

Managing Expatriation, Repatriation and Organisational Learning in MNCs: an Integrative Framework

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Abstract

In the expanding global economy knowledge has become one of the most strategically-significant resource, so that firms' competitive advantage depends, more and more, on their ability to create, transfer and protect knowledge asset.

Since very few firms are able to develop a wide range of knowledge internally, expatriation and repatriation may be considered as important sources of competitive advantage, thanks to the huge amount of knowledge, both tacit and explicit, that corporate may acquire by managing the cycle.

Prior researches mainly investigated the intra-organisational knowledge transfer – from headquarter to subsidiaries – allowed by the expatriates. Very few studies, on the contrary, focused on the "reverse" process – from the subsidiaries to headquarter. According to this, we aim at deeply investigate the conditions upon which intra-organisational knowledge transfer may occur, and corporate learning process may be fostered, as well. In doing so, we focus on the entire expatriate-repatriate cycle, assuming that the effectiveness of knowledge transfer depend on the way the whole process is managed. An integrative theoretical model will be finally suggested, and recommendations for further researches will be proposed.

Keywords: *Multinational, expatriation, repatriation, knowledge transfer, organisational learning*

JEL classification: **D83, F23**

Introduction

The expansion of markets, both domestically and internationally, intensifies environmental turbulence, impelling firms to enhance flexibility and to improve their level of knowledge exploration and exploitation (Levitt, March, 1988). All the authors agree with the importance of learning process and knowledge transfer and sharing in upgrading firms' performance, as well as in fostering their capacity to establish a competitive advantage, the last one mainly connected to firms' ability to create, transfer, utilize and protect knowledge asset.

Since very few firms are able to develop a wide range of knowledge internally, their accessibility to a broader knowledge-base, through external learning, has attracted the attention of the scholars more and more.

According to the considerations above, international experience is widely recognised as a source of new knowledge.

For many times, a lot of Authors have investigated the expatriation process within multinational corporations (MNEs), analysing the role that expatriate managers have in transferring knowledge from headquarter to subsidiaries; very little, however, is actually known about the “reverse” knowledge transfer (from subsidiaries to headquarter), as well as on the conditions upon which intra-organizational knowledge transfer may be fostered.

Repatriate managers play an important role in sustaining firms’ competitive advantage thanks to the wide range of knowledge they are able to keep while living and working abroad. In spite of this, empirical evidences show that one quarter of repatriates leaves the company within one year of coming back home (Black & Gregersen, 1999 a, 1999, b). When repatriates go away, a lost of investments is faced by the company: both tacit and explicit resources may be used by competitors against the original firm; and corporate learning improvement is limited, as well.

According to both the relevance of the topic and to the little research actually existing on the subject (Adler, 2000; Antal, 2000; Martin, 2001), we aim at investigate the conditions upon which “reverse” knowledge transfer and corporate learning process may be fostered. We particularly assume that the effectiveness of organizational learning depends not only on firm’s capacity to retain repatriates, but also on the way the whole cycle is managed. Following our assumptions, the open ended questions were grouped, taking into account the following step:

1. Home country assignment (selection of expatriate manager and pre-departure training);
2. International experience (during which the expatriate may be able or not to acquire new and valuable knowledge);
3. Re-entry phase.

This paper is the result of the first stage of a wider-ranging research, aiming at deeply investigate the cross-border knowledge transfer within multinationals, in order to understand:

- a) the type of knowledge that expatriates are able to gain abroad;
- b) the difficult that repatriate face when come back to their home company;
- c) the conditions upon which the corporate learning process may be improved through the expatriate-repatriate cycle.

According to our aims, the following paper shows the theoretical model used to arrange questionnaires and semi-structured interviews¹.

¹ Empirical investigation of expatriate-repatriate process is still ongoing. At this time, a sample of Italian multinationals has been selected, within AIDA database, and some repatriate managers (like, for example, Fiat group executives), have been contacted and interweaved. AIDA is The Bureau

The Expatriate-Repatriate cycle: a Knowledge perspective

Expatriation is the process by which an employee is sent abroad for an international assignment; when the expatriate come back to home country, he became a “repatriate” (Lazarova, Tarique, 2005).

As Kamoche (1997) notes, expatriation offers the opportunity to acquire knowledge abroad, while the repatriation gives the chance to transfer and use the new knowledge in the parent company: repatriates, in other words, are responsible for the generation and transfer of useful knowledge, thus representing a valuable, and difficult to imitate, source for firms’ competitive advantage.

A lot of Authors examined expatriation process, analysing both the benefits deriving from the international assignment and conditions upon which the process would be managed (Lazarova, Caligiuri, 2001, Sims, Schraeder, 2004).

Taking into account the prevailing literature on the topic, the expatriate-repatriate cycle can be divided into three main stages:

- 1) Home country selection;
- 2) International assignment;
- 3) Re-entry phase (Lazarova, Caligiuri, 2001, Sims, Schraeder, 2004).

The first stage refers to the expatriate selection for the foreign assignment and includes the pre-departure training; the last one is arranged to provide the employee with the first information about the host country and culture; and the assignment itself. The next step refers to the period – from one to many years – during which the employee, the manager or executive, works in the foreign subsidiary. Finally, during the re-entry phase, the expatriate come back to the home company as a repatriate or is, alternatively, employed in a new international experience (Bossard, Peterson, 2005).

According with a Knowledge perspective, each phase may be linked to a different stage of the Knowledge Management process¹.

We particularly refer to the theoretical framework developed by Probst and Raub (1998). The Authors structured the knowledge management process into six interdependent and logical phases (Knowledge identification, Knowledge Acquisition, Knowledge Development, Knowledge Sharing and Distribution, Knowledge Use, and Knowledge Preservation): the so-called Knowledge Management Building Blocks. The Knowledge blocks shape an organizational knowledge cycle, which starts with definition of the firm’s knowledge targets and ends with the goals evaluation.

Van Dijk database. It collects information about all the Italian stock companies characterised by a production revenue larger than 100.000,00€ At this time, empirical investigations have mainly sampled American executives and managers (Black, 1991; 1992; Hammer, Hart & Rogan, 1998; Harvey, 1989); a small number of studies was conducted on Finnish (Gregersen & Stroh, 1997) and Japanese repatriates (Black, 1994; Gregersen & Black, 1996), but no study has been developed on Italian firms. Depending on the above considerations, our research may contribute to extend general understanding of how multinational companies manage organisational learning through repatriation.

¹ Knowledge Management may be defined as the process by which an organization systematically acquires, manages and communicates new knowledge (Alavi, Leidner, 1999). This process can be broadly characterized by consisting knowledge creation and knowledge transfer activities.

Taking into account Probst and Raub's contribution, the expatriate-repatriate cycle could be interpreted as a knowledge management process: starting from the identification of a corporate knowledge need, the expatriate is sent to one subsidiary, where He acquires, creates and develops new knowledge; at the end of the international assignment the expatriate come back to headquarter, in order to share and diffuse his knowledge at a corporate level where the last one is used and stored for reaching company purposes.

Very few firms are actually able to manage successfully the expatriation-repatriation cycle (Adler, 1997; Black & Gregersen, 1999; Harvey, 1982; Tung, 1998), because of the inner complexity that characterises the entire process. Unsuccessful expatriate-repatriate experiences may depend on a lot of factors, each of which affecting corporate capacity to acquire and transfer knowledge: the lack of an adequate pre-departure training, for example, may lead to a cultural shock; cultural shock negatively affects the employee placement in the host country and the expatriate capacity to acquire knowledge, at least (Sims, Schraeder, 2004)¹.

At same time, empirical findings of previous studies show that home country companies tend, often, to underestimate the value of repatriates' knowledge; as a consequence, the repatriate are not able to use the skills and the competences developed abroad; they feel frustrated in their new job and think about leaving their firm (Bossard, Peterson, 2005)².

In any of the underlined options, the corporate experiences a lost of new and valuable knowledge, and the opportunity to upgrade its competitiveness, as well.

According to the above considerations, figure 1 shows the factors that may affect the effectiveness of an expatriate-repatriate cycle, taking into account the three main phases into which the referred process may be divided, on one hand, and Knowledge Management process, on the other one.

¹ Cultural Shock may be defined as "the stress induced by the behavioural expectation differences and the accompanying uncertainty with which the individual must cope" (Black&Gregersen, 1991, p .462). It refers to the emotions that an employee feels after entering a foreign country, the last one characterised by different culture and different language (Sims, Schraeder, 2004).

² Bossard and Peterson (2005) conducted in depth interview with 20 expatriates in seven American Multinational Companies (MNCs) in the Pacific Northwest who come back to their home country. The Authors' empirical study supports the previous researches developed on the topic: repatriation is not always easy, and an high percentage of failure still remained. Among the problems faced by the repatriate, like, for example, changes in both work setting and in private lives, the interviewees revealed a strong disappointment by the lack of interest shown by home country company.

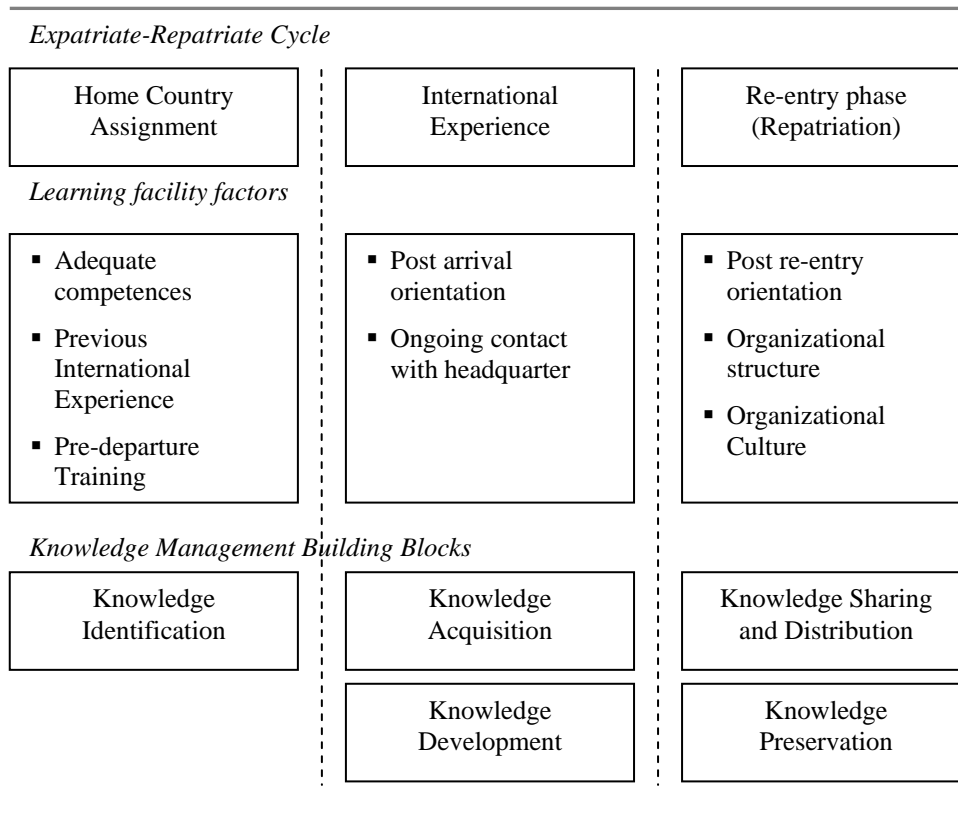


Figure 1 Knowledge Management in the context of expatriate-repatriate cycle

Source: our elaboration

As the figure shows, many factors may facilitate or, alternatively, obstacle the expatriate's capacity to acquire and develop new knowledge, as well as the effectiveness of the corporate learning process, at least: a lot of studies suggest, for example, that different forms of pre-departure orientation programs (visit to the host country, cross-cultural training, and assistance in finding housing, schooling, and transportation arrangements) reduce the impact of culture shock (Black&Mendenhall, 1990; Desphapande&Viswesvaran, 1992) allowing the expatriate adjustment process (Harrison, 1994; Sims, Schraeder, 2004); at same time, as Antal (2000, 2001) notes, the lack of contacts between the subsidiary and the headquarter, during the assignment abroad, increases the expatriate's uncertainty, thus limiting his capacity to catch local learning opportunity. Even if is not our aim to investigate all the factors able to affect knowledge creation and acquisition through expatriation, we recognise the strict linkage between the effectiveness of corporate learning capacity and the way the whole expatriate-repatriate cycle is managed. From a learning perspective, in fact, the international

assignment contributes expatriate's knowledge acquisition, both tacit and explicit¹; the effectiveness of organisational learning depends however on the firm's capacity to convert individual knowledge into corporate one. According to these considerations, the absence of adequate contacts with the expatriate, during the stage of international experience, negatively affects intra-organizational learning process, limiting the knowledge transfer between the subsidiary and the headquarter. As a consequence, both authors and practitioners suggest for frequent communication between the expatriate and headquarter: during the assignment, the expatriates should be included on company e-mail lists; they should periodically receive corporate newsletter; and home visit should be also arranged in order to involve them into the corporate network activities (Adler, 1997; Black, 1994; Lazarova, Caliguri, 2001). In addition, corporate should assign formal mentor to the expatriate, in order to guide and keep him in contact with the organisation. Even if a lot of authors refer to mentoring activities as a way to help expatriates during their assignment abroad, and to grant their future career, we recognised the importance of mentor as a tool for useful knowledge keeping. "Person to person" contacts, and frequency of communication between mentor and expatriate, allow information exchange among the parties, as well as, the use of multiple communication channels, both formal and informal. Under such circumstances, individuals develop strong ties; share believes and experiences, so as to transfer their knowledge more effectively.

1. The international experience: the role of co-ordination as a learning facility factor

Referring to multinational firms, Calvelli (1998) analysed the intra-organizational learning opportunities taking into account:

- a) The degree of co-ordination exercised by the headquarter over the subsidiaries;
- b) The formalisation of the existing co-ordination mechanisms.

Co-ordination usually refers to the integration of different activities in order to gain a common goal (Van de Ven et al., 1976), while a co-ordination mechanism is any administrative tool used by the organization in order to achieve the underlined integration. According to Barnard (1968), co-ordination mechanisms may be divided into two main groups: formal mechanisms and informal ones². Standard, budget, plans and reports, for example, belong to the first

¹ Tacit knowledge can be defined as the stock of knowledge that individuals take for granted, in their everyday, coping with the world; it depends upon experience and is idiosyncratic. Explicit knowledge refers, on the contrary, to knowledge that can be codified and articulated and therefore transmitted in a formal way. The two alternative types of knowledge are often referred to as "know-how" and "know-that". While the former is created 'here and now' in a specific, practical context and conveyed through analogies and metaphors, the latter is contained in manuals and procedures and oriented towards a context-free theory (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

² According to Thompson (1988) standardised co-ordination mechanisms may be used to manage simple interdependencies like, for example, pool and sequential interdependencies; reciprocal dependences, on the contrary, need for informal tools of co-ordination.

group, while the use of informal communications, frequent and direct managerial contacts, as well as the establishment of temporary or permanent teams, task forces or committees belong to the informal mechanisms (Martines, Jarrillo, 1989).

Both the degree of co-ordination and co-ordination mechanisms affect intra-organisational knowledge transfer, thus allowing or, alternatively, limit corporate learning process, as whole: particularly, more complex learning processes, typically, *learning from analysis*¹ and *learning from networking*², depend on corporate capacity to manage intra-organisational knowledge flow, through an intense co-ordination over the subsidiaries and by using informal and flexible co-ordination mechanisms (Calvelli, 1998).

The following figure shows the different learning opportunities arising into a multinational company.

| | | | |
|--------------------------|----------|--|---|
| Co-ordination mechanisms | Informal | <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Learning by doing</i> vs <i>Learning from analysis</i> (C)</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Learning from analysis</i> vs <i>Learning from networking</i> (D)</p> |
| | Formal | <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Learning by doing</i> vs <i>Learning from action</i> (B)</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Learning from action</i> (A)</p> |
| | | Low | High |
| Degree of Co-ordination | | | |

Figure 2 Intra-organisational learning opportunities

Source: Calvelli (1998)

For a long time Multinational firms have adopted formalisation and standardisation as tools of co-ordination: “standard practices” (Simon, 1976), “paper systems” (Lawrence and Lorsh, 1967) and “rules” (Galbraith, 1973) were used to guide the actions of subsidiaries. From a knowledge perspective, formal co-ordination mechanisms bound corporate learning process, since communication are mainly top-down and no feedback comes from subsidiaries to headquarter. At same time, decision making is highly centralised and local managers have no autonomy: simple output control and frequent reports of almost all activities are also used as coordination devices (Martines, Jarrillo, 1989).

¹ According to Ketelehöhn (1994) *learning from analysis* is a complex learning process arising when firms acquire information coming from the outside and develop new ideas. Taking into account the Author’s perspective, *learning from analysis* is similar to the so-called *double loop learning* as it was defined by Argyris and Shön (1978).

² When people, or units, systematically exchange information, individual learning turns into a collective one and a *learning from networking* takes place (Calvelli, 1998).

According to the above considerations, corporate is not able to develop complex learning process, the last ones moving from *learning by doing*¹ to *learning from action*², at least (Quadrants B and A). When a low degree of coordination exists, in fact, managers focus on daily practices and a *learning by doing* generally develops; in some cases, however, managers may be more proactive; they adapt the established routine to external contingencies, thus allowing a *learning from action* (Quadrant B). *Learning from action* may also arise when a high degree of coordination exists (Quadrant A): in the underlined hypothesis, headquarter is able to join together the subsidiaries into corporate strategic aims, and to closely manage the knowledge transfer among geographically and technologically widespread activities.

Informal co-ordination mechanisms allow the development of more complex learning process, as it is showed in quadrants C and D: new cross-departmental, informal and subtle communication mechanisms added to the existing structural and formal managerial devices to cope with complex environmental conditions (Martines, Jarrillo, 1989); both top-down, bottom up, and lateral knowledge flow is supported, and *learning from analysis* and *learning from networking* may easily arise³. Particularly, when both high co-ordination and informal mechanisms are present, subsidiaries motivation and creativity is fostered; systematic communications are established among all the parties; and the corporate exploits the learning advantages coming from networking.

Depending on the above considerations, we support the idea that the effectiveness of corporate learning process depends on headquarter ability to co-ordinate expatriates' activities during their assignment abroad, and to use them as "knowledge bridges" (from headquarter to subsidiaries and from subsidiaries to headquarter). In the context of expatriation, therefore, co-ordination and co-ordination mechanisms add to post-arrival orientation and ongoing contacts as *learning facility factors*. If the corporate is able to co-ordinate the expatriates, the process of expatriating and repatriating exceeds spot orientation and individual experience grows along with the organisation's one.

At its best, expatriation benefits both individual and the company. Thank to expatriation experiences, the organisation expands its knowledge assets; properly managed, the know-how, coming from different markets, may be stored at institutional level, thus providing insight for the better management of international resources (Downes, Thomas, 1999).

¹ *Learning by doing* is typical of small firms which learn thanks to their daily activities (Calvelli, 1998).

² *Learning from action* refers to a process that develops on the basis of the existing knowledge assets: people and firms acquire new information from the outside; they try to develop new hypothesis and new ideas taking into account what they already know. It is a typical closed cycle of knowledge (Ketelhön, 1994).

³ Even when headquarter uses informal co-ordination mechanisms, managerial myopia may lead to *learning by doing*, as it is showed in quadrant C. In the underlined situation inertia and low propensity to take risk affect managerial behaviour, thus limiting corporate knowledge development (Calvelli, 1998).

2. From “reverse” knowledge transfer to corporate learning process

Repatriation represents the last step of expatriate – repatriate cycle: assuming that the previous stages have been successfully managed, the employees have been able to acquire and create different types of knowledge, and to develop new skills.

As noted above, in fact, expatriation and repatriation are deeply connected, so that most activities, led to retain repatriate knowledge, take place more frequently *during* than *after* the international assignment.

Antal (2000) described five types of knowledge that expatriates gain abroad: declarative (what), procedural (how), conditional (when), axiomatic (why), and relational knowledge (who)¹; similarly, according to Fink and Meierewert (2005) expatriates are better able to satisfy customers requests, more flexible and tolerant, than their home colleagues. They often learn the language and local customs, as well as the characteristics of political, social and local economic systems; thanks to their experience, the expatriates meet a lot of people, thus building networks useful for creating new and profitable business opportunities. In an exploratory case study in Austrian commercial banks, the Authors interviewed 19 repatriates to Austria, in order to identify the types of knowledge acquired by the expatriates, during their international experience. Research results confirmed the existence of the knowledge categories recognized by the literature: Market Specific Knowledge, Personal Skills, Job-Related Management Skills, and Network Knowledge. By working in a different environment, expatriates therefore have to manage a broad range of actions, thus improving their own ability to understand and manage the business as whole. This last type of knowledge, never defined before in the literature, has been labelled “General Management Capacity” by Fink and Meierewert (2005). Some of the underlined categories are more standardised than the others: market specific knowledge, for example, may be transferred more easily than job-related knowledge or personal skills through “low intensity tools” (e.g.: documents, presentations, intranet) (Lazarova, Tarique, 2005). Capturing network knowledge, personal skills or general management capacity, on the contrary, need for “high intensity knowledge transfer tools”, like personal contacts and frequent communications.

According to this, the effectiveness of repatriate knowledge retention may depend not only on post re-entry orientation (Downes, Thomas, ANNO), organisational structure and organisational culture (Antal, 2001), but also on corporate capacity to match the type of knowledge and the extracting tools.

¹ Declarative Knowledge refers to knowledge that expatriates collect about the local markets, the products, needs, and wishes of customers; the procedural knowledge refers both to general management skills and to the so-called “learning to learn”; when abroad, the managers are also able to develop a new and different sensitivity about the use of time and its effects (conditional knowledge); they understand different cultures (Axiomatic knowledge); and expand their network of relevant contacts (Antal, 2000).

Interestingly, empirical evidences show that repatriates don't feel particularly welcome when come back home and find difficult to talk about their experience with the other employees and colleagues (Bossard and Peterson, 2005). From a knowledge perspective, the lack of re-entry programs and incentives limit knowledge transfer (distribution) among people, and the conversion of individual learning into organisational one, as well. Similarly, organisational structure is often mentioned as a barrier to organisational learning, because of difficult that repatriates have to face in large and bureaucratic company. The presence of bureaucratic structures, different functions and levels of responsibility makes it more difficult to both identify the value of repatriate's knowledge and to diffuse it within the whole organisation. Finally, corporate learning process may be also limited by organisational culture¹. Well established values and believes often lead to the so-called "not-invented-here-syndrome" according to which all the ideas and way of working, developed out of the company, are underestimated and soon refused (Teigland, Fey, Birkinshaw, 2000).

Because of the underlined obstacles, planning efficient post re-entry programs and supporting repatriates could be not sufficient to turn individual learning into corporate one. Repatriate knowledge, partly kept by the company, during the international assignment, in fact, needs to be recognised, codified and diffuse throughout the organisation. The "institutionalisation" of repatriate knowledge may be interpreted by the well-known "knowledge creation" model developed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995)².

Figure 3 shows the developed theoretical framework. It would be useful to identify the conditions upon which corporate knowledge transfer may be fostered, in the field of repatriation. Particularly, the proposed model³ summarises:

a) The *learning facility factors* that may affect both knowledge acquisition, from subsidiaries to headquarter (during international assignment), and knowledge distribution and sharing after re-entry;

b) The institutionalisation process that allows the expansion of individual knowledge to organisational level.

¹ According to De Long and Fahey (2000) culture affects organisational learning by: a) Shaping the assumption about what knowledge is; b) Defining the relationship between individual and organizational knowledge; c) Creating a context of social interaction; and d) Shaping the process by which new knowledge is created and diffused in the organizations.

² By "knowledge creation" model, the authors refer to organisation's capacity to create new knowledge, diffuse it throughout the company, and embody it in products, services and systems.

³ Our model has been developed taking into account both the literary contributions actually existing on the topic and the results of empirical findings. Modifications and additions, to the prevailing studies, have been underlined by using italics.

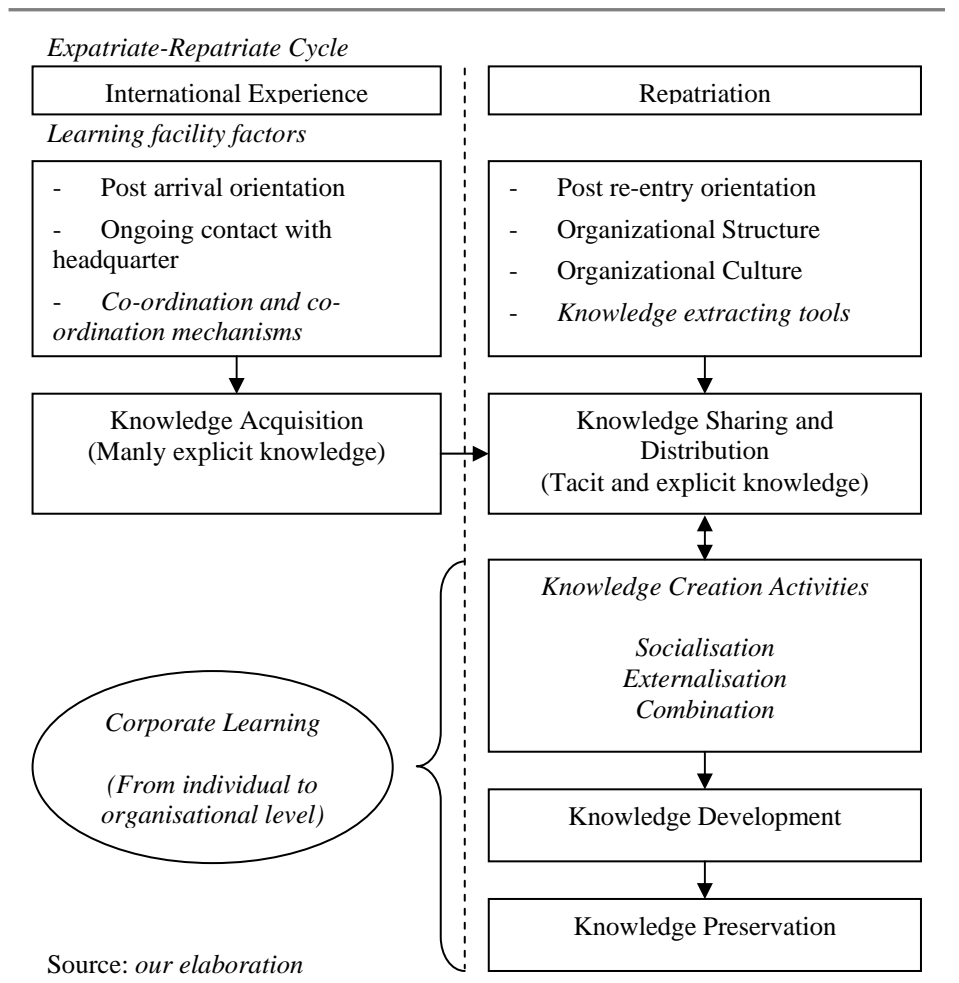


Figure 3 Corporate learning process through repatriation – An Integrative Framework

Thanks to socialisation, externalisation and combination, new knowledge develops and may be stored in order to catch competitive advantage.

According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), knowledge is created, and organisational learning occurs, through a continuous and dynamic interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge. Particularly, new knowledge is created through four step, namely, socialization (tacit to tacit), externalization (tacit to explicit), internalization (explicit to tacit), and combination (explicit to explicit).

When repatriate comes back home company, the knowledge acquired abroad, mainly tacit knowledge, has to be shared with the other members inside the organisation, through meeting and personal contacts. At this step, headquarter is

responsible for arranging the most appropriate communications tools, in order to support *socialisation*¹ at individual level.

Since organisational learning is a social process among individuals and not confined within the individual, the following steps – *externalisation* and *combination* – allow the knowledge transfer inside the corporate, thanks to the codification and formalisation of repatriate knowledge. The use of questionnaires, annotations, texts search, as well as document categorisation may be helpful for reaching corporate aims. At the end of the process, repatriate knowledge is “organizationally” expanded and amplified at higher ontological levels (group, organization, and inter-organization).

Conclusions and suggestions

Our paper provides a theoretical framework for a deeper understanding of intra-organisational knowledge learning upon expatriate-repatriate cycle. By doing so, it identifies the conditions through which knowledge transfer may be fostered during international assignment (expatriation phase), as well as during repatriation phase.

Referring to expatriation phase we, particularly, underlined the role that the degree of coordination and coordination mechanisms have in fostering intra-organisational learning process. The effectiveness of knowledge transfer, in fact, depends not only on corporate capacity to arrange expatriates orientation programs and to provide them with ongoing support; but also on the way the cross-border relationships are managed. As noted above, when both high degree of coordination and informal mechanisms are present, subsidiaries motivation and creativity is fostered; systematic communications are established among all the parties; and the corporate exploits the learning advantages coming from networking.

Referring to repatriate phase, *knowledge extracting tools* have been added to the other learning facility factors already analysed in the existing literature: when repatriate come back home, corporate has to retain the knowledge acquired abroad, by using the most appropriate extracting tools. *Socialisation* may be considered, as a consequence, the most suitable way to share individual and implicit knowledge among people, and to direct *knowledge creation activities*.

Even if exploratory in nature, our framework contributes to the micro-foundation of the knowledge transfer and organisational learning issues, by giving a systematic overview of the existing literature, as well as by providing a new and original interpretative model.

In any case, since the first result of a wider research, our findings need to be verified through the empirical investigation.

¹ “A typical example of socialization is that apprentices work with their masters and learn craftsmanship not through language but through observation, imitation, and practice.” (Nonaka e Takeuchi, 1995, p. 63).

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