

**The facilitation of repatriate knowledge transfer:  
Which human resource management processes are effective?**

Abstract

This study aimed to identify effective human resource management processes for the facilitation of repatriate knowledge transfer. In order to generate multiple perspectives, repatriates as well as human resource managers from five German multinational companies were interviewed. The results indicate that successful repatriate knowledge transfer requires effective cooperation between the human resource management department and line management, as well as integrated management of the expatriation-repatriation cycle. Moreover, concrete 'best practice' human resource management processes have been identified. These human resource management processes confirm the relevance of seven human resource management practices for the facilitation of repatriate knowledge transfer during the whole expatriation-repatriation cycle: selection and staffing, internal communication, training, job design, performance appraisal, compensation and rewards, and career development.

**Keywords:** International human resource management; knowledge management; organizational learning; repatriate knowledge transfer; repatriation.

The importance of knowledge as the key resource for companies in order to gain and sustain competitive advantage has long been established (Barney, 1991; Drucker, 1969, 1992). Tacit knowledge in particular described as complex, rich, context dependent, and person bound, plays a central role in providing companies with a competitive edge, because this kind of knowledge is difficult to imitate by others (Barney, 1991). Due to the fact that tacit knowledge resides within individuals, human resources have been identified as the central intangible asset in today's global economy (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000).

Research has shown that the type of knowledge gained by employees who are sent on international assignments, fulfils these criteria and could therefore provide companies with a competitive edge (Fink & Meierewert, 2005; Oddou et al., 2013). International assignees certainly do acquire explicit knowledge, namely technical facts about local markets, customer preferences, customs of business operations, and cultural differences. However, and more importantly, they also develop tacit knowledge and skills, such as a more global mindset, improved management and language competencies, and extended global networks (Berthoin Antal, 2000; Fink & Meierewert, 2005; Oddou et al., 2013). Hence, the knowledge of international assignees could be used to improve global business operations if companies were able to effectively extract their knowledge, and disseminate it within the organizational network (Baruch et al., 2009; Stahl, Chua, Caligiuri, Cerdin, & Taniguchi, 2009). Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001, p. 390) pointed out that repatriates could play an "irreplaceable role in organizational learning, given that they can accelerate the transfer of knowledge from host countries to headquarters, and vice versa."

Surprisingly, only a few studies advance an organizational learning perspective when researching repatriation (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). The majority of the traditional global

mobility literature has focused on repatriation from a socio-psychological perspective and addressed topics like cross-cultural adjustment and psychological well-being (Fink & Meierewert, 2005; Kamoche, 1997; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). However, this approach neglects the long-term potential of repatriate knowledge as a strategic asset for organizational learning. In addition, the socio-psychological perspective is less valued by practitioners, who are more interested in answering concrete questions about the return on their investments (McEvoy & Buller, 2013). Therefore, researchers have called for a more competency-based view of repatriation that addresses the needs of academics and practitioners alike (Downes & Thomas, 1999; Harvey & Novicevic, 2006; McEvoy & Buller, 2013; Riusala & Suutari, 2004).

Consequently, this study aimed to make an important contribution in bridging this gap between researchers and practitioners. In order to identify ‘best practice’ human resource management (HRM) processes for the facilitation of repatriate knowledge transfer (RKT), repatriates (i.e., employees who have returned to their domestic work unit from a company-initiated international assignment) and HR managers from five multinational German companies have been interviewed. The study builds on findings from previous research, which has shown that certain HRM practices are highly relevant for the facilitation of knowledge transfer behavior (e.g., Minbaeva, Pedersen, Bjoerkman, Fey, & Jeong, 2003).

## **Literature review**

### **The impact of HRM on RKT**

Due to the fact that this paper focuses on RKT, hence knowledge transfer in the context of repatriation, one might assume that this analysis will be limited to the impact of HRM practices on knowledge transfer behavior after the return of repatriates. However, the authors follow previous research that has highlighted the need to understand expatriation and repatriation as an

integrated process (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Harvey & Novicevic, 2006; McEvoy & Buller, 2013). For example, Berthoin Antal (2001) emphasized that the expatriation cycle needs to be extended in order to include the elements of the reentry process. In addition, Harvey and Novicevic (2006) argued that three dimensions of the expatriation-repatriation cycle should be distinguished, namely pre-expatriation, during expatriation, and upon repatriation. This paper will follow this idea of an integrated expatriation-repatriation cycle, and analyze which HRM practices are relevant for the facilitation of RKT: before, during, and after international assignments.

As a starting point for the review of the literature, Huselid's (1995) widely accepted framework of 'High Performance Work Practices' was utilized to analyze the literature under the headings of these seven HRM practices: Selection and staffing, training, career development, job design, performance appraisal, compensation and rewards, and internal communication. Second, we reviewed the literature on knowledge transfer as well as on expatriation and repatriation and aimed to identify evidence about the effectiveness of the listed HRM practices for the facilitation of knowledge transfer behavior. The empirical evidence for the relevance of each of the seven HRM practices in this context will now be presented in detail because they will also serve as categories for the content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013; Mayring, 2010).

**Selection and staffing.** Caligiuri (2014) has highlighted that selection should be considered in the context of knowledge transfer behavior because some individual differences, such as personality, cannot easily be changed. In particular, the selection of international assignees should take into account individual characteristics, such as personality traits and other competencies that go beyond technical skills (Baruch, Steele, & Quantrill, 2002; Deller, 1997; Gupta, Singh, Kaushik, & Bhatt, 2013). In their conceptual article, Bonache and Zárraga-Oberty (2008) supported this argument, and concluded that international assignees are more effective

knowledge senders if they are selected for certain additional factors, such as personality characteristics. Additionally, researching 92 subsidiaries of Danish multinational corporations, Minbaeva (2005) found that staffing influenced the motivation and ability of knowledge receivers and was positively and significantly related to knowledge transfer outcomes.

**Training.** According to Szkudlarek (2010), training was one of the most often mentioned HRM practices in the reentry literature. Minbaeva et al. (2003) found that training, measured in terms of training days received, showed a significant relationship to employees' ability to receive knowledge that in turn affected knowledge transfer outcomes. Additionally, Cabrera and Cabrera (2005) highlighted that extensive training, including cross-team training and formalized orientation programs, can be used to build employees' confidence in their abilities and in turn foster knowledge transfer. Moreover, and due to a potential 'reverse cultural shock' often experienced by repatriates when reentering their work unit (Oddou, Osland, & Blakeney, 2009b), cross-cultural training has also been identified as an important training initiative to ease reintegration (Inkson, Arthur, Pringle, & Barry, 1997).

**Career development.** Suutari and Brewster (2003) highlighted that one of the most relevant topics for repatriates is the career impact of their international assignments. Thus, most international assignees seem to expect that their expatriation experience be part of a career path development (Baruch et al., 2002). Successful career development processes that address this need might include pre-departure career discussions, mentoring during the entire expatriation-repatriation cycle, and integrated career planning (Furuya, Stevens, Bird, Oddou, & Mendenhall, 2009; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Suutari & Brewster, 2003). Career development practices that are structured and integrate the international assignments into the career plans of international

assignees seem to have a relevant impact on their motivation to transfer knowledge (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007).

**Job design.** Job design seems to be relevant at two points of the expatriation-repatriation cycle. First, clarity about the purpose of the international assignment itself can positively influence repatriates' ability to focus on knowledge that is relevant to the domestic work unit and therefore can be more easily transferred after reentry (Black & Gregersen, 1999; Harvey & Novicevic, 2006; Welch & Steen, 2013). Second, the design of the reentry job seems to be of utmost importance for knowledge transfer. For example, Berthoin Antal (2001) showed that position power (i.e., hierarchical positioning of the reentry job) increased repatriates' ability to transfer their knowledge upon return. Additionally, position responsibilities that were related to repatriates' international experience made the knowledge more relevant to the employees in the domestic work unit and therefore increased their motivation to receive knowledge (Oddou, Osland, & Blakeney, 2009a).

**Performance appraisal.** Bonache and Zárrega-Oberty (2008) argued that performance evaluation criteria need to emphasize the importance of knowledge transfer, otherwise repatriates might perceive the time spent on knowledge transfer as conflicting with their other job responsibilities. In addition, Minbaeva et al. (2003) found that performance appraisal was positively related to employees' ability to receive knowledge. Therefore, well-designed performance evaluation systems can positively impact both the motivation and ability of repatriates and employees from the domestic work unit to share and receive knowledge.

**Compensation and rewards.** With regard to compensation and rewards, it has been argued that financial as well as non-financial benefits might motivate knowledge sharing and receiving behavior (Bonache & Zárrega-Oberty, 2008; Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005; Huang, Chiu, & Lu,

2013). For example, Cabrera and Cabrera (2005) reported the effective use of awards to increase knowledge sharing motivation, while Minbaeva et al. (2003) demonstrated a link between performance-based compensation and motivation to receive knowledge. Moreover, Wilkesmann, Fischer, and Wilkesmann (2009) investigated the impact of external incentives on the motivation of Chinese and German employees to share their knowledge and found positive relationships, particularly incentives such as non-financial recognition and appreciation by colleagues and superordinates.

**Internal communication.** Research has shown that opportunities for interaction between knowledge senders and recipients positively influence their relationship, which in turn supports knowledge transfer behavior (Crowne, 2009; Huang et al., 2013). These opportunities are often associated with internal communication activities. For instance, Huang et al. (2013) reported the significant impact of company newsletters and more informal meeting areas on knowledge sharing behavior, and Minbaeva et al. (2003) showed that more frequent internal communication positively influenced knowledge receiving motivation. Finally, not only the existence but also the richness of transmission channels might have a positive impact on knowledge transfer behavior (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005).

In summary, the existing research evidence demonstrates that RKT can be facilitated by HRM using specific practices. Nevertheless, organizations still seem to lack effective tools for the retrieval of repatriate knowledge (Oddou et al., 2009b). For example, Berthoin Antal (2001) found out that only half of respondents reported that their companies had put procedures in place to facilitate RKT. Consequently, while it seems to be common knowledge that specific HRM practices can enable successful RKT, organizations seem to struggle with the implementation of effective HRM practices. Therefore, this study aims to identify effective HRM practices for the

facilitation of RKT by interviewing the most knowledgeable and affected groups with regards to global mobility practices, namely HR managers and repatriates. Moreover, concrete and viable recommendations for the implementation of these identified HRM practices shall be derived. Work in the literature is usually limited to the HRM practice level (Caligiuri, 2014; Minbaeva, Pedersen, Bjoerkman, & Fey, 2014), however in this study we will focus on HRM processes that facilitate RKT, thus adding a more detailed perspective to the discussion. We build on Armstrong (2006), who defined HRM processes as the formal procedures and methods used to put HRM practices into action.

## **Method**

### **Sample and data collection**

In this qualitative study, 20 interviews with repatriates ( $n = 12$ ) and HR managers ( $n = 8$ ) from Germany were conducted. The interviews were discontinued once the researchers realized that a certain level of saturation had been achieved, and completely new insights were no longer emerging from the data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Respondents came from five different multinational companies that operated in the energy industry ( $n = 4$ ), finance ( $n = 3$ ), industrial goods ( $n = 6$ ), information technology ( $n = 2$ ), and the professional services industry ( $n = 5$ ). The researchers intended to generate a diverse sample in terms of industries that are relevant in the German context. Companies were selected based on their size and the numbers of international assignees they expatriated and repatriated per year in order to ensure that they had profound experience and achieved a high level of professionalism in managing international assignments. Participating companies were asked to identify repatriates who had been on international assignment for at least twelve months, and who had returned to the domestic work unit within the previous five years, to ensure that relevant RKT experiences had not already faded from



memory. In addition, at least one HR manager from the global mobility department of each company was interviewed to account for their potentially different perspectives. A few of these HR managers ( $n = 2$ ) also had expatriation and repatriation experiences. The sample was balanced in terms of gender, as ten participants reported to be female and ten participants reported to be male. The average age of participants was 41.26 years ( $SD = 8.77$ ). The average length of the international assignments of the repatriates had been 31.92 months ( $SD = 25.41$ ), and on average they had returned to their domestic work unit 32.08 months previously ( $SD = 27.06$ ).

The interviews were conducted between April and December 2014 and lasted for 60 minutes. The majority of the interviews were conducted via telephone ( $n = 15$ ), whereas a limited number of interviews were done in person at the workplace of the respondents ( $n = 5$ ). This was dependent on the individual preferences of the interviewees. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guideline and respondents were asked to reflect on their personal experiences with the HRM support provided before, during, and after the international assignments. Thus, the status quo of HRM support with regard to international assignments was retrieved. As a next step, interviewees were asked to recount examples of ‘best practice’ HRM processes that they were aware of and, further, to suggest ideas how the HRM practices should ideally be implemented in order to facilitate RKT.

### **Data analysis**

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Twenty interview transcripts were available for analysis. A content analysis following Krippendorff (2013) and Mayring (2010) was conducted. The interview transcripts were analyzed using MAXQDA 11 and the text paraphrases were assigned to categories. Initially, these categories were formed deductively and reflected the

seven HRM practices that had been derived from the review of the existing literature: selection and staffing, training, career development, job design, performance appraisal, compensation and rewards, internal communication. Sub-categories represented HRM processes, and these were allowed to emerge from the data. However, in order to incorporate the breadth of insights from the accounts of repatriates and HR managers, the researchers realized that an additional category, namely general observations (i.e., types of knowledge, lack of professionalism, and lack of cooperation) needed to be included as part of the category system (Table 1). In order to ensure the intersubjectivity of the final category system, two different researchers, who are experts in the field, also assigned the text phrases to the categories. The intercoder reliability using the macro KALPHA was calculated and was found to be satisfactory at  $\alpha = .73$  (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

[Please insert Table 1 here]

## **Results**

The results will be presented in the following order: First, the value and the types of repatriate knowledge acquired abroad are presented. Second, companies' lack of professionalism in retrieving this kind of knowledge is emphasized. This includes the difficulties that the actors involved must cooperate effectively and that the responsibilities for different HRM processes must be defined clearly. Third, the examples of 'best practice' HRM processes (i.e., the main body of evidence), which demonstrate the relevance of the seven HRM practices for the facilitation of RKT, is presented. Overall, these results stress that expatriation and repatriation should be managed as an integrated cycle.

**The value and types of repatriate knowledge**

Repatriates emphasized their steep learning curve while abroad and the value of the different types of knowledge they acquired. These types of knowledge included explicit as well as implicit aspects. Explicit knowledge included an understanding of the local markets, customers, and suppliers that could be used to generate more interlinked business opportunities between the different countries. Implicit knowledge included the following aspects: more global networks, more fine-grained intercultural knowledge, improved social skills, and a more global mindset. Based on this implicit knowledge, repatriates often acted as mediators between employees from different countries, they were able to manage diversity more effectively, and contributed their global perspective to issues that involved foreign countries. One repatriate emphasized the value of repatriate knowledge for the company in the following way:

And it is about finding these hidden pearls and diamonds. But only the one who has worked on these pearls and diamonds can also bring them back. So, and this knowledge is precious and you have to try to retain this knowledge and maybe apply it in a different context in a different country, where exactly this knowledge might be needed – if they only knew that this knowledge is available. (Repatriate, industrial goods)

**Lack of professionalism and lack of cooperation**

Repatriates and HR managers agreed that the lack of an integrated concept for the management of the complete expatriation-repatriation cycle was a sign of limited professionalism. One HR manager highlighted that harvesting repatriate knowledge was not focused upon and therefore not managed effectively:

My impression is that in Germany, only very few consider what can be gained from it [international assignment] afterwards. What is in it for the organization beyond the

performance abroad? Do I have a similar effect again after the assignment? (HR manager, energy)

In addition, the distribution of responsibilities for specific HRM processes amongst the different actors of the organization was unclear. These actors were the different HRM departments (e.g., global mobility, talent management, and employee development), line management, and top management. Repatriates and HR managers highlighted the limited clarity about responsibilities and the lack of strategic integration of their activities:

The levers for an effective transfer are that you have to have a real concept, a concept about: How do I start the assignment, what happens in between, and how do I start the reintegration? For this you need clear instructions and responsibilities. (Repatriate, professional services)

First, HR managers reported that they had limited discretion in influencing if and how the knowledge of repatriates was retrieved by line management after their return. While HR managers felt responsible for managing the reflection and feedback on the administrative repatriation process, they saw line management in the lead when it came to harvesting repatriate knowledge:

This is something the business needs to do. We from HR do a debriefing, but not a content-related debriefing. (HR manager, energy)

Yes, that is true, we encourage people to do this but we can only encourage, we cannot force someone. (HR manager, industrial goods)

However, different repatriates and HR managers suggested that the HRM department should be responsible for providing guidelines for line management about how the process should be managed:

Absolutely - that is not the job of HR. HR needs to have a process, for this...how you ensure that knowledge transfer actually happens and then the job of HR is done.

(Repatriate, industrial goods)

I think that HR can only set up a tool or a structure of how to retrieve this knowledge but the actual doing, the responsibility for the transfer of the knowledge, should lie with the business. I could see HR developing a tool that is then made available to the whole organization. (HR manager, finance)

Second, respondents asked themselves whether involving different HRM functions to support the global mobility department when appropriate, as well as clear-cut handover points between the different actors could help to professionalize the management of international assignments. HR managers and repatriates mentioned the need for an effective involvement of other HRM functions, such as talent management and employee development:

That is something that we could improve with talent management and also want to improve. That would at least be my vision for the future, we generate more transparency about what kind of people with which qualifications sit where, in order to better support the selection process. (HR manager, energy)

On the one side the supervisor conducts the assessment but I think it would also be helpful if, additionally, the people development would also ensure that they are in intense contact. They could assess how the expectation of the assignee has changed, what he expects from the future. (Repatriate, industrial goods)

**Identification of ‘best practice’ HRM processes for the facilitation of RKT**

None of the interviewed companies reported having installed an integrated ‘best practice’ process for the management of the complete expatriation-repatriation cycle in order to facilitate RKT. Nevertheless, it was clear from the responses of the interviewees that certain HRM processes were regarded as well performing in this respect. Consequently, the researchers decided to combine the responses of the HR managers and repatriates from the five different companies, in order to show which HRM processes are most generally considered ‘best practice’ amongst the seven identified HRM practices. The order in which the seven HR practices are presented follows the count of category frequencies presented in Table 1. The most frequently mentioned HR practices are presented first.

**Selection and staffing.** Interviewees agreed that the selection of the right people for international assignments would not only affect the success of the expatriate assignment itself but also lead to a higher probability of RKT after the reentry of the repatriates into the domestic work unit. First, interviewees emphasized that a ‘best practice’ selection of expatriates would have to start with transparent and easily accessible advertisement of the available global positions. Second, expatriates should not be selected on an adhoc basis but on the basis of a thorough assessment that follows the companies’ usual standards:

Previously, the decision was very much dependent on the head of the division, they said: ‘Ok, so and so shall be sent abroad next month.’ This was not very transparent for the other employees but nowadays and in 80% of the cases, we are able to advertise positions, run a normal selection process with different applicants for the positions that have been advertised, and finally the best applicant gets the job. (HR manager, energy)

Third, these assessments should test for the following selection criteria: the motivation of the assignee, the technical expertise of the assignee, and the personal and intercultural competences of the assignee. While the first two selection criteria were already included at most interviewed companies, the third criterion – personal and intercultural competences – was acknowledged as highly significant but so far seldom assessed:

We have many technicians and experts that might not be able or well suited to work in and adjust to Egypt or Libya. You cannot go there with your German mindset, and there are assignments that have failed because they did not have the soft skills. (HR manager, industrial goods)

**Internal communication.** HR managers and repatriates agreed that the mechanisms of internal communication can be used to advance RKT by creating awareness and transparency about the value of repatriate knowledge for the organization:

I think that you should create more transparency and awareness. This would support the knowledge transfer process because it raises the awareness of supervisors and colleagues. (Repatriate, professional services)

Three effective communication processes were mentioned, which can be distinguished based on their timing: enabling contact with the domestic work unit during the international assignment, advertizing the newly acquired expertise of repatriates before and upon their return, as well as establishing an expert database that allows potential knowledge recipients to reach out to repatriates after their return.

First, interviewees emphasized that regular contact with the domestic work unit members during the international assignment facilitated knowledge transfer during the assignment and helped assignees to feel more connected to their colleagues at home. In addition, potential

knowledge recipients became familiar with the value of the knowledge of the assignees for concrete questions and tasks. This exchange was enabled by joint work projects or regular conference calls with the assignee. One repatriate remembered the value of this contact as follows:

I think it is a good thing. Particularly, if you have been abroad for a longer period you can directly feedback your information and experiences on an adhoc basis. If you have come back after a while, you might have forgotten some things. If you extract the present information, you can probably get more out of it. (Repatriate, information technology)

Second, interviewees reported the value of accompanying the return of repatriates with announcements in newsletters, company newspapers, and other existing internal communication outlets. Accordingly, these announcements triggered the interest of potential knowledge recipients, and were helpful conversation starters:

We do announce that the return of employees, they usually come back at the end of the month and at the beginning of the month we have our employee news that we published on the intranet. We announce how long the employee has been away and where he was located. (Repatriate, energy)

Third, interviewees agreed that some form of an expert or knowledge database, which includes the knowledge and expertise of international assignees and repatriates, can enable potential knowledge recipients to conveniently access repatriate knowledge insofar as it can be codified. In order to build such database, repatriates would need to create reports or summarize their codifiable knowledge as frequently asked questions (FAQs), as highlighted in the following two quotes:



I would have liked to create FAQs for the benefit of my colleagues. Oftentimes it was about the right contact person in Canada or the different project plans. (Repatriate, professional services)

And anyways, I think it would be helpful to have a database or contacts, so that you could contact the different people. And you would not have to look for the knowledge yourself, but you would have a platform or something where you can locate the relevant information easily. (Repatriate, information technology)

**Training.** With regards to the type of training provided by the organization, the interviewees emphasized the importance of three HRM processes in order to facilitate RKT. First, the relevance of an administrative reintegration briefing was highlighted both for the global mobility managers to receive feedback about how the support during the international assignment had been perceived by the repatriates, and also to establish and clarify how the reentry process would be managed. The administrative reintegration briefing was managed by HR and the expatriate was invited to participate about three months before the planned reentry. This type of debriefing session was described by HR managers as follows:

We look at, what went well, what needs to be improved. How did the overall process work? Well, that you reflect on the assignment itself. (HR manager, industrial goods)

We do conduct a detailed briefing with the repatriate, in order to really define, who does what during the repatriation process, what are the responsibilities and also to keep him updated about what is going on. (HR manager, energy)

Second, depending on the length of the international assignment and the cultural distance to Germany as the domestic country, HR managers and repatriates agreed that intercultural

reintegration training could help repatriates to adjust more quickly and smoothly to their domestic environment. Thus, a 'reverse cultural shock' might be buffered or prevented, and consequently a less disruptive and difficult cultural adjustment process might facilitate RKT. Interviewees agreed that an assignment within Europe, which did not last longer than two years, would not warrant intercultural reintegration training:

If someone has only been abroad for one or two years, then it might not be so dramatic yet.

(Repatriate, industrial goods)

I would not have needed a cultural debriefing and I think that it is not really necessary for a relatively short assignment in a European country. (Repatriate, finance)

However, repatriates who came back from an assignment that was conducted outside of Europe and that lasted for more than two years could benefit from an intercultural training upon their return.

Third, and most importantly for the facilitation of RKT, the interviewees suggested that a structured and knowledge-related debriefing session would be helpful after the reentry of the repatriates. This debriefing could be initiated by HR; however, business and line management would need to take the main responsibility for the assessment of the value of the repatriate knowledge for the domestic organization. This is highlighted by the following two quotes:

First, to ask the returning person: 'How did it go? What happened? What has changed?

What did you learn? And then as a next step, decide how the reintegration [of the knowledge] into the organization will be done. (Repatriate, industrial goods)

Well, to have transparency, otherwise he [the supervisor] does not really know what the new employee's capabilities are and what he learned while being abroad. (Repatriate, energy)

**Job design.** With regards to job design, HR managers and repatriates reported that the job design process should ideally include the following three elements: Involvement of assignee, match with the knowledge gained during the international assignment, and a timely and structured search process for a suitable position. First, an effective job design process would have to involve the returning assignees and ask them about their needs and wishes with regards to their repatriate job:

For me that would be a very normal question, that is how I know it, that you ask that person: 'In which direction do you want to develop, in which other areas would you maybe like to work in the future.' (Repatriate, industrial goods)

Second, interviewees pointed out that RKT would be made easier if an overlap between the jobs during the international assignment and after the return of the repatriate into the domestic work unit existed. For example, repatriates would be able to apply and transfer their newly acquired knowledge during joint work projects. However, repatriates were also conscious to mention that the overlap between jobs should not be too large in order to leave room for individual development. One HR manager assumed that the overlap between jobs should not exceed 50%, and the usefulness of an overlap was described by a repatriate in the following way:

An expat is so much richer in terms of so many things he experienced that he will definitely be able to contribute a lot – if the company pursues this and retrieves this knowledge. As a starting point, it is probably good if there is an overlap, for sure. (Repatriate, industrial goods)

Finally, another crucial element of the job design process was the timely and structured search for a suitable position. HR managers and repatriates were very clear that securing a job for repatriates only four weeks before their return was too late and not professional, and would lead to high insecurity and dissatisfaction among repatriates. The proposals for when the search process should be kicked-off by HR, ranged between six and twelve months before the return of the assignees. One HR manager even argued that they aimed to finish the search process eight months before the return of the assignees. In addition, HR managers highlighted that an effective process required the timely involvement of line managers, and the clear message that finding a suitable position was a business responsibility; HR could only support the process. The structured and timely process was described in the following way:

In HR, we have a list of all assignments and return dates of the expats. This list is shared once a month with all senior managers, managerial board and one level down, and nine months before someone's assignment contract ends, that person becomes orange in the list. Six months before the end of the contract the name turns red. Additionally, once a month we meet with these managers, not the top management but the senior managers, and we go through the list, per country, and we talk about what the potential job opportunities for that person could be – from the business perspective.[...] This includes defining who is actually responsible for finding a job, and who talks to the employee. From an HR perspective, we make sure that these employees receive the necessary attention, and that that nobody is forgotten. (HR manager, energy)

**Performance appraisal.** HR managers and repatriates were not convinced that including the extent of RKT as a 'hard' performance criterion for repatriates, should or even could be used to facilitate RKT. One issue that was raised was how the extent of RKT could be measured in a fair

way, because the type of acquired knowledge and the willingness of the domestic work unit to acquire that knowledge will most likely differ. Therefore, a quantitative criterion might be difficult to define, as emphasized in the following quote:

I cannot think of anything, an explicit criterion...implicit, yes because...On the other hand, the company wants to get something out of it after the assignment but you cannot measure this with an explicit criterion, it is different story for every individual. (Repatriate, finance)

However, while the implementation of 'hard' performance criteria was not seen as effective, interviewees agreed that there could be 'soft' approaches to facilitate RKT. In essence, it was argued that the definition and communication of expectations by line management before the start of the international assignment could be an effective approach to linking performance management and RKT success. Line management would have to specify their expectations with regard to the acquisition and transfer of knowledge that could be useful to the domestic work unit upon return, as one repatriate emphasized:

I would do this, I would sit down with them [the assignees] and say: 'Please, if you are coming back, we will look at what you have learned in detail and everything that you have learned will be integrated into the company. That is completely straightforward to me. (Repatriate, industrial goods)

**Compensation and rewards.** Similar to the dismissal of measuring the extent of RKT with 'hard' performance criteria, interviewees agreed that it is not necessary to financially compensate repatriates for their knowledge transfer behavior. Moreover, they even pointed out that financial compensation could be detrimental, because its effect wears off quickly and repatriates might

even feel offended, as they are generally already motivated to transfer their knowledge without additional compensation.

Actually, I think it is similar to performance. I have thought about this but compensating this [RKT] is hard to imagine. (HR manager, energy)

Not for sitting down with my colleagues and training my colleagues and transferring my knowledge. I do not need 3.50€ on top for this. That is not important to me. (Repatriate, industrial goods)

However, rewards that were of interest to repatriates were fairly basic: recognition and visibility within the organization. One repatriate emphasized the relevance of being recognized for performance abroad and the value of the acquired knowledge in the following way:

The appreciation is part of being taken seriously. That someone says: ‘Somebody comes back with a lot of valuable experiences.’ The appreciation is worth a lot more than money. (Repatriate, industrial goods)

In addition, repatriates welcomed the opportunity to present their newly acquired knowledge and their personal experiences in front of a wider audience to gain visibility, as highlighted in this quote:

Or that I could have given the presentation in front of all departments. Naturally, you have to assess how relevant the information is for these departments but you could have adjusted it. (Repatriate, professional services)

**Career development.** Finally, regarding the link between effective career development processes and the facilitation of RKT, interviewees agreed that a transparent and structured outlook on the impact of the international assignment on their careers would keep repatriates

committed and motivated. It became clear from the responses of the interviewees that repatriates expected a promotion or career advancement after their return and that a mere job guarantee was not good enough:

In this case, the head of the division promised her that she could return to the exact same job, when she comes back. But I asked myself: ‘Why is he sending her abroad then in the first place?’ (HR manager, professional services)

In addition, it was suggested that companies should implement a scenario management process for the career development of each international assignee. This process would require that HR managers and line managers develop career scenarios for each assignee before their departure. However, this would not involve the concrete definition of a job but only the outline of a potential career track. The scenarios should be discussed and validated each year during the course of the international assignment, and consequently adjusted if the assignee developed differently from what was expected. As a result, the transition from career development to job design upon the return of repatriates could be managed more smoothly:

We have to develop a scenario, HR managers and line managers, about what could happen after the repatriation. And a scenario does not include the exact definition of a concrete job in a department but a scenario means: ‘Managerial track? Expert track? What happens with this employee? Is he going back to his old job? Can you anticipate that the finance expert transitions into controlling after the assignment?’ [...] That is why one should also talk to the employee about this: ‘From today’s standpoint, we think that this and that could happen, under these conditions.’ And once a year, you have to validate the scenario. (HR manager, energy)

**The expatriation-repatriation cycle and effective HRM practices and processes**

As a result of the empirical findings presented above, an expatriation-repatriation cycle was developed, which is displayed in Figure 1. This framework shows that expatriation and repatriation should be managed as two elements of an integrated process. In addition, Table 2 displays which HRM practices and processes can be effective enablers of RKT during the three phases of international assignments, namely before (i.e., home country position), during (i.e., expatriation), and after the assignment (i.e., repatriation). Accordingly, HRM needs to address selection and staffing, career development, and performance appraisal before the assignment. Internal communication and job design become relevant enablers for RKT during the assignment. Finally, compensation and rewards, specific aspects of internal communication, and training become focus areas for HRM after the repatriates' assignment.

[Please insert Figure 1 here]

[Please insert Table 2 here]

**Discussion**

This paper aimed to identify the most effective HRM processes for the facilitation of RKT. In contrast to previous studies that also acknowledged the impact of HRM practices on knowledge transfer outcomes (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Minbaeva, 2005; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Oddou et al., 2013), the results are grounded in empirical data, and not merely byproducts of the main findings, nor based solely on theoretical reasoning. The contribution of this article is twofold. First, the results show that successful RKT requires effective cooperation between the different HRM functions that are involved during the expatriation and repatriation process, as well as between HR and line management. In addition, integrated management of the expatriation-



repatriation cycle that addresses the needs of international assignees before, during, and after the assignment is needed. Second, concrete examples of ‘best practice’ HRM processes were identified that confirmed the relevance of seven HRM practices for the facilitation of RKT: selection and staffing, internal communication, training, job design, performance appraisal, compensation and rewards, and career development.

In one of the first empirical articles on RKT, by Berthoin Antal (2001, p. 78), the author suggested that the “learning challenge facing organizations seeking to improve their expatriation processes is, in other words, less a matter of acquiring knowledge than of actually taking steps to use it.” Hence, it has been argued that expatriation and repatriation should be understood as two elements of the same integrated process (Baruch et al., 2002; Berthoin Antal, 2001; Harvey & Novicevic, 2006). The results of the current study support this insight and emphasize that international assignments should be managed as a structured and integrated process. Moreover, this paper went beyond the expatriation cycle of Berthoin Antal (2001) and introduced an expatriation-repatriation cycle that acknowledges which HRM practices and processes need to be offered before, during, and after the assignment (Table 2) in order to facilitate RKT.

This integrated perspective on international assignments can also be the starting point for rethinking the business case for global mobility. For a long time, researchers and practitioners have been aware of the high costs that are associated with expatriating and repatriating employees (Black & Gregersen, 1999; Handler & Lane, 1997; Inkson et al., 1997). These costs are easily quantifiable and directly affect the bottom line of the companies.

Conversely, the benefits of international assignments, for individual employees as well as the whole organization, are difficult to quantify and therefore often neglected (Welch & Steen, 2013). Doherty and Dickmann (2012) have even argued that measuring the return of investment

of international assignments is the ‘holy grail’ of global mobility. While the measurement is complicated, evidence of the benefits of international assignments exists and includes the positive impact on: turnover, retention, and performance (Doherty & Dickmann, 2012; Sparrow, 2006) as well as potential career and leadership opportunities (Doherty & Dickmann, 2012; Welch & Steen, 2013). In addition, the influence of expatriate knowledge transfer (Chang, Gong, & Peng, 2012; Fang, Jiang, Makino, & Beamish, 2010) and RKT (Furuya et al., 2009; Oddou et al., 2013) on the performance of subsidiaries and the domestic work unit has been outlined. Consequently, global mobility departments should aim to create managerial awareness about the duality of costs and benefits in order to receive strategic support. In addition, they need to have access to the appropriate data and software, and they require time and resources to develop new approaches to quantify the intangible benefits of international assignments.

### **Implications for practitioners**

This empirical study has aimed to contribute to bridging the gap between researchers in the field of international human resource management and practitioners who manage international assignments. The researchers think that practitioners can apply the results of this paper in several ways.

First, practitioners can use the findings as a starting point or a checklist for the evaluation of the effectiveness of their current management of repatriation and RKT. Initially, they would have to assess the status quo at their company with regards to the implementation of the seven identified and relevant HRM practices. Next, the HR managers can use the results of the study as ‘best practice examples’ and analyze the difference between their status quo and the ‘best practices’. This analysis might reveal areas where companies already do well managing repatriation and RKT. However, it might also lead to the identification of areas for concern,

where the company needs to improve the effectiveness of its HRM processes. In addition, the results of the study provide concrete recommendations in the form of ‘best practice’ HRM processes that facilitate RKT. Therefore, the results of the paper can be understood as a guide to the implementation of more effective HRM processes for the management of repatriation and RKT.

Second, the findings also emphasize that HR managers and line management might have to change the way they think about international assignments in order to increase the potential return on investments. The empirical findings indicated that most companies lack the awareness of the value of repatriate knowledge and therefore do not manage repatriation professionally. Oftentimes, expatriation and repatriation are separate and detached processes and cooperation between the actors involved is suboptimal. This could be addressed by managing international assignments as an integrated expatriation-repatriation cycle that requires the involvement of different actors (e.g., other HRM departments, line management) at different points in time in order to draw on their specific expertise (e.g., talent management). However, this also requires that the global mobility departments have the skills and discretion to define an integrated process for the management of international assignments, provide the relevant tools, and involve the other actors as needed.

### **Limitations**

The current results contribute to the understanding of the type of HRM processes that are relevant for the effective facilitation of RKT; however, based on the design of the qualitative study, some limitations need to be acknowledged. First, only German repatriates and HR managers were interviewed. This limits the cross-cultural applicability of these findings to countries from different geographic areas, and especially countries with more emerging

economies. Repatriates and HR managers from less developed countries might face different challenges, and this could impact their perceptions of effective HRM support. Second, the data was collected from multinational companies with profound experience in expatriating and repatriating employees. Thus, small and medium-sized companies with only limited experience with international assignments might think differently about the ways in which RKT should be facilitated. Third, due to the interview methodology used, these results should be interpreted as a only a first indication about the most relevant HRM processes for the facilitation of RKT, based on a qualitative approach with a correspondingly limited sample size.

### **Implications for future research**

First, researchers might be able to integrate the current results into their existing theoretical models that depict the interplay between a great variety of the variables which have been proposed to influence RKT success (Bonache & Zárraga-Oberty, 2008; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Oddou et al., 2009b). HRM practices and processes can be included into these existing theoretical models as an organizational level or contextual variable. Thereby, these models would be expanded to the organizational level.

Second, the identification of relevant HRM processes and not only HRM practices, allows for a more nuanced view of the type of HRM support that is needed in the context of repatriation and RKT. For example, future research could test the current qualitative results with larger samples and in different cultural contexts to assess their generalizability. However, this step would be dependent on the prior development of a RKT support scale that reliably and validly measures the construct at hand (Schriesheim, Powers, Scandura, Gardiner, & Lankau, 1993).

Finally, the current paper includes the perspectives of both repatriates and HR managers. With regards to an even more detailed understanding of the challenges in terms of the cooperation

between HR and line management, it might be interesting to collect data on the perspectives of line managers. Their standpoint might help to clarify what kind of support they expect from global mobility departments and where they feel responsible for certain outcomes, as well as how the handover points between the different actors could be managed more effectively.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study demonstrate that much can be gained if companies do not deprive themselves of the newly acquired knowledge of international assignees. However, global mobility departments need to manage expatriation and repatriation as an integrated process and involve other HRM departments as well as line management much more effectively. Finally, this paper offers concrete recommendations for how HRM practices can be implemented in order to facilitate RKT. Therefore, it advances an organizational learning perspective.

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Table 1. *Category system and frequencies of the content analysis*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Frequencies</b>
<b>General observations</b>		<b>24%</b>
	Lack of cooperation between HR/business	10%
	Lack of professionalism	8%
	Value and type of repatriate knowledge	6%
<b>Selection and staffing</b>		<b>17%</b>
	Selection criteria	10%
	Selection process for IA	7%
<b>Internal communication</b>		<b>16%</b>
	Contact during IA	6%
	Announcements of the return of assignees	7%
	Establishment of expert database	3%
<b>Job design</b>		<b>14%</b>
	Timely search for suitable position	6%
	Match with IA expertise	4%
	Involvement of assignee	3%
<b>Training</b>		<b>10%</b>
	Knowledge-related debriefing session	6%
	Administrative reintegration briefing	2%
	Intercultural reintegration training	2%
<b>Performance appraisal</b>		<b>8%</b>
	'Hard' vs. 'soft' criteria	6%
	Expectation management before IA	2%
<b>Compensation and rewards</b>		<b>7%</b>
	Non-financial compensation	4%
	Financial compensation	3%
<b>Career development</b>		<b>6%</b>
	Integration of IA into career plan	4%
	Scenario career management process for IA	2%

*Note.* IA = International assignment.

Table 2. *Effective human resources practices and processes for the facilitation of RKT*

<b>HRM practices</b>	<b>HRM processes: Before IA</b>	<b>HRM processes: During IA</b>	<b>HRM processes: After IA</b>
Selection and staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advertisement of global positions</li> <li>• Variety of selection criteria</li> <li>• Thorough selection process</li> </ul>		
Internal communication		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact with domestic work unit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advertising repatriate knowledge</li> <li>• Expert/knowledge database</li> </ul>
Job design		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement of assignee</li> <li>• Match with newly acquired knowledge</li> <li>• Timely search for new position</li> </ul>	
Training			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administrative reintegration briefing</li> <li>• Intercultural reintegration training</li> <li>• Knowledge-related debriefing</li> </ul>
Performance appraisal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectation setting</li> </ul>		
Compensation and rewards			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition and visibility</li> <li>• Presentation of newly acquired knowledge</li> </ul>
Career development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarity about career impact of IA</li> <li>• Scenario management process</li> </ul>		

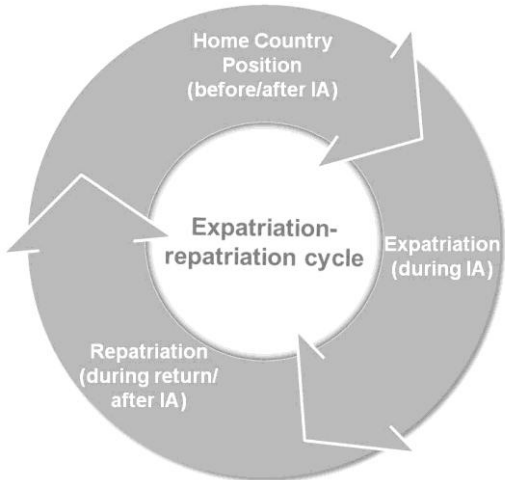


Figure 1. Expatriation – repatriation cycle