conduct debriefing sessions with their expatriates on a regular basis since the sessions will allow expatriates to reflect on what they have learnt during their time abroad. Three out of five respondents had regular debriefing sessions, formal or informal, during their international assignments while the other respondents never had any or only due to the specific character of the assignment. Respondent 4, who work for a relatively small company compared to the other ones, had informal debriefings with his supervisor and went back to Sweden plenty of times. Similarly, respondent 5 also went back to Sweden a couple of times and sent monthly formal reports to his home organization concerning his stay, future plans, and of course how the business was developing in the assignment country.

It seems like debriefing sessions vary depending on the size of the company and the nature of the assignment. Another likely explanation could also be the country, market, or region the expatriate is assigned to. For example, Company D was very interested in how the business developed when Respondent 5 was stationed in Pakistan and Kenya. The difference could also be explained by different HR policies within the companies we have chosen to study.
4.4 Post-assignment Position
Lazarova and Tarique (2005) discuss how firms must actively try to create and maintain their employees’ motivation to share, which for example can be done by offering adequate career development opportunities. Three out of five respondents agreed with this statement and said that if they hadn’t gotten a post-assignment position which they were pleased with, they would have considered applying for available jobs at other companies. Respondent 2 was the only one who said that the post-assignment position would have no effect on his motivation to share. His international assignments were so different from his earlier job within the company so when he returned to his previous position he thought of it more as a job rotation. Respondent 1 did not quite agree with Lazarova and Tarique’s statement either and stated that motivation is highly individual and one can therefore not generalize and say that a higher position in terms of power and influence will motivate former expatriates to share their knowledge. Although, respondent 1 explained that company A used no formal or structural plan to exploit knowledge from expatriates, the company showed interest in the knowledge he had gained by recruiting him to a position that required international experience.

Possible post-assignment position was something the expatriates had to apply for themselves and it was only one respondent, Respondent 2, who chose to return to his former position within the company. Respondent 5 had an active dialog with the HR department during his international assignment concerning what position he would get upon his return but none of he other respondents had anything similar.

Similar to Lazarova and Tarique, Berthoin Antal (2001) state that expatriates are most likely to share when they are in a position of power. Our empirical findings seem to correspond to Berthoin Antal’s findings since all of our respondents except for one, received or were recommended to apply for positions which gave them more power and influence than they had before. It seems like giving homecoming expatriates or recommending them to apply for higher management positions is a way for the firm to show its appreciation but also a way for the company to retain and capitalize upon the expatriates’ international experience. Offering interesting positions upon the expatriates’ return seem vital to retain former expatriates and
respondent 3, 4, and 5 expressed that very clearly; no interesting post-assignment position equals no knowledge transfer.

The return position is also important from an organizational learning perspective. Berthoin Antal (2001) states that, expatriates returning to top management positions should use their status and power to influence the organization to become more supportive of sharing ideas and trying different working methods. Respondent 4 agrees with this statement and said that he tries to transfer and implement best practices from other countries all the time. His international experiences has taught him that doing business the Swedish way is not the only right way to run a business and his position as a managing director gives him adequate status and power to influence the organization to try new working methods.

“I get questions all the time and I try to transfer best practices from other countries and implement them in Sweden and thereby combining the best of both worlds”

Respondent 4 – Managing Director
5. Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter will present the conclusions of this study and discuss them in a wider context. Afterwards, the limitations and managerial implications will be discussed and suggestions for future research will be presented.

Firstly we conclude that formal mechanisms or structured programs to exploit knowledge from expatriates were not very common in the companies studied. Only one of the respondents claimed that he had undergone a structured form of exploiting knowledge by submitting formal reports regularly and through interviews with the HR department. The lack of structured programs and formal mechanisms was something that most respondents argued was a big impediment for knowledge transfer. But according to literature on knowledge management (e.g. Davenport & Pruska, 1998) an effective way of transferring knowledge is to let it be spontaneous and unstructured. Thus, the question is whether structured or formal ways of exploiting knowledge is really preferable. As mentioned earlier, respondent 5 wrote monthly formal reports which were sent back to his home organization but is this really a feasible solution for MNCs with hundreds of expatriates worldwide? Will someone have time to read through the considerable number of reports that would be handed in?

Secondly, we can conclude that although most MNCs did not use any formal programs or mechanisms to exploit expatriates’ knowledge, they were able to take advantage of it and capitalize upon it anyway by assigning former expatriates to suitable positions which required international experience. All of our respondents explained that they had been satisfied with the position they had gotten upon repatriation, but how they got it varied among the respondents. Respondent 5 had an active dialog with the home organization during his international assignment, where future career planning was one of the topics. The other respondents had to actively apply and search for positions within the organization before returning home. It seems like expatriates must take a lot of responsibility themselves when it comes to their careers and actively apply for positions of their liking. That a former expatriate will be handed a fun and challenging post-assignment should probably not be taken for granted.

Thirdly, we can conclude that our respondents view the lack of responsiveness from their colleagues as another big impediment to knowledge transfer and that even though their coworkers
were smart and educated, knowledge transfer only occurred when their coworkers demanded it or when it was relevant to their work.

Fourthly, we can conclude that, based on our empirical data, the corporate culture is important and that a strong corporate culture makes cultural differences between subsidiaries and countries/regions less apparent. Respondents 1 and 2 stated that even though the countries they were assigned to had different cultures than Sweden, the core values were still able to shine through. From a knowledge transfer perspective this is good news, since colleagues who share the same corporate culture can communicate better with each other and transfer knowledge more effectively than people who do not (Davenport & Prusak. 1998).

Although knowledge transfer might be more effective between colleagues who share the same corporate culture, Bender and Fisher (2000) state that organizations should reward their employees and give them incentives to share their knowledge and expertise. But in our empirical data, no incentives for sharing could be found except for the appreciation from fellow coworkers. Internal competition was also something we could not find strong proof of but it is of course possible that our respondents did not want to shed light on negative aspects of the firm they are employed by.

Lastly we conclude that debriefing sessions, according to our empirical data, vary depending on the size of the company, position of the expatriate, and the number of expatriates a firm has. Respondent 4 was the only one who had informal debriefing sessions with his supervisor in Sweden but this company is also somewhat smaller than the other companies. Informal reports might be the most optimal way to transfer knowledge during the assignment but depending on how many expatriates a firm has, informal debriefings might not be possible due to the vast number of expatriates. Hence, the more expatriates a firms has the less optimal informal debriefings will become. Since the number of expatriates is supposed to increase in the future (Bonache & Brewster, 2001) another solution will probably be needed.

5.1 Managerial Implications
As we have concluded knowledge transfer was unstructured and without formal mechanisms in many of the companies we investigated. We argue that maybe the lack of structured methods of transferring knowledge from expatriates could be proof of that structured ways of transferring
knowledge are not always preferable and maybe even an active choice. It could also be the result of the disinterest of expatriates’ knowledge.

As for managerial implications we think it is important that managers are aware of the difficulties in exploiting knowledge from expatriates, but that does not mean that they have to establish formal mechanisms of transferring expatriates’ knowledge. However, since some of the respondents claimed that there was a need for formal mechanisms, a possible solution might be to let the expatriates decide whether formal mechanisms should be used or not.

Another managerial implication is to promote knowledge sharing and socialization among employees. Expatriates gain mostly tacit knowledge during their international assignments and since tacit knowledge is hard to articulate and codify, it is therefore best transferred by letting employees socialize. As respondent 2 explained, “Indeed it would be good if one could have informal face-to-face meetings every time you wanted to communicate, but it’s not possible in practice”. So accordingly, assigning time for socialization could therefore be a possible solution and would also in line with the findings of Davenport and Prusak (1998), Nonaka (1991), as well as Riusala and Suutari (2004).

5.2 Limitations
We are aware that interviewing only five former Swedish expatriates will only give us a small hint of how MNCs deal with knowledge exploitation from expatriates and it is furthermore not likely that our empirical results will represent a hundred percent accurate picture. To do so a more extended and more profound study is needed. In our study we only interviewed five former expatriates and our the face-to-face interviews were only approximately 40 minutes long. We are aware that the empirical findings that we got in this study may very well be different if other expatriates from other companies were to be interviewed. However we see our study as a small study, giving a glimpse of how MNCs exploit and harvest knowledge from Swedish expatriates.

5.3 Future Research
As our study concerns Swedish expatriates we think it would be good if further research would investigate how expatriates from different nationalities experience that their knowledge is being exploited by MNCs. Since our study only focused on knowledge transfer from expatriates’ point
of view we think that doing a study from the MNC, e.g. the supervisors and/or the HR-department, as well as the expatriates’ point of view would be interesting as it would give a more complete picture by including multiple viewpoints.

Another interesting area for future research would be to focus on how expatriates returning from certain geographical areas effect the exploitation of knowledge from expatriates. Lastly we think it could be interesting to investigate whether expatriates twenty years ago experienced the repatriation differently compared to how expatriates experience it now. Since the number of expatriates is expected to increase in the future (Bonache & Brewster, 2001), this subject is highly topical and must not be neglected by researchers or practitioners.
6. References

*Articles*


Literature


Internet

The Economist

Interviews

Respondent 1, Director of Strategic Sourcing, Stockholm, 2011-05-03, Personal interview
Respondent 2, Supply and Sourcing Manager, Stockholm, 2011-05-03, Personal interview
Respondent 3, R&D Director, Stockholm, 2011-05-11, Personal interview
Respondent 4, Managing Director, 2011-05-12, Telephone interview
Respondent 5, Senior Project Manager, 2011-05-13, Email interview
Appendix 1 - Interview Questions

General information

- What training/education do you have?
- What did you work with before?
- How long have you been working in the company?
- What positions have you had within the company?
- What is your current position?
- What kind of international assignment have you had? How long were you working as an expat? How many times have you been working as an expat? How many years in total?

Knowledge transfers

- Have you heard about knowledge transfer before? What does knowledge transfer imply here at the company?
- Does the company have any formal or/and structural program to exploit and harvest the knowledge and experience gained by expatriates?
- Are there any formal mechanisms in the process of exploit and harvest the knowledge and experience gained by expatriates?
- Does the company use any method to measure knowledge transfer?
- Do you feel that the company exploit and harvest the knowledge and experience you have gained as an expat? If yes, how have the company applied your knowledge in a context?
- Do you feel that the company shows interest in what kind of knowledge and experience you have gained as an expat?
- Did you write any report once you were repatriated concerning your international assignment?
- Did you get any opportunity or occasion to hold lectures or talks about your experiences from the international assignment?
- According to you what obstacles and hinders for knowledge transfer exist within the company?
- Does your company have some kind of mentoring program, where young employees are assigned to senior employees?
From your experience and point of view what do you think the company could do/change to achieve better knowledge transfer from expatriates?

**Knowledge characteristics**

- Do you find it difficult to express and explain the knowledge you have gained as an expat?
- What kind of knowledge is being transferred within the company (tacit/explicit)? What does that process look like?
- What are the most important experiences and knowledge you have learned during your time abroad?
- Do you feel like you have a great deal of knowledge that could be useful for the company but you do not know how to transfer it?

**Corporate culture**

- How does the organizational structure look like?
- Is the internal (including vertical) communication good?
- Is the company strongly hierarchal?
- Is the company centralized or decentralized?
- What does the company culture look like? Do you believe the company culture promote or impede knowledge transfer from expatriates?
- Do you think internal competition exists within the company that impedes knowledge transfer?
- Do you think the corporate culture is important?

**Expatriates**

- Do you know how many expatriates from your company are being sent on international assignments per year?
- How long time did it take for you to acclimatize yourself to the new surroundings in the company when you were repatriated?
- According to you, what could be done to motivate expatriates to share their knowledge they have gained to the rest of the company?
• Do you feel satisfied with the repatriation process? Is there anything that the company could have been done better?

Debriefing

• During the time you were on your international assignment did you have any regular contact with HQ for debriefing? If yes, with whom? What was discussed? What did that process look like?
• During the time you were on your international assignment, did you at any time go back home in work relating purpose?

Post-assignments position

• What kind of position within the company does expatriates usually get when repatriated?
• What kind of position within the company did you get when you came back home after your international assignment? Where you satisfied with the position you where handed? Was it a position you expected? Do you feel that you can make use of the knowledge and experience you gained on you international assignment in you current position today? If yes, in what way?
• Did you apply actively for a post-assignment position during your international assignment or were your position already known? When did you find out what kind of position you would when repatriating?
• Would you say that your post assignment position gave you more power/influence?
• Would you say that you are motivated to share your knowledge and experiences with coworkers or other employees? If not, what would motivate you to share your knowledge and experiences?
• What if you supposedly hadn’t received a position you had been pleased with upon return, do you think that would have had a negative effect on your attitude towards sharing knowledge and experiences?