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Repatriate knowledge transfer

Individual perspective

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ABSTRACT:

Tämä tutkimus käsittelee pitkiltä ulkomaankomennuksilta palanneiden työntekijöiden tiedonsiirtoa organisaatioissa. Tarkemmin ottaen kohderyhmänä on organisaatioon palanneet työntekijät, jotka ovat olleet ulkomaankomennuksella työnantajan lähettämänä vähintään vuoden mittaisen ajan (eng. long-term corporate repatriate). Ulkomaankomennuksen aikana työntekijät kartuttavat tyypillisesti yrityksille arvokasta ja vaikeasti kopioitavaa tietoa, esimerkiksi uusia verkostoja, tietoa kohdemaan markkinoista, kulttuurista ja toimintatavoista sekä kehittävät johtamistaitojaan. Tutkimukset ovat kuitenkin osoittaneet paluuvaiheen tiedonsiirrossa olevan haasteita, eikä palanneiden ekspatriaattien kartuttamaa tietoa usein saada hyödynnettyä tehokkaasti organisaatioiden sisällä. Lisäksi paluuvaiheen tiedonsiirtoon keskittyviä tutkimuksia, erityisesti yksilötason näkökulmasta, on määrällisesti vähän. Tämä tutkimus pyrkii vastaamaan tähän tarpeeseen ja lisäämään ymmärrystä paluuvaiheen tiedonsiirrosta ulkomailta palaavien työntekijöiden näkökulmasta. Tarkoituksena on selvittää, minkälaista tietoa työntekijät kartuttavat ulkomaankomennusten aikana, minkälaista tietoa he siirtävät eteenpäin palatessaan ja mitkä yksilötason tekijät vaikuttavat paluuvaiheen tiedonsiirtoon. Tutkimus on toteutettu laadullisena tutkimuksena. Tutkimuksessa haastatellaan yhdeksää ulkomaankomennukselta palannutta työntekijää eri toimialoilta ja yrityksistä. Tutkimuksen löydökset osoittavat, että ulkomaankomennuksen aikana kertyneen tiedon luonne, työntekijän persoonallisuuteen liittyvät piirteet sekä ulkomaankomennuksen jälkeinen asema organisaatiossa vaikuttavat työntekijöiden motivaatioon, kyvykkyyteen ja mahdollisuuksiin siirtää tietoa organisaation sisällä. Tulokset osoittavat, että organisaatiot voivat edesauttaa tiedonsiirtoa tarjoamalla ulkomaankomennuksilta palaaville työntekijöille tiedonsiirtoa tukevan aseman ja tehtäviä, missä työntekijä voi hyödyntää ja siirtää tietoa mahdollisimman monipuolisesti organisaation sisällä. Lisäksi formaalit tiedonkeruun menetelmät voivat viestittää työntekijöille, että heidän kerryttämää tietoa arvostetaan ja edelleen lisätä työntekijöiden motivaatiota osallistua tiedonsiirtoon.

KEYWORDS: Repatriation, long-term corporate repatriate, reverse knowledge transfer, international assignments

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Abbreviations

MNC	Multinational Corporation
RTK	Reverse Knowledge Transfer

1 Introduction

Knowledge has been long understood as a key source of sustainable competitive advantage (Argote & Ingram, 2000; Davenport & Prusak, 2009). There is an emerging view among international business researchers that understand multinationals corporations (MNCs) as institutions for integrating knowledge (Bonache & Brewster, 2001). Indeed, MNCs capability to transfer and utilize knowledge through its intraorganizational networks can be a key factor for superior performance. According to Gupta and Govindarajan (2000), the main reason for the existence of MNCs is their capability to transfer and utilize knowledge through intraorganizational networks, compared to external market mechanism. This knowledge-based view of firm (Grant, 1996), which understand companies as a bundle of knowledge, is widely adapted in the management literature (Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000).

One way for multinationals to achieve intraorganizational knowledge transfer across company's network is to send employees abroad for international assignments (Bonache & Zárraga-Oberty, 2008; Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2009). The recent literature has adopted a more strategic perspective to view international assignments, considering expatriates as a valuable asset to develop and diffuse knowledge across companies' networks (e.g. Beaverstock, 2004; Chiang et al., 2018; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). During international assignments, expatriates typically acquire highly valuable knowledge while being surrounded by foreign operations, business practices, and cultures (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Oddou et al., 2013). This view of expatriates as knowledge transferors is also widely acknowledged in the literature (e.g. Bonache & Zárraga-Oberty, 2008; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Oddou et al., 2013).

However, studies have discovered a dilemma in transferring this highly valuable knowledge of expatriates back to the domestic organizations (e.g. Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2009; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). Despite the fact that expatriation is a remarkable investment for multinational corporations, MNCs do not to fully utilize the knowledge acquired upon the foreign assignments (Bonache et al., 2001;

Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2009). According to Paik et al., (2002, pp. 636), “conflicts often arise due to a misunderstanding of the returning expatriate’s role between a company and repatriates”. Therefore, it is highly important for companies to enhance their understanding on the individual-level processes behind the knowledge transfer. To cite Nery-Kjerfve and McLean (2012, pp. 626), “it is the knowledge possessed by these key individuals that is the main asset for corporations to compete in the global market”.

1.1 Research gap

There is a growing interest in repatriation (Chiang et al., 2018), however, the research field on the topic is still relatively under-researched (Chiang et al., 2018; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). Prior research on international human resource management have typically focused on expatriation, leaving the research on repatriates incomplete (Bonache et al., 2001; Chiang et al., 2018). Expatriation is associated requiring higher human resources attention compared to repatriation, since repatriation is the phase when expatriates return to the familiar home country (Kulkarni et al., 2010). However, studies show that repatriation is a stage that typically involves multiple challenges in organizational context, and therefore needs to be better understood (Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Chiang et al., 2018; Kulkarni et al., 2010).

Furthermore, there are certain main themes emerged in the repatriate literature. For example, repatriation adjustment, organizational commitment, and repatriates’ turnover intentions are topics that have gained attention among researches (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). On the other hand, researches focusing on the individual factors, such as identity, motivation or abilities, and their relation to the outcomes of repatriation are rare (Chiang et al., 2018). Also, there is very limited amount of studies focusing on repatriation’s potential towards organizational learning and growth in individuals, groups and organizations (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012).

What comes to repatriation literature from a knowledge management perspective, the current body of literature is still very limited (Burmeister, 2017; Chiang et al., 2018). The first empirical study has been published not earlier than 2000 (Burmeister, 2017), and there are still many issues to be addressed (Burmeister, 2017; Chiang et al., 2018; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). So far, researchers have developed diverse conceptual models and studied the antecedent of successful knowledge transfer, but there is no common understanding on the relationships between the diverse variables and processes behind the transfer (Burmeister, 2017).

Moreover, studies on the individual processes behind a successful knowledge transfer are scarce, and there is only little understanding on the subject (Chiang et al., 2018). According to Lazarova and Tarique (2005, pp. 371), "there is a need to better understand how individual ability, motivation, and career aspirations affect the process of transfer between individuals and organizational units". Similarly Harzing et al., (2015) suggest future research to study not only the actual knowledge transfer, but the individual motivations and abilities behind the it. According to study by Minbaeva, Mäkelä, and Rabbiosi (2012), individual factors have a significant influence on employees' level of engagement to intraorganizational knowledge exchange. However, they note that individual factors can be influenced by organizational and cultural factors, and should be studied more comprehensively (Minbaeva et al., 2012). Also study by Mäkelä and Brewster (2009) provided understanding that individual characteristics, such as ability and motivation, and interpersonal factors have a major influence on knowledge sharing, besides encourage researches to execute more studies on the matter.

Therefore, this study aims to contribute to this gap of the literature and increase understanding of the individual knowledge transfer of repatriates. The focus is on the knowledge transfer upon return, due to the increasing interests among the subject and the little number of studies regarding the topic. Moreover, the previous studies have pointed out the problematic nature of this phase of expatriation, and a need for a better understanding on the topic. Besides, as knowledge is widely understood as a key factor

influencing organizational performance, this study aims to provide suggestions for organizations to better manage and facilitate repatriate knowledge transfer process. The focus will be on an individual level since previous studies have pointed out the need for increasing understanding of the individual processes and factors behind a successful knowledge transfer. Besides, interactions between individuals are the main source of knowledge transfer (Argote & Ingram, 2000), and therefore evitable to understand.

1.2 Research problem and theoretical contribution

Basing on the widely accepted understanding that knowledge is embedded in individuals, this study takes an individual perspective in examining repatriate knowledge transfer. Studies have stated a need for more research focusing on the individual-level processes behind repatriate knowledge transfer (Harzing et al., 2015; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Mäkelä & Brewster, 2009; Minbaeva et al., 2012). Therefore, the aim of the research is to increase the understanding of the individual knowledge transfer of repatriates. The study will consider what kind of knowledge expatriates typically acquire and transfer, and how the individual-level factors of repatriates influence the knowledge transfer.

Therefore, the main aim of the research is to increase understanding of the individual knowledge transfer of repatriates.

Two research questions are developed to support answering to the aim of the research :

- 1) *What kind of knowledge expatriates develop and transfer?*
- 2) *How the individual attributes of repatriates influence the knowledge transfer?*

1.3 Definitions of the key concepts

The key concepts of the study are defined below.

Expatriate

Lee and Liu (2007, pp. 124) describe expatriate as “one who is on an extended foreign assignment for a multinational corporation”.

Repatriation

According to Chiang et al., (2018, pp. 192) definition, repatriation refers to “the final phase of a prolonged international assignment that occurs when the international assignee (repatriate) returns home to his or her parent or initiating organization together with accompanying family members, if any”.

Long-term corporate repatriate

Basing on previous literature, Chiang et al. (2018, pp. 191) define corporate repatriates as “returning employees who were sent overseas by their employing organizations on either a short- (e.g. 3–12 months) or long-term (e.g. over 12 months) basis who are expected to complete a time-based task or accomplish an organizational goal”. In this study, the focus is on the long-term corporate repatriates, who have returned from an international assignment of a length of minimum 12 months.

Knowledge

In the literature, there are various suggestions of how to describe knowledge. In the present study a definition of knowledge as “information enriched by personal experience, values, beliefs, and contextual information” (Burmeister, 2017, p. 3), is adopted.

Reverse knowledge transfer (RKT)

According to Burmeister (2017, pp. 4), knowledge transfer refers to “an interactive and socially embedded process between knowledge senders and recipients”. Simply, knowledge transfer consists of two parts: transmission of knowledge by a knowledge sender and absorption of knowledge by a knowledge recipient (Davenport & Prusak, 2009). In this study, a term reverse knowledge transfer (RKT) is applied. Reverse knowledge transfer occurs when knowledge is transferred back to the domestic organization from the host location, during the repatriation of the foreign assignment (Burmeister et al., 2018).

1.4 Structure of the study

This study begins with an introduction, in which the background of the research is discussed, and the research aims described. Then, the theoretical settings of the study are discussed in the light of the prior studies and literature. The theoretical chapter consists of five main themes: repatriation, knowledge transfer, repatriate knowledge, and the role of individuals in organizational knowledge transfer. In the last chapter of the theoretical part, the theoretical framework of the study is summarized.

After the theoretical part, the thesis proceeds to the empirical part of the study. First, the methodological choices for the study are presented and discussed. Second, the findings of the study are presented. Then, in Discussion, the findings are discussed in the light of the theory, basing on the two research questions of the study. In Conclusions, the conclusions are drawn from the study findings and the answers for the research questions summarized. Also, theoretical and managerial implications are provided, limitations of the study are discussed, and suggestions for future research are given. The structure of the thesis can be seen in the Figure 1.

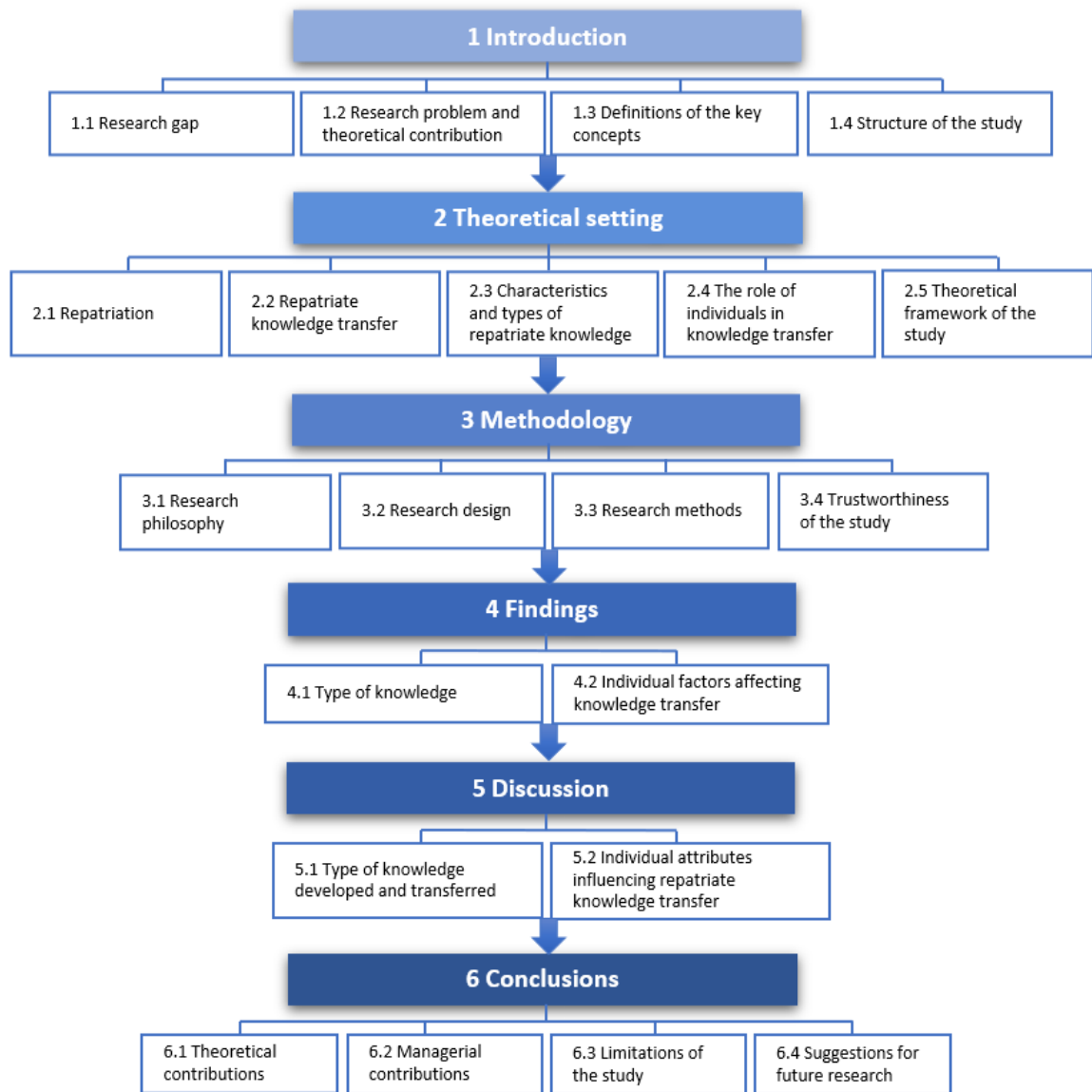


Figure 1. Structure of the study

2 Theoretical setting

In this theoretical section of the study, the key findings of the literature review are discussed. First, the theme of repatriation is discussed in light of the theory. Then, the thesis proceeds to consider repatriate knowledge transfer. The characteristics and types of repatriate knowledge and the role of individuals in reverse knowledge transfer are discussed in separate chapters. In the last chapter of the theoretical part, the theoretical framework of the study is presented.

2.1 Repatriation

As discussed in Introduction, the research field in international assignments have traditionally focused on the early phases of expatriation, leaving studies on repatriation fragmented (Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Chiang et al., 2018). However, studies have acknowledged the diverse challenges and problems that specially occurs during repatriation, and therefore called for more research on the topic (Chiang et al., 2018). In this chapter, the previous literature on repatriation is reviewed.

The body of literature defines repatriation relatively similarly. Typically, repatriation is defined as the final phase of expatriation. For example Hurn (1999, pp. 224) describes repatriation as “the transition from a foreign country back to one's own after living overseas for a significant period of time”, and Herman and Tetrick (2009: pp. 69) shortly define repatriation as “the return from overseas employment”. Chiang et al., (2018, pp. 192) describe repatriation more specifically: “the final phase of a prolonged international assignment that occurs when the international assignee (repatriate) returns home to his or her parent or initiating organization together with accompanying family members, if any”. The latter definition by Chiang et al. (2018, pp. 192) is adapted in this study.

Moreover, since there are diverse types of expatriation, also repatriation can be defined according to the type of assignment. Drawing from repatriate literature, Chiang et al.

(2018) summarizes the diverse types, please see in the Figure 2. The focus of this study is on the repatriation from a long-term corporate expatriation. Basing on previous literature, Chiang et al. (2018, pp. 191) define corporate repatriation as “returning employees who were sent overseas by their employing organizations on either a short- (e.g. 3–12 months) or long-term (e.g. over 12 months) basis who are expected to complete a time-based task or accomplish an organizational goal”. Accordingly, this study defines long-term corporate repatriates as employees who have returned from an international assignment of a length of a minimum 12 months.

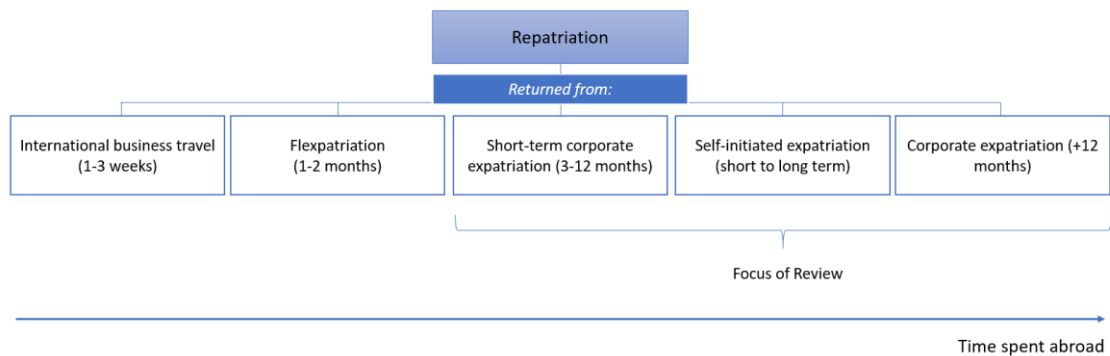


Figure 2. Deconstructing repatriation (Chiang et al., 2018, pp. 192).

2.1.1 Challenges in repatriation

The many challenges regarding repatriation phase are widely acknowledged in the literature (Chiang et al., 2018; Herman & Tetrick, 2009; Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2009; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). According to Herman and Tetrick (2009), repatriation is one of the most challenging transition during a global career, linking the professional experience abroad and the previous career path together. However, studies have traditionally focused on the challenges regarding the transition from home to the international assignment, rather than the challenges occurring during repatriation (Kraimer et al., 2012; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007).

The problematic transition back to home organization can lead to remarkably high turnover rates among repatriates (Kraimer et al., 2012). This has also been one of the major issues the literature have focused for several decades (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). According to survey report by Brookfield (2016), the attrition rate for repatriates, following the first two years of returning, is greater compared to employees stayed in the home country. Moreover, studies have discovered that expatriates are typically satisfied with their international experience but often leave their employer upon return (Suutari & Brewster, 2003), which indicate to dissatisfaction with the management of repatriation. Moreover, since repatriates typically obtain highly important knowledge, networks and skills abroad, it is not only the costs that organizations can lose but more importantly, potential way to enhancing the organizational competitive expertise (Chiang et al., 2018; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007).

Literature have proposed alternative explanations for repatriates' turnover. Traditional reasoning is that repatriate's dissatisfaction, which ultimately leads to leaving the company, stems from the perception that companies do not value the newly acquired knowledge and expertise and ignore them. On the other hand, repatriates enhanced employability, changes in the employment relationships, and repatriates willingness to manage their career can lead to the decision to quit (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007).

Also identity theory can explain the high turnover rate of repatriates: repatriates might have changed during their international assignment and adopted an international identity, especially if they have been highly involved in the communities abroad (Kraimer et al., 2012). According to Kraimer et al., (2012, pp. 411) findings, this international identity "interacted with how they compared themselves to their colleagues without international experience and ultimately contributed to their psychological strain and turnover decisions". The new, adopted identity can therefore lead to identity crisis and distance repatriates from their home organization (Kraimer et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the literature has acknowledged a dilemma between the organizational and individual (repatriate's) perspective during repatriation (Chiang et al., 2018; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Suutari & Brewster, 2003). Indeed, repatriates can view a successful repatriation very differently compared to organizations. Lazarova and Cerdin (2007, pp. 421) describe the situation simply: "What may be good for the individual might at the same time be bad for the organization, and what may be good for the organization might sometimes be bad for the individual". For example, an international experience (of repatriate) is typically found attractive in the external job market (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Suutari & Brewster, 2003), which can possess a risk for a company but an opportunity for repatriates (Suutari & Brewster, 2003).

In terms of knowledge transfer, the same contradiction can affect the motives to use the recently gained knowledge. From firms' perspective, it is highly beneficial to transfer and utilize the knowledge within the firm, in order to enhance its competitive expertise. However, from a repatriate's perspective that is not necessarily the most benefiting option, for example compared to utilizing the knowledge in other environment, such as in another firm (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). Furthermore, there are diverse types of knowledge that are not all as easy to capture (Davenport & Prusak, 2009; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). Expatriates typically gain tacit knowledge upon their expatriation, which is shown to be difficult to transfer (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012).

2.1.2 Repatriation success

There are number of different measurements proposed for assessing the success of an international assignment (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009; Chiang et al., 2018). Also, as discussed in the previous sub-chapter, the literature has widely acknowledged the differences between organizational and individual success upon repatriation. Lazarova and Cerdin (2007) suggest that the success of repatriate and success of organization should be clearly separated.

Individual success is typically related to career success, job success, and development success. *Career success* is linked to career satisfaction, promotion, and pay increase. *Job success* is linked to job satisfaction. Finally, *development success* is linked to marketability, network, and relationship building. (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009.) According to Lazarova and Cerdin (2007), repatriates are typically relatively career-oriented and actively focus on their career development. Expatriation gives them an opportunity for development in terms of boundary-spanning activities, network development, and increase their exposure to many diverse career opportunities (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). On the other hand, organizational success is typically studied in terms of employee retention, performance, network and relationship building, and the transfer of knowledge (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009; Chiang et al., 2018) Performance is linked to the capability to perform key organizational tasks and achieve objectives. (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009.)

Lazarova and Cerdin (2007) propose a theoretical framework regarding the link between repatriate retention and repatriation success (please see in the Figure 2). First, individual, environmental, and organizational factors can influence repatriate's turnover intention, as discussed in the previous sub-chapter. For example, attractive employment opportunities in the external job market can influence positively on the decision to leave. Furthermore, the decision to stay or leave affects repatriation success in both individual and organizational level. In this model, individual success is shortly defined in terms of psychological and physical mobility, whereas organizational success includes knowledge transfer, and network and relationship building (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007).

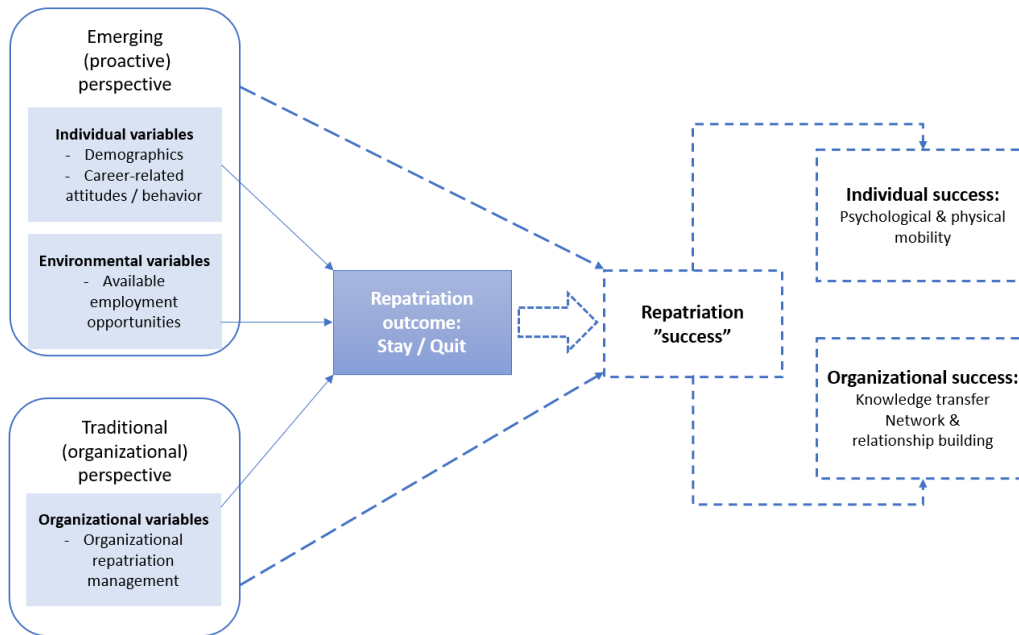


Figure 3. Framework of a repatriation success (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007, pp. 423).

2.2 Repatriate knowledge transfer

The literature on knowledge transfer has traditionally focused on the conventional knowledge transfer process, where knowledge is transferred from the parent company to foreign subsidiaries (Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Nevertheless, there has been a growing number of studies on reverse knowledge transfer since the first empirical study by Antal in 2000 (Burmeister et al., 2015). Studies have steadily moved towards a more strategic perspective, acknowledging the value of gaining knowledge abroad and transferring it back to a company headquarter (e.g. Chung, 2014; Kumar, 2013; McGuinness et al., 2013). However, despite the growing interests in RKT, the research on the topic is still scarce, and there is need for more empirical research to be conducted (Burmeister et al., 2015).

2.2.1 Knowledge transfer

Knowledge transfer refers to “an interactive and socially embedded process between knowledge senders and recipients” (Burmeister 2017, pp. 4). Shortly, it consists of two main parts: transmission of knowledge by a knowledge sender and absorption of knowledge by a knowledge recipient (Davenport & Prusak, 2009; Shao & Ariss, 2020). Moreover, the adaptation of the new knowledge by a knowledge recipient is a distinguishing character in the definition of knowledge transfer and therefore emphasized in the literature (Davenport & Prusak, 2009; Shao & Ariss, 2020; Szulanski, 2000). According to Davenport and Prusak (2009, pp. 101) “knowledge that isn't absorbed hasn't really been transferred”. Also Szulanski (2000, pp. 23) proposes that “knowledge transfer should be regarded as a process of reconstruction rather than a mere act of transmission and reception”. Therefore, successful knowledge transfer requires application and use of knowledge by a knowledge recipient.

Moreover, there are several frameworks of knowledge transfer process presented in the literature. One of the most widely adapted model by Szulanski (2000) describe knowledge transfer process via four stages: initiation, implementation, ramp-up and integration (Burmeister et al., 2015), please see in the Figure 3. *Initiation* regards finding an opportunity to transfer knowledge and the decisions behind the actual knowledge transfer. *Implementation* occurs during the actual exchange of knowledge and resources between the knowledge sender and a recipient. *Ramp-up* refers to the phase when the knowledge recipient starts to utilize the knowledge. Finally, *integration* is the stage where the use of knowledge by a knowledge recipient begins progressively routinizing. (Szulanski, 2000.)

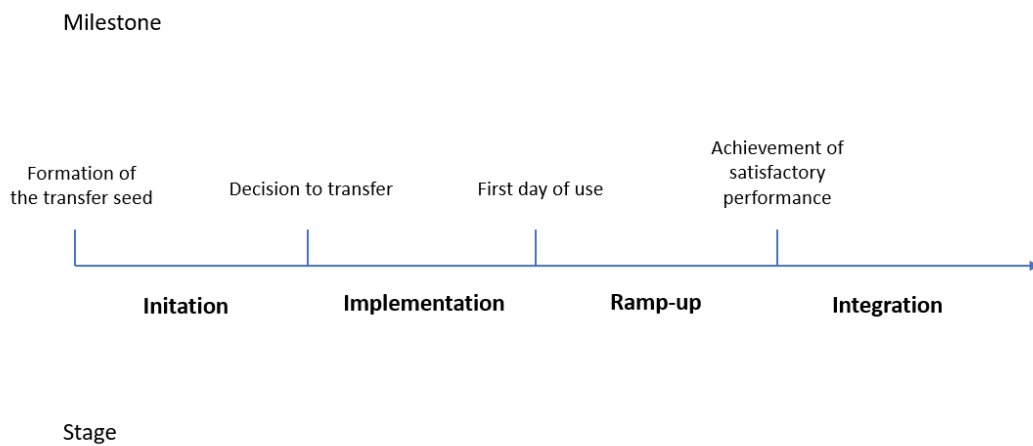


Figure 4. The process of knowledge transfer (Szulanski, 2000, pp. 13).

Alternative frameworks of knowledge transfer are presented by Hansen (1999), Hansen et al. (2005), and Kwan and Cheung (2006) (Burmeister et al., 2015). Hansen (1999) consider knowledge transfer process through two parts: *search* and *transfer*. However, this was later extended (Burmeister et al., 2015), when Hansen et al. (2005) presented framework of three stages, namely *a decision to seek knowledge*, *search costs*, and *costs of transfers*. In the first phase, a team decides whether it will seek knowledge in other subsidiaries. If the team decide to seek knowledge, it will start looking for, identifying, and evaluating potential knowledge, which in turn create search costs. Finally, the team needs to transfer the knowledge, which includes modifying, editing, and incorporating the knowledge, and in turn creates transfer costs.

The fourth model by Kwan and Cheung (2006) considers knowledge transfer through four stages, similarly to the model by Szulanski (2000). The model involves stages of *motivation*, *matching*, *implementation*, and finally *retention*. The first step, motivation, involves all the events that will advance the decision to start seeking knowledge. Matching means the search for suitable knowledge transfer partners. In the implementation phase, the actual resource flow occurs. In the final phase, retention, “the new practice become

institutionalized, progressively lose their novelty, and become part of the objective, taken-for-granted reality of the recipient organization” (Kwan & Cheung, 2006, pp. 19).

2.2.2 Reverse knowledge transfer (RKT)

In the literature, there can be find various definition for repatriate knowledge transfer. According to Burmeister et al., (2018), reverse knowledge transfer occurs when knowledge is transferred back to the domestic organization from the host location, during the repatriation of the foreign assignment. Definition by Lazarova and Cerdin (2007, pp. 422) describes also the nature of knowledge: “Knowledge transfer in the repatriation context refers to transferring general and specific knowledge regarding foreign cultures, politico-social context, and business environments, knowledge of local organizational practices, as well as knowledge of key local suppliers and clients”. Shao and Ariss (2020, pp. 3) determinates self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) knowledge transfer as “the process through which SIEs share their knowledge with co-workers who then apply that knowledge”. Also Sanchez-Vidal et al. (2018, pp. 1774) describes reverse knowledge transfer as “the benefits the MNCs can obtain from the knowledge their repatriates acquired during their assignments abroad”.

Moreover, majority of studies in RKT have not examined the distinct nature of reverse knowledge transfer but considered RKT similarly to conventional knowledge transfer process (Burmeister et al., 2018). However, reverse knowledge transfer is a complex process and includes specific challenges compared to conventional knowledge transfer process. Yang et al., (2008) examined conventional and reverse knowledge transfer and noted differences in their transfer logics. Their findings suggest that organizational characteristics play an important role in conventional knowledge transfer, whereas knowledge characteristics are crucial in reverse knowledge transfer process. Reverse knowledge flow is “a process of searching for recognition and acceptance” (Yang et al., 2008, pp. 896), where subsidiary needs to convince the relevance of the knowledge it holds. On the contrary, the parent company has a higher level of authority towards a

subsidiary and can therefore control the conventional knowledge flow (Yang et al., 2008). Along with the power imbalances, repatriates typically need to convince the knowledge recipients of the importance of their knowledge. Burmeister et al., (2015) study revealed that repatriates put high importance on their capability to convince potential recipients of their credibility and the value of their knowledge. Oddou et al., (2013) study links unsuccessful knowledge transfer to repatriates' experiences of being perceived as an outsider, unsuitable job positions, neglecting managers, and working in an environment with biases towards repatriates and their knowledge.

Furthermore, there can be distinguished two research directions in the RKT literature. First, studies have examined the influence of reverse knowledge transfer to organizational learning, and for example studied what kind of knowledge is repatriates typically gain abroad. Second, studies have aimed to understand the variables and factors that influence the success of reverse knowledge transfer. (Burmeister et al., 2015.) Studies have examined knowledge transfer in both organizational level (McGuinness et al., 2013; Oddou et al., 2013), where knowledge is transferred within organizational networks, and individual level (Burmeister et al., 2015; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018), where knowledge transfer occurs between individuals, such as employees. There are also few studies examining knowledge transfer on a dyadic level, including perspectives from both knowledge sources (e.g. repatriate) and knowledge recipient (e.g. domestic employee) (Burmeister et al., 2018; Joshi et al., 2007).

Moreover, the literature focusing on repatriate knowledge transfer from a process perspective is rare. In fact, until 2015 there was no empirical studies focusing on repatriate knowledge transfer from a process perspective (Burmeister et al., 2015). Burmeister et al. (2015) aimed to fill this gap in the literature and proposed RKT process model (please see in the Figure 4) explaining the repatriates knowledge transfer from an individual perspective. Specifically, the model describes the roles, activities and interaction between repatriates, recipients, and supervisors through four stages: assessment, initiation, execution, and evaluation.

During *assessment*, each party make considerations that affect the decisions whether to act or not (in this case, transfer or receive knowledge). For example, repatriates assess whether the knowledge they hold is useful enough to be shared or not. *Initiation* regards the initiatives or facilitating approaches, such as suitable timing to transfer knowledge. *Execution* means the actual knowledge transfer. Finally, each participant *evaluates* the results and approach of the transfer. (Burmeister et al., 2015.) The key contribution of the model is that “the relative weight of each component of the framework varies among actors and across the four phases of RKT” (Burmeister et al., 2015, pp. 748). This is in line with the general understanding of knowledge transfer as a dynamic phenomenon, influenced by diverse actors.

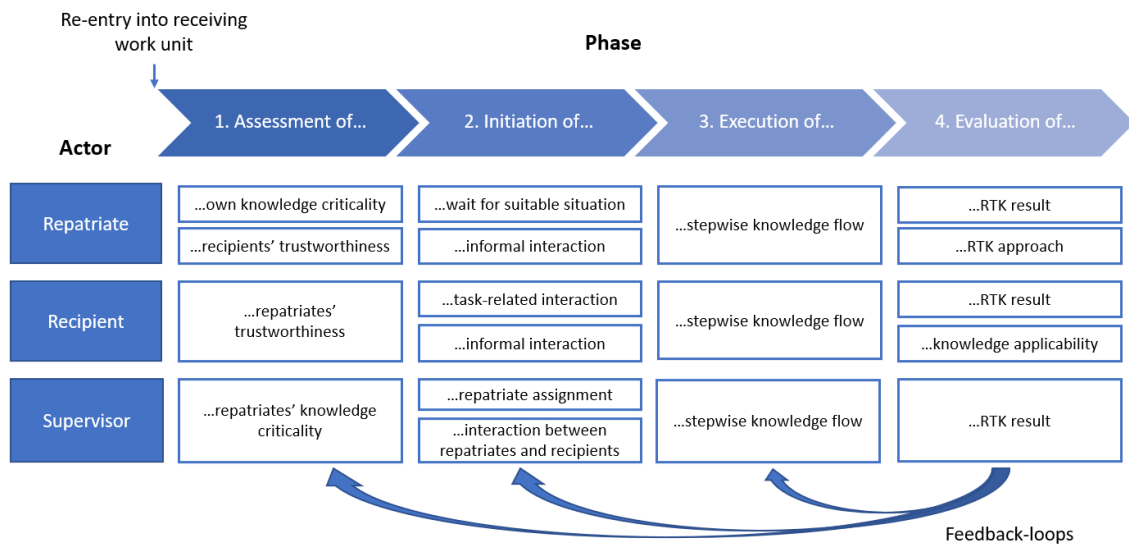


Figure 5. Repatriate knowledge transfer process (Burmeister et al., 2015, pp. 743).

2.3 Characteristics and types of repatriate knowledge

The nature of knowledge is proposed to be one of the key factors influencing individual knowledge transfer and sharing (e.g. Ipe, 2003; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). In the literature, knowledge is typically defined between diverse distinctions, such as tacit versus

specific, generic versus specific, and firm specific versus national specific (Bonache & Brewster, 2001). The dimension between **tacit versus explicit** determinates the transferability of knowledge: the more tacit the knowledge, the more difficult it is to codify and communicate further. Indeed, application is the only way to “reveal” tacit knowledge. On the contrary, explicit knowledge can be easily communicated through formal language, such as documents and manuals. (Riusala & Suutari, 2004.) Furthermore, the knowledge expatriates gain is typically both contextual and mostly tacit by its nature. According to Antal (2000, pp. 37), tacit knowledge is “something that the individuals who hold it cannot immediately identify and express, and those people with whom they share it need time to absorb and understand the new knowledge that the expatriate took years to gain abroad”. Therefore, the utilization of expatriate’s knowledge needs high adaptation when applying after return. (Antal, 2000.)

Furthermore, there can be distinguished two research typologies in repatriate knowledge (Burmeister et al., 2015). Antal (2000) categorized five types of knowledge that repatriates can bring back to parent companies: knowing what (declarative), knowing how (procedural), knowing when (conditional), knowing why (axiomatic) and finally, knowing who (relational). *Declarative knowledge* is explicit knowledge, regarding the knowledge about the cultural differences between host country and home country. *Procedural knowledge* describes processes and skills expatriates gain, such as general management skills, specialist skills, and knowledge of how to learn. *Conditional knowledge* means the increasing understanding of in which situations is appropriate to utilize the newly acquired knowledge, thus understanding of a suitable timing. Moreover, *axiomatic knowledge* regards an increasing cross-cultural understanding and finally, *relational knowledge* the networks and relationships expatriates gain while being abroad. (Antal, 2000.)

The other typology of repatriate knowledge is proposed by Fink et al. (2005). This categorization of repatriate knowledge includes 1) market-specific knowledge 2) personal skills 3) job-related management skills 4) network knowledge and 5) general

management capacity. *Market-specific knowledge* is rather easy to transfer, and it regards the knowledge about the local environment, such as political, social, and economic systems, language, customers, and business procedures. On the contrary, *personal skills* consist of the development of expatriates' soft skills, such as intercultural skills, tolerance, and openness, and are therefore difficult to transfer. Also *job-related management skills* are difficult to transfer and consists of several soft skills relating to work, such as communication skills, project management skills and problem-solving skills. The fourth type of knowledge, *network knowledge*, is partly transferable and is rather similar to Antal's (2000) relational knowledge, regarding the increasing network expatriates gain. Finally, *general management capacity* grows since expatriates work with a wide range of business functions and learn to understand a wider picture of business. General management capacity is type of knowledge which cannot be transferred. (Fink et al., 2005.)

In addition to the widely adapted classifications, many researchers have aimed to describe repatriate knowledge. Lazarova and Cerdin (2007, pp. 405) describe the role of expatriates as following: "Expatriates are in a position to obtain knowledge about the rules of doing business internationally and the complexities of international operations, the characteristics of national markets, their business climate, cultural patterns, structure of the market system, and, most importantly, knowledge about individual customers and suppliers". Oddou et al., (2013) study suggest, according to the common understanding in the literature, that repatriates gain highly important global knowledge, wider perspectives, global mindset, networks, personal growth, and better management and communications capability. Sanchez-Vidal et al., (2018) describe the tacit nature of repatriate knowledge and emphasize that the acquisition of this type of knowledge requires an exposure to foreign cultures. Moreover, Oddou et al., (2009) note that due to the tacit nature of repatriate knowledge, repatriates themselves might not be totally aware of the knowledge their hold, which in turn challenges the knowledge transfer process.

2.4 The role of individuals in knowledge transfer

Studies on RTK have increasingly recognized the role of an individual in facilitating knowledge transfer process (e.g. Burmeister et al., 2015, 2018; Furuya et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2013; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Mäkelä & Brewster, 2009; Oddou et al., 2009, 2013; Reiche, 2012; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). There is widely held assumption that repatriates' characteristics, such as their **ability** and **motivation** to share knowledge, influence on reverse knowledge transfer (Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Also, **opportunities for interaction** are considered one of the major factors influencing on the process (Blumberg & Pringle 1982). However, studies state a need for better understanding of the micro-level processes behind RKT.

One of the widely adapted frameworks in the research field is a AMO -framework by Blumberg and Pringle (1982), please see in the Figure 5. The model consists of three variables, namely motivation (willingness), ability (capacity), and opportunity, and suggests that work performance depends on these three variables. (Burmeister et al., 2015.) Specifically, according to Blumberg and Pringle (1982, pp. 565) individual performance "is determined by opportunity, willingness, and capacity and, in turn, is a partial determinant of each".

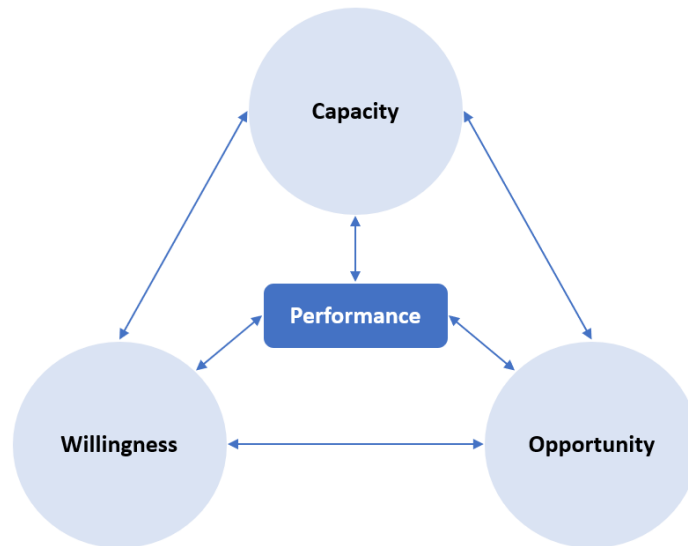


Figure 6. AMO -framework (Blumberg and Pringle 1982, pp. 565).

Also previous studies propose, in line with the AMO-framework, that repatriates' ability and motivation to share knowledge, also known as disseminative capacity, play a key role in the reverse knowledge transfer process (Burmeister et al., 2015, 2018; Oddou et al., 2009; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). For example Burmeister et al., (2015) studied the micro-processes behind RKT and propose that ability and motivation of the actors, and the opportunities to interact play the key roles in the knowledge transfer process. Moreover, their findings indicate that repatriates' ability to transfer knowledge is more important to the success of knowledge transfer than their motivation to share knowledge. (Burmeister et al., 2015).

Moreover, Lazarova & Tarique (2005) propose that repatriates' readiness to transfer knowledge is essential and depends on the knowledge that repatriates' have, and their motivation to transfer this knowledge. Furthermore, Furuya et al., (2009) findings suggest that repatriates' self-adjustment is positively related to competency transfer, which further affects job motivation and work performance. Moreover, Ipe (2003) proposed

that individual knowledge sharing depends on four factors, namely on the type of knowledge, individuals' motivation, opportunities for interaction, and finally the organizational culture. Some key findings from the previous studies are summarized in the Table 1.

Year	Authors	Key contribution
2005	Lazarova and Tarique	Effective knowledge transfer requires a fit between individual readiness to transfer knowledge and organizational receptivity to receive knowledge.
2009	Furuya et al.	Organizational support, intercultural personality characteristics, self-adjustment, and repatriation policies affect global competency learning and transfer, which in turn affect job motivation and performance.
2009	Mäkelä and Brewster	Interunit meetings, project groups, cross-border teams, and repatriate interactions are related to social capital and knowledge sharing
2009	Oddou et al.	Characteristics of repatriates (knowledge senders) and work unit (knowledge recipient), and their relationship moderate reverse knowledge transfer process.
2012	Reiche	How and under what conditions repatriates' host-unit social capital entails knowledge benefits
2013	Huang et al.	Knowledge sharing motivation and opportunity mediate the relationship between knowledge governance mechanisms and knowledge sharing behavior of repatriates.
2013	Oddou et al.	Factors that either hinder or facilitate RKT.
2015	Burmeister et al.	RKT process model from an individual perspective
2018	Burmeister et al.	Repatriates' disseminative capacity, domestic employees' absorptive capacity, and formal interaction opportunities between repatriates and domestic employees are positively related to reverse knowledge transfer.
2018	Sanchez-Vidal et al.	Repatriates' disseminative capacity (ability and motivation to transfer knowledge) is positively related to reverse knowledge transfer.

Table 1. Findings on the role of an individual in RKT from previous studies.

Furthermore, there are a few studies examining RKT from the both the knowledge sender's and receiver's perspective. For example, Oddou et al., (2009) proposed a conceptual model of RKT, suggesting that both knowledge transferors and knowledge receivers need to be able and motivated to transfer knowledge. Besides, they proposed that work unit's receptivity (as a knowledge receiver) depends largely on its orientation towards learning, absorptive capacity, global mindset, and the role of collaborative leadership in the unit (Oddou et al., 2009). Also, Burmeister et al., (2018) contributed to the literature by providing the first empirical study from a dyadic perspective, focusing both the role of repatriates as knowledge senders and domestic employees as knowledge recipients. Their findings indicate that not only repatriates' motivation and ability to transfer knowledge, but also domestic employees' absorptive capacity, and their opportunities to interact facilitate RKT process.

2.4.1 Ability and motivation to transfer knowledge

As discussed earlier, repatriates' disseminative capacity, which refers to their ability and motivation to share knowledge, is expected to be positively related to the knowledge transfer process (e.g. Burmeister et al., 2015, 2018; Oddou et al., 2009; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). Studies have aimed to identify the drivers behind repatriates' disseminative capacity, in order to understand ways to enhance the knowledge transfer process of repatriates. For example, Sanchez-Vidal et al., (2018) propose that repatriates' disseminative capacity is affected by the **knowledge** repatriates gain abroad. In the literature, knowledge and skills have been proposed as potential drivers to repatriates' disseminative capacity, but there is lack of empirical studies on the matter. However, there is widely held assumption that expatriation offers an unique condition to acquire number of diverse, often tacit knowledge and skills (Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018).

Moreover, their findings suggests that in addition to the level of knowledge, also firms' **international assignment policies** have an influence on the disseminative capacity. Specifically, the results indicate that whether a firm has consistent international assignment policies and whether the assignments are related to the career development of employees, the higher the disseminative capacity of repatriates is. (Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018.) Also other studies have examined the role of organizational policies and practices regarding repatriates' disseminative capacity (e.g. Furuya et al., 2009; Oddou et al., 2013). For example Furuya et al., (2009) findings indicate that organizational support and repatriation policies affect global competency learning and transfer.

Moreover, studies have proposed diverse **employee characteristics** affect repatriate's disseminative capacity (Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). For example Furuya et al., (2009) proposed that not only organizational support and repatriation policies, but also *intercultural personality characteristics* and *repatriate self-adjustment* influence on competency learning and transfer, and in turn affect job motivation and performance.

Specifically, they present that repatriates with high level of intercultural personality characteristics were positively associated to acquiring global management competency, which further advance global competency transfer. Besides, there are a high positive relation between repatriate self-adjustment and global competency transfer. (Furuya et al., 2009). Also Oddou et al., (2009) propose that both repatriates' individual characteristics and job-related characteristics influence their disseminative capacity. Indeed, they proposed that repatriates' ability to transfer knowledge depends on repatriates' *expertise*, their *ability to form social networks*, the *level of position power* in their job in the parent company, and *the level of similarity between the international assignments and the responsibilities in the parent company*. Moreover, repatriates' motivation depends on repatriates' *career considerations* and their *commitment* towards the work unit and organization (Oddou et al., 2009).

2.4.2 Opportunities for interaction

In addition to the individual characteristics of repatriates, the opportunities for knowledge sharing have been shown to influence the knowledge transfer process. Indeed, aligned with the AMO-framework (Blumberg & Pringle 1982), knowledge senders' and recipients' opportunity for interaction have found to be positively related to RKT (e.g. Burmeister et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2013). Opportunity refers to the environmental variables that are beyond employees control, and can have a significant role in determining one's performance (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982). In terms of knowledge sharing, opportunities for interaction can be categorized into formal and informal opportunities (Ipe, 2003.) **Formal opportunity** means "a planned learning opportunity" (Huang et al., 2013), and include example training programs, structured work teams, and diverse systems advancing knowledge sharing. On the other hand, **informal opportunities**, also known as relational knowledge sharing channels, can advance face-to-face communication between knowledge senders and recipients, which in turn develops trust between the parties and also advance the knowledge sharing (Ipe, 2003.)

In terms of RKT, repatriates can acquire interaction opportunities through social relationships, which further offer opportunities for knowledge sharing. Individuals are shown to be more willing to share knowledge if they find suitable channels for that kind of behavior, and on the contrary, less willing if knowledge sharing is perceived as requiring lots of effort. (Huang et al., 2013.) Upon return, repatriates involved in the *socialization process*, when learning and adapting to the norms, attitudes, and behavior of the group in the work unit, while aiming to fit in (Oddou et al., 2009). This requires frequent communication between the repatriates and work unit (Oddou et al., 2009), and therefore opportunities for interactions plays a relevant role in the socialization process (Burmeister et al., 2018). Also, study by Huang et al. (2013) argues that motivations and opportunities play remarkable role in knowledge sharing and propose a positive relationship between relational opportunity (social capital) and knowledge transfer.

2.5 Theoretical framework of the study

This chapter summarizes the theoretical framework of this study. Previous studies have proposed diverse factors as potential drivers of RKT and stated a need for more empirical studies on the individual-level factors behind RKT. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of RKT, focusing on the role of knowledge in RKT and the individual attributes influencing repatriates' knowledge transfer.

The framework is based on the widely utilized AMO-framework by Blumberg and Pringle (1982). It proposes that individual work performance depends on three interacting variables, namely motivation, ability, and opportunity. In line with the model and previous studies, this study assumes that repatriates' disseminative capacity, namely motivation and ability (Burmeister et al., 2015, 2018; Oddou et al., 2009; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018) and opportunities for interaction (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982; Burmeister et al., 2015) play a remarkable role in reverse knowledge transfer. Due to the lack of a common understanding of the drivers behind RKT, this study aims to contribute to this gap and discover potential individual attributes affecting these three variables.

Besides, also the role of knowledge is examined in this study. Specifically, the aim is to discover what kind of knowledge expatriates develop and transfer. In previous studies, knowledge is proposed as a potential driver for repatriate knowledge transfer (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005) and knowledge sharing (Ipe, 2003), but studies examining the relationship empirically are rare (Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). In this study, the common typology of repatriate knowledge by Fink et al. (2005) is adapted. The typology consists of five types of knowledges and describes their extent of transferability. According to the typology, repatriate knowledge consists of market-specific knowledge, personal skills, job-related management skills, network knowledge and general management capacity. Market-specific knowledge is rather easy to transfer, whereas general management capacity cannot be transferred. Network knowledge is partly transferable, and both personal and job-related soft skills are difficult to transfer. (Fink et al., 2005.) This study utilizes this categorization of knowledge, aiming to provide more profound understanding of the role of knowledge in repatriate knowledge transfer.

3 Methodology

In this section, the methodological choices of the thesis are presented. The choice of the methods is made on the basis of the research questions of this thesis. First, this chapter presents the research philosophy, which forms a background for the other methodological choices. After that, the research design of the study is presented. Research design is followed by the discussion of the data collection and data analysis, and finally the trustworthiness of the study is argued.

3.1 Research philosophy

This study relies on ontological perspective which understand reality as subjective. Ontology “concerns the ideas about the existence of and relationship between people, society, and the world in general” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 13). Besides, ontological choices are closely link to epistemology, which concerns knowledge, its limits, and sources (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 14). This study relies on *subjectivism* research philosophy, which perceives “reality as being socially constructed” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 15), and therefore assumes that knowledge can be acquired through social actors. Moreover, subjectivism links to constructionism, emphasizing the social nature of reality and leaning on the idea that “social actors produce social reality through social interactions” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 14). This study focuses on repatriates (social actors) and examine knowledge transfer through their experiences and perspectives. The study aims to build understanding of repatriate knowledge transfer through the social interactions of repatriates.

Moreover, subjectivism is related to a philosophical position called *interpretivism*, and also adapted in this study. Interpretivism regards subjective and shared meanings, focusing on how people “interpret and understand social events and settings”. Therefore, studies relying on interpretivism focus not only the content of the data but also the way it is produced, therefore leaving space for various interpretations. Besides, common

form of interpretivism is social constructionism: “Social constructionism seeks to understand how the seemingly ‘objective’ features, such as industries, organizations and technologies, are constituted by subjective meanings of individuals and intersubjective processes such as discourses” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 20).

Furthermore, this study applies an *abductive* reasoning. Abductive reasoning can be adapted as a combination of the two basic research directions, induction, and deduction. In deduction, a study proceeds from theory to empirical analysis. On the contrary, an inductive study proceeds from empirical research to theoretical outcomes. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008.) This study combines both inductive and deductive reasoning. The empirical research is basing on previous studies and theories. However, both theory and data are altered and developed simultaneously, and the data is analyzed utilizing both the findings of the study and previous literature.

3.2 Research design

Research design is “the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study’s initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusions” (Yin, 2009, pp. 26). Research design therefore ensures that research question is addressed properly throughout the study, for example through suitable data collection method.

In this study a **qualitative research approach** is adapted. Due to its high suitability for in-depth investigations, a qualitative research approach is commonly utilized in case studies (Farquhar, 2013). In qualitative approaches, the focus is typically on the interpretation and understanding of diverse phenomena. Indeed, Farquhar (2013) describes qualitative data as way to increase understanding or interpretations, whereas quantitative data are typically for measurements or counting. Qualitative data collection and analysis are “sensitive to the context aiming at a holistic understanding of the issues studied” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 5). Therefore, qualitative research approach is adapted to study repatriate knowledge transfer.

Moreover, a **case study** is adapted as a qualitative research approach in this study. Case study is a common method in business research, allowing to gain “a holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life-events” (Yin, 2009, pp. 4). Also, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, pp. 116) explain that case study allows to present “complex and hard-to-grasp business issues in an accessible, vivid, personal, and down-to-earth format”. To capture that, case study research typically does not implement simplistic research design but to leave space for complexity and diversity (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This study adapts a case study as a study method, since the aim of this study is to gain in-depth understanding on a complex social phenomenon, namely the knowledge transfer of repatriates. Also, the second research question of this study seeks to understand present circumstance through a “how” question, being explanatory by its nature. Therefore, case study presents a suitable method for studying the topic. (Yin, 2009.)

The unit of analysis of this case study are repatriates. Particularly, the case focuses on expatriates who have returned from long-term corporate expatriation. Long-term corporate expatriation is defined as an international assignment of a length of a minimum of one year. Since the focus is on the knowledge transfer upon return, the case is limited to repatriates who have continued working after the return, either in the same company or another. Moreover, this study adapts a **multiple-case design**. The unit of analysis includes repatriates from diverse companies, industries, and countries, and therefore the study considers multiple cases. Furthermore, a **holistic design** is adapted in this study. Only one unit of analysis, namely repatriates, is analyzed. Involving sub-units would have offered opportunities for more profound analysis, however, a holistic design enables to focus only on the chosen unit. Moreover, due to the time restrictions of this study, the data is analyzed at a specific point in time, and therefore the present study is **cross-sectional**.

3.3 Research methods

In this section, the research methods of the study are presented and argued. First, the sampling method is presented. Second, the data collection technique is described. Third, the chapter presents the data analysis method used in this study.

3.3.1 Sampling

In this study, the target population are *long-term corporate repatriates*. In this study, long-term corporate repatriates are defined as returned employees who have been sent to an international assignment by their employer of the minimum period of one year. The target population is not limited only to repatriates with expatriate contract. The choice is based on the relevance of the information that can be acquired from diverse types of repatriate experiences and contracts, and the limited resources of the study. However, basing on the aims of this research, the target population is limited to repatriates who have continued working after their return, either in the organization which sent them abroad or in another firm.

The sample of this target group is selected based on the availability to repatriates who were reached and who were willing to participate the interview. Moreover, the participants were reached through diverse sources and channels, for example through the personal networks of a researcher, contacting of a local community for expatriates, and also contacting repatriates directly through e-mail and messages. Also, some of the participants were reached through other participants, who were able to recommend and share contacts of the people they know. Therefore, the sampling technique of this study follows **a volunteer sampling**. Contrary to probability sampling, where each member of the target group has an equal opportunity to be selected, a volunteer sampling typically concerns participants who agree to take part in the study. This sampling technique was chosen due to the high number of members in the target population of this study, which should have been reached in order to adapt probability sampling technique (Jupp, 2015.)

In this study, the sample consists of nine participants, three females and six males. Majority of the participants, six out of nine, are Finnish, one is Lithuanian, and one is Latvian. The participants worked in diverse positions, companies, and industries. However, telecommunication was a dominant industry among the study participants. Also, eight participants worked in private sector, whereas one worked in public sector. Moreover, the participants have different educational backgrounds, for example background in studies in University of Applied Sciences to studies at a PhD level. The majority of the participants have a higher educational background.

Furthermore, the participants had different types of contracts during their international assignments. Two participants had local contracts, while six had expatriate contracts. One of the participants shared his experiences from two diverse assignments, and one of with an expatriate contract and the other one with a local contract. Moreover, regardless the type of contracts, there was noted to be differences in the packages offered by an employer. For example, one participant with a local contract explained that the biggest differences between local and expatriate contract regards monetary benefits, and an expatriate contract was perceived to be much higher regards its monetary value. On the other hand, the participants who had experiences in both expatriate and local contracts, expressed that there were no big differences between them. He described that the biggest difference was the fact that he no longer belonged in the social security system of his home country, but otherwise the local package was even partially better. Therefore, it can be noticed that the contract itself does necessarily determinate the benefits, but the offerings are highly company specific.

Furthermore, the length of the assignments varied between 1,5 years to 15 years. However, the most typical length of the assignment was three to four years, which concerned seven out of nine of the participants. The time of return varied between the years 2002 – 2017. All except one participant had returned to work to the same company which initially sent them abroad. Only one participant started to work in another company after

return. However, this was influenced by the fact that the previous employer could not offer a position in the home country.

Also, many of the participants had prior international experiences, for example background in working or studying in another country, or prior expatriation experiences. However, it varied between the interviews whether the focus was only in one expatriation experience of a participants or more. Therefore, in the following table, only the expatriation experiences of the participants that have been discussed during the interviews and are therefore part of the data of this study, are presented. Please see the summarized information of the study participants in the Table 2.

Participant code	Nationality	Gender	Industry of a home organization	Host country	Lenght of the assignment	Year of return	Repatriated to the company which sent abroad	Appr. lenght of the interview
A	Lithuanian	Female	Telecommunications	Singapore	3 years 3 months	2014	Yes	1 h
B	Latvian	Female	Telecommunications	India	3 years	2012	Yes	30 min
C	Finnish	Female	Public administration	Russia	3 years	2017	Yes	20 min
D	Finnish	Male	Telecommunications	Mexico, United Arab Emirates	3 + 4 years	2008	Yes	45 min
E	Finnish	Male	Telecommunications	Germany	3 + 3 years	2010	Yes	25 min
F	Finnish	Male	Telecommunications	USA	4 years	2002	Yes	35 min
G	Finnish	Male	Software development	USA	1,5 years	2017	No	55 min
H	Finnish	Male	Telecommunications	China	3 years	2010	Yes	25 min
I	Finnish	Male	Retail	Estonia	15 years	2017	Yes	1h 5min

Table 2. Study participants.

3.3.2 Data collection

This study collects a primary data through semi-structured interviews. Primary data allows to gain insights on the studied phenomenon through a fresh data (Farquhar, 2013), in this case repatriate knowledge transfer. Semi-structured interviews are commonly

used in qualitative studies (Farquhar, 2013) and allow to acquire material systemically, but still maintaining relatively conversational and informal interview settings (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Indeed, the aim is to create circumstances where a participant is encouraged to speak of the topic studied, while keeping conversational settings (Farquhar, 2013).

In this study, a semi-structured interview structure consisting of the key themes to be discussed was formulated. The questions were mostly “what” and “how”-questions, which are allowed through semi-structured interviews (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Indeed, open questions are typical in qualitative surveys and enable a participant to describe their thoughts through her/his own words. Moreover, in order to gain accurate data in light of the research questions, the interview themes and questions varied during the data collection. When an initial understanding of the topic was gained during the first interviews, the interview structure was altered to acquire accurate data. Please see the interview structure in the Table 3.

Part of the interview	Key themes
Background information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Educational background - Current job position - Expatriation experience: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host country • Time period • Repatriation
What kind of knowledge repatriates transfer and how?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What types of knowledge are acquired and transferred: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal soft skills • Network knowledge • Market-specific knowledge • Job-related soft skills • General management capacity • Other - How the knowledge is transferred, examples of transfer - How the transfer is perceived, easy – difficult
How the individual attributes of repatriates influence the knowledge transfer ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How the following factors have affected: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personality, motivation, attitudes • Position • Type of knowledge • Opportunities for interaction • Commitment and career considerations • Repatriate self-adjustment • Other - Additional information

Table 3. Key themes of the interviews.

In total, nine persons were interviewed to gain an understanding on the topic. In a qualitative research, the aim is to gain understanding of a chosen phenomenon, and therefore an appropriate number of participants is difficult to define. (Farquhar, 2013). Moreover, all of the interviews were conducted through a video call. Due to technical challenges, one interview was conducted without a camera. The length of the interviews varied between 25 minutes to a bit over one hour, depending on the schedule of the study participants and amount of information that was shared. The interviews were conducted with a shared language: two interviews were conducted in English and seven of them in Finnish. The English-spoken interviews were not in the participants' native language. Moreover, all of the interviews were recorded.

After the interviews, the recordings were changed into a written form, and the most relevant comments and parts were transcribed precisely. During this phase, the analysis of the data was already started. Also, the most relevant Finnish -spoken comments were afterwards translated into English, in order to utilize direct quotes in the paper.

3.3.3 Data analysis

Data analysis refers to “recombining evidence to draw empirically based conclusions”. (Yin, 2009, pp. 126). That can include for example examination, categorization, or tabulating the data. However, the analysis is one of the least developed phase of case study, including only few stable formulas, and therefore a researcher should follow a general analytic strategy to overcome the challenges linked to the analysis (Yin, 2009).

The analysis technique of this study follows the principles of thematic coding. The data was analyzed manually. The analysis was started by familiarizing oneself with the transcripts, highlighting the most relevant comments and labelling the data under descriptive codes. This was done for each interview, one by one. Then, the descriptive codes were grouped and categorized basing on the similarities and shared meanings, and finally the occurring key themes were defined. Data categories were built both from theory and from the data. Part of the coding was already done during the data collection phase when the interviews were transcribed. This technique enabled to start the analysis process in an early phase and make sure the interview structure was able to meet the study objectives.

3.4 Trustworthiness of the study

Reliability and validity are classic evaluation criteria in business research. *Reliability* refers to “the extent to which a measure, procedure, or instrument yields the same result on repeated trials” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 292). In other words, reliability

refers to the consistency of research, and measures whether another researcher can acquire similar results if a same study is repeated. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008.) Moreover, *validity* means “the extent to which conclusions drawn in research give an accurate description or explanation of what happened” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 292). However, there are varying views among qualitative researchers whether reliability and validity can evaluate properly the quality of a qualitative research. If a study relies on subjectivist epistemology or especially on constructionism, as this thesis does, alternative evaluation criteria is preferable. Therefore, Lincoln’s and Cuba’s concept of trustworthiness is adapted in this study and measured through *transferability*, *credibility*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

The transferability of this study is enhanced by the versatility of the sample, consisting of participants from diverse countries, positions, and companies. Therefore, the results do not regard only a particular group, for example repatriates within a specific company, which enhance the transferability of the study results. Moreover, a careful description of the research settings, assumptions, and research techniques is provided. Therefore, the process and context under which this study is conducted, is easily available for other researchers.

To enhance *credibility*, the interviews were recorded, and the transcripts carefully analyzed, to avoid any misunderstandings. Also, during the analysis, certain parts of the recordings were re-listened, for example to make sure a context of a direct quote is correctly understood. However, it must be noted that two of nine interviews were not conducted in participants’ native language but in English, besides, all of the Finnish-speaking quotes were translated into English by a researcher. These language-related aspects might have some level of influence on the findings. Also, some examples of the topics were given during the interviews to encourage participants to more in-depth discussion, which might influence the direction of the discussions.

Moreover, *dependability* concerns the information about the research process, and it should be logical and documented. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008.) As described previously, the choices and diverse stages of the study is clearly presented in the study. Also, this chapter provides further information of the trustworthiness of the process.

Finally, *confirmability* is enhanced when “linking findings and interpretations to the data in ways that can be easily understood by others” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 294). The findings of this study are presented in a logical and clear manner, in a way that it is easy for a reader to get a comprehensive understanding of the findings. Moreover, the findings are argued with direct quotes and comments from the study participants. Also, when noted to be relevant, additional thoughts of the participants are presented hand in hand with a direct quote, to provide more profound understanding of the context of a particular quote.

4 Findings

In this chapter, the findings of the study are presented. The study aims to build better understanding of the factors that influencing repatriate knowledge transfer, examining the topic from an individual perspective. This chapter presents the interview findings with regard to the research questions of the thesis. First, the findings regarding the type of knowledge developed and transferred are presented. Second, the findings of the individual attributes influencing repatriate knowledge transfer are presented.

4.1 Type of knowledge

The findings regarding the type of knowledge developed and transferred are presented in this chapter. In order to answer the question of what kind of knowledge repatriates transfer, it was necessary to first find out the type of knowledge repatriates develop during their international assignments. The following types of knowledge were discovered : network knowledge, personal soft skills, job-related management skills, market-specific knowledge, general management skills, and knowledge regarding expatriation process. The data categorization is basing on the typology of repatriate knowledge by Fink et al. (2005). However, one of the knowledges, knowledge regarding expatriation process, occurred as a new type from the data. In this chapter, each type of knowledge are discussed in a separate sub-chapter. First, the findings of what kind of knowledge is developed is described and second, whether and how the knowledge is transferred is presented.

4.1.1 Network knowledge

The majority of the participants had increased their professional networks during the expatriation, which is in line with the earlier research findings. During the interviews, network knowledge was noted to be one of the types of knowledge which is rather easy

to identify and express. Network knowledge was increased gradually during the expatriation experience. During the interviews, many participants highlighted the effort they needed to put on building networks in the beginning of their expatriation, in order to adapt to a new work community:

...And out of the sudden you are in a place where nothing is documented, and you should know that Jack is responsible for that and John for that and if you need to know something about that you should ask maybe for Diana... (laughs). It was pretty difficult to get in, it took very long until you get the hang of it. And it was necessary to get acquaintances. (G)

However, one of the participants mentioned a differing experience of gaining network knowledge. Gaining network knowledge was felt easy and effortless, which was basing on the remarkable position of the company in the local market and the participant's professional position during the expatriation :

Yes definitely [I acquired networks]. During those years I kind of got to know everyone. So...of course that... I didn't need to put a lot of effort for it because there were so many people willing to talk to. (I)

What comes to the transfer of network knowledge, it was generally perceived to be relatively easy. Each of the participants who identified network knowledge as a learning had somehow utilized it afterwards, either through own work or by sharing it inside a company. Even the only participant who had employed by another company after the expatriation, expressed that he has been able to utilize the same practices and learnings, even though most of the contacts were different. The following comment describes the experiences of the transfer by participant F, who were able to transfer network knowledge broadly inside a company:

Network knowledge was definitely transferred. All the contacts, professional networks which I built in there were of course available for me, for my team, and for the whole company. And it transferred in a fund... It transferred in an explicit and formal way that I could do that, even introduce people to each other like 'hey this is X from our company, and we met there and then'. (F)

Besides the transfer of actual contacts, the participants also shared other kind of information regarding their networks. This information was shared informally. For example, an information on how these contacts should be approached was transferred further:

Well yeah, or let's say those contacts are that [knowledge that he has been able to transfer informally]. Like I have been able to transfer that network of contacts. Like who knows, what they know, what competencies they do have. And maybe also, not only 'who knows' but also like how to approach. Maybe it is that semi soft value. Like when...people are a bit like how to...Often you can have people speak up in a different way when you know what interest them. When you start a conversation by talking about football first and then you go to your point, like not directly asking the thing you wanted, if you know that something like that interests him so...People open up in a very different way for that. (I)

Moreover, the knowledge of the expertise, competencies, or personal perceptions of the contacts were shared. The following comment describes the transfer of this type of network knowledge. The transfer was occurred informally, in terms of questions from colleagues:

...'In this article it is said about this and this guy, do you think that is trustworthy?' or 'this kind of guy offered us a plot, do you know him, it seems a little bit vague?' or... These kinds of questions I was facing weekly, or then also, there has been questions about our personnel like 'he has applied for this position, what kind of perception you had about him back then we you were with him, as you worked so many years, do you think he would be suitable for this?' like recommendations. That kind of stuff. (I)

In addition to transferring network knowledge to colleagues, the participants had utilized network knowledge in their own role, through their job assignments and tasks. Therefore, the contacts and networks acquired abroad were transferred in a new role back to home organization, despite the lack of explicit knowledge sharing. The participants had utilized the networks in their job assignments and projects, and also the background of working together were found beneficial. The following comments describe the experiences of the participants:

...And I have utilized that network in many times during these years. When that network was built during that time, like mostly the internal networks of the company in my case, not so much that market-specific knowledge that you have here, I didn't acquire it so much during my work experiences that I did there. More like the internal networks of the firm indeed, and that I have been able to utilize

afterwards in many different projects we have proceeded. And those networks are still very strong. (H)

...You know, it was not just, I would say that ability, but once again these experiences, and for example I got to work with the same people I worked... when, when was it... 7-8 years ago. So, like you know I got to work this year with somebody for example. And having that past experience of working together, knowing that I can confide in that person, it made it much easier for us to work together. (A)

4.1.2 Personal soft skills

The study participants identified several personal soft skills they have acquired during their expatriation, such as intercultural skills, higher adaptability, tolerance of ambiguity, and increased self-confidence. These skills were developed through the intense exposure to a new culture and environment. Soft skills were found to be a remarkable part of the knowledge acquired.

Intercultural skills were identified as a remarkable learning by almost every participant, and many provided concrete examples of the situations they faced during the expatriation. The participants highlighted the development of the intercultural skills, identifying it as one of the key learnings:

What I definitely learnt a lot a lot a lot was from, like a cultural working...working cultural differences. So of course, with Indian colleagues in Indian a lot... I learned a lot how (pause) what's the best way to work, to manage, how not to get into conflicts and really... so a lot of these things. (A)

Yes, I can say that these [learnings] regards mostly the cultural working, with different cultural groups and people. That is maybe the biggest thing in it. (E)

Moreover, the participants highlighted that intercultural understanding was highly important in order to succeed at work. For example, participant A described the cultural understanding she acquired was very useful in order to understand the different working styles and work in that environment:

...This will explain why you know you would feel sometimes...would seem to me would waste lot of time in different discussions and not move forward. So

yeah...I would say these cultural, communication learnings was a key to learn everything else. (A)

Another soft skill that was highlighted in the interviews was an increased **adaptability**. The participants needed to integrate into a new society during their expatriation, which promote an increased capability to build networks effectively and adjust own behavior:

Out of the sudden you are in an environment where you don't have that old network. You don't have those old friends from college, you don't know the local companies and you have to get to know them and through that you learn to like open doors and step up and say that 'hi this and that is me and I'm coming from here and there'. So that is maybe...maybe the most important skill, this kind of personal ability to step up into a strange environment and start building relationships in there. (F)

...And another important [learning] was, probably in both [host countries] perhaps at least in Dubai even more is that kind of understanding of 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do'. (D)

But also, I basically learned that I can...I can integrate in any society. If I could integrate in India, then I know that I can adjust, and culturally adjust to any society. There is like, there is no place in the world where I would say 'no I would not go there for a year'. No, there is no such place, I can go anywhere. (B)

Moreover, through the intense exposure to a new environment, it was discovered that the participants also developed their **tolerance for ambiguity**. One participant described the expatriation experience as following: "While working on assignment I think I very often felt like...(laughs) You know when you through someone in the water and we learn how to swim (laughs)." (A). The comment describes the number of uncertainties and the level of unpredictability the participants faced during their expatriation. The following comment describes the development of the tolerance for ambiguity, when working in a new, uncertain environment:

Tolerance of ambiguity, yes [it improved]. That before I went [abroad] I was in those specialist positions and in the parent company, which was firstly, like it was already back then about a hundred years old and well-managed, and all those organizational supports were systematic... – – But when you went there [abroad], it was like jumping to an ice hole. Like there...not like... like of course there was still all corporate specialists available, but because there were that specific, local aspects, there was nothing else to be done than figure it out and to take action. (I)

Similarly, participant F described the increasing tolerance for ambiguity. It was noted that the development of this type of soft skills is not necessarily easy to identify and express:

...That kind of courage of starting to find things out and figuring how things go in a new environment. That kind of...that kind of tolerance...I am not sure if it's a skill... a tolerance to be like 'okay I don't understand anything of this, but I'm going to figure it out' or like 'everything in this felt to be against my intuition and I am just trying to understand'. – – And also, that you understand that everything is not working as you have used to but that is not necessarily worse thing at all. Learning to face things in a positive light. (F)

Besides, it was discovered that the expatriation experience increased **the self-confidence** of the participants. During the expatriation, the participants typically faced difficult work situations and the experience of managing these successfully were noted to increase their confidence:

I felt generally much more confident, experienced, and so on so forth, like in my that role. Like you know when you see how, how difficult or challenging can be things, everything else feels little bit easier from that point of view. Then, also, I felt a bit more confident maybe... job market because having all these international experiences is always a good benefit... (A)

It gave me a lot of confidence, that experience as well. Knowing that I could cope with people who in India where very change resistant, it gave me a lot of confidence just to many other persons that, yes there can be many perspectives but then together we...we will find the most optimal solution. (B)

What comes to the transfer of personal soft skills, there were differences among the study participants, but it was generally perceived to be a complex process. It was noted that this type of knowledge can be verbally shared, but not necessarily truly transferred. Indeed, a repatriate can tell or share his/her experiences and learnings, but the adaptation of these skills would require a personal experience or exposure on behalf of the knowledge receiver. Participant A explained this dilemma:

... You have to listen between the lines, you have to...you know, all these things I learned in hard way, I think, I could spend a couple of hours and to tell to anyone. So that point of view it can be easily shared because this is not very complex...knowledge. It's like, cultural differences are always interesting to everyone.

But I don't think it's something that can be taught, you know, something everyone learns themselves. (A)

Similarly, participant B highlighted the high level of adaptation that the transfer of soft skills requires. As the transfer requires not only a willingness to transfer knowledge by a knowledge sender but active adaptation by a knowledge receiver, the role of the latter was emphasized:

Because especially in this case with the soft skills, it really requires personality and mind-set change in communication with Indian for example, so that you to reach your target, to reach your result with them. And not every person is willing to adjust. (B)

Also, participant E described the knowledge he has gained, which consists mostly of the personal skills. He felt that the knowledge he holds is difficult to directly transfer to somebody else:

Regarding my tasks, I would say that you should personally experience that. It is quite difficult to transfer it like that. (E)

However, also possible way to transfer soft skills occurred during the interviews. Participant F pondered whether his changed behavior was indirectly affected the colleagues. The following comment describes this type of indirect transfer through participants own, changed behavior and showing an example:

...It is hard to transfer those [soft skills], but maybe you could transfer them through an example. -- I didn't arrange any courses or tried to transfer the knowledge in an explicit way when I was back in home, but it most likely affected when we had, when I was back in Finland and we have clients visiting from some totally diverse culture, so it didn't felt strange for me, but I could kept my ears open in a right way and be like 'hey okay, now we are playing like this'. -- Probably regarding that indeed, my behavior was different after the trip [expatriation] and it transferred inside the company, or at least people have viewed it like "okay he is acting like that". I think so. (F)

Also, participant H expressed that intercultural knowledge was something that he has been able to transfer inside a company. Indeed, he explained that he was able to transfer the knowledge regarding the differences in working in the host country. Specifically, he

described the diverse ways of commitment in Chinese culture, which was the knowledge he has able to transfer back to the home organization:

Indeed, how you work with Chinese working culture and their diverse ways of commitment. – – And that is something... what I could bring back to my colleagues when I returned to work to Finland, I could bring it back like this is how things happen in there. Like how you commit people in Chinese culture, for example to something that you are trying to implement from here. (H)

4.1.3 Job-related management skills

Several job-related management skills were identified during the interviews, such as communications skills, negotiation skills, and leadership skills. **Communication skills** formed a major part of the knowledge acquired. The participants needed to adapt their communication style to the new environment. Being sensitive was emphasized during the interviews:

...When you have colleagues and subordinates from diverse kind of cultures you of course have to be sensitive, watch your words, or at least be understanding towards that, like at least try to prevent any conflicts stemming from that. (D)

Communication skills improved automatically because there are so different kind of personalities in the [organization], both Finnish and Russian who handle things differently and you have to get along with them... that some take offence at friendly advices and then you have to be careful of how to present that...(C)

It really concretized, that I really needed to think about my behavior and words and think, and really make an effort like what that person meant like... Because that behavior, reaction, was different which I was used to if being in a similar situation in Finland. (I)

Also, improved **negotiation skills** were mentioned during the interviews. Participant B explained how she has improved her negotiation skills when making business cases for decisions. She explained that the aim of making a business case was to argue a decision, for example reasons for implementing a change. The following comment describes the negotiation skills she improved:

Negotiation skills for sure. Because I had to pursued and negotiated with Indian quite a lot to convince them so.. you know kind of a lot of soft skills. To convince, to explain, to win them on my side. – – So, this creation of business cases was a

very interesting experience. Learning how to...learning how to argue my way and put facts on the table. (B)

Moreover, improved leadership skills were part of the knowhow acquired. The following participant explained how he learned to adapt his behavior, which in turn improved his leadership skills:

Well, I learned, let's say what I have utilized afterwards with my own teams, is that how you should lead different teams. That is maybe the first thing that got into me. Through your own experiences, indeed you have to adapt your leadership style a little bit depending on who you are leading, what you are reaching for. (H)

What comes to the transfer of job-related management skills, the participants had utilized the skills and knowledge mostly through their own behavior and work. There was no explicit knowledge transfer discovered. Therefore, it seemed that the transfer of job-related management skills is rather difficult. However, the following comments describe how the participant had utilized the improved skills professionally in their own role:

So, in general, for example with these business cases, I used them all over in my next project, because it was really just a natural way to put facts on table, which I didn't use before. So yes, I use it not only with Indian but just generally to achieve my target with, also with Finns, and with Americans, and with any of [company name] management in Finland and globally. (pause) (B)

Before I went there [abroad], I didn't realize, I kind of had pretty polarized communication style. It was very black and white. And there I learned indeed that, and I have utilized it afterwards, indeed that you have to have those grey shades between your communication, that how you reach everybody, reach everybody through your communication. (H)

Moreover, regarding both personal and job-related soft skills, there were discussion whether the changed behavior of a participant F had influenced his subordinates and therefore the transfer of soft skills occurred:

I had hundreds of people as subordinates so it [knowledge] is transferring to the group's actions, so I would say that there was probably transfer also regarding these soft skills. (F)

4.1.4 Market-specific knowledge

Also, market-specific knowledge was discovered as one of the types of knowledges. The participants had acquired market-specific knowledge during their expatriation, such as knowledge about the local markets, business practices, and improved their language skills. For example, the participants have increased their knowledge of the local markets of the host country. By being an expatriate in a host country, the participants naturally familiarized themselves with the consumer markets of the country. Also, other markets, such as procurement or labor market, were mentioned during the interviews:

So, probably regarding these market-specific skills, you become a specialist of that market at some extent, when you settle in there. And also, we were making, in our company, we were making products to consumers, and suddenly you became one of the consumers of the market. You had an apartment in there, your children were at schools, you bought your cars, and lived in there, so you understood that market. (F)

If talking about the Estonian markets, whether it is procurement markets, or real estate markets as we built new units in there, working with the constructionists, construction companies, and of course not to mention the most important one, labor market so our employees, and then consumer market so I think I learned so much and I can say that I am actually an expert related to these things. (I)

Moreover, some participants mentioned the business practices they had learned. For example, they had acquired knowledge regarding diverse reward systems, leadership styles, and organizational cultures. However, whether participants learned new business practices was noted to be linked to the organizational culture of the firm and its level of standardization. Therefore, the answers varied. For example, participant E did not acquire knowledge of business practices due to the similarity between the host and home organizations:

However, I was in the same firm, we practically had similar working environments already existing. So, in that sense, regarding business tools environments, they were actually very much the same, it really did not change. (E)

What comes to the transfer of market-specific knowledge, it was noted to be relatively easy to transfer. One participant explained that he had found the knowledge about the local markets to be very easily transferred, because the knowledge was very practical

and linked to the daily life. Also, the fact that the company was making products to consumers, may affected positively to the transferability of the knowledge:

And it was easy to transfer, I definitely think that the market-specific knowledge was easy to transfer, and it accrued a lot in a way which was very concrete and linked to the daily life. But it was due to the fact that we were making products to consumers, if we could have made products to some more abstracts party, I am not sure whether it would have been so easily transferred. (F)

Moreover, he explained how he had utilized his increased knowledge of the target market in the home company, for example by sharing the knowledge to his colleagues when making business decisions:

...I had a better understanding of the target market which was really important market for us and through that I understood how they do business in a very different way. That for example the sales channel through which our product went to the markets was totally different than we had in home, Finland. And I noticed that very often I needed to correct, maybe even a bit annoying way to some people, I needed to correct when I was returned to Finland and say like 'hey in that country it is not working like that, the consumer does not make those choices like that but they use that channel...' (F)

However, the applicability and possible benefits of this type of knowledge were emphasized due to the high level of market- or culture-specificity. For example, regarding business practices, the applicability of the knowledge was highlighted. One participant gave an example of the diverse working environment in USA and Finland, in terms of the organizational hierarchy and policies. He found the knowledge to be easy to transfer, but pondered the applicability of that type of knowledge:

It is maybe easy to transfer but whether it is applicable in there where you are trying to transfer that, so that is maybe the question. -- In that sense the market-specific knowledge, there is things that are easy to transfer, and you can utilize basically the same ways and tricks. But then there are of course things that necessarily doesn't transfer that easily. (G)

Similarly, the participant F explained how he could utilize the knowledge of the host-country's business practices not necessarily with Finnish colleagues, but when working with people in the host-country:

So, then I utilized those, this kind of tools came to my arsenal and I could use those in a suitable situation. And it helped, first of all, not necessarily back in Finland, but when I returned to Finland and have to work with the groups and firms of this host-country, so I maybe understood them better. (F)

4.1.5 General management skills

General management skills were also increased among some of the participants. General management skills were increased when being expatriated from a company headquarter to a smaller subsidiary. Typically, the responsibilities in a local office are much broader, compared to more specific and narrower roles in a company headquarter. The following comments describes the experiences in the local office compared to company headquarter. It can be note that the participants acquired larger responsibilities, more opportunities to impact, and broader perspectives to the business:

...Its own way the local office where are a few tens or a bit more personnel at some point, so it is much tighter community, and you have bigger responsibilities that if you are a logistic manager at some...at some host-country organization you really have...you are dealing with a quite big hassle. Then the same position comes, and you are at some HQ where there are ten or a hundred people with the same job title, it easily begins to be that you are just managing the left chain ring in that job. Like... At the assignment you got a great big picture of a large company and the benefits of a large company, whatever they are, and like, relatively large overall responsibilities... (D)

Whether I actually learned that [leadership skills], definitely, because first of all I was given a remarkable bigger unit as my responsibilities, which I could have in Finland in terms of as short period of time with that experience level. (I)

Basically, when you are an expatriate, you have a broader visibility to things, you impact on a larger scale, kind of. Like when you are back in your own local team, your own role, the visibility is smaller. You don't see that broadly and you are not as involved than you maybe were before. (H)

Moreover, general management skills are typically highly difficult to transfer, and it was noted to be difficult to gain concrete insights of the knowledge transfer. However, it was discovered that the increased management skills were positively affected the

participants' career paths. That, in turn, may have been a way to utilize the knowledge more efficiently inside the company:

I don't...I could say that [company name] kind of utilized and gave new opportunities to advance in one's career but I don't know whether the firm kind of actively harvested that know-how, like there were no memories or documents harvested or asked. Probably they understood as a firm that when you have been in some 'trouble' there is good to move forward and advance in career. (D)

And in my case when I returned, well first I returned to a similar position but then pretty quickly I indeed went to that broader business perspective, I was put... or I got to move [into a new position] indeed, and it was beneficial that I had been and knew the local culture and local business procedures and local people, networks from there were already existing. (H)

4.1.6 Knowledge of expatriation process

Moreover, during the discussions it was discovered that the participants acquired information of the expatriation process itself and were able to transfer it inside a company. The knowledge regards information that could prepare other expatriates for the assignment, including both very practical knowledge from the offers of employment to local schools, but also knowledge about their personal experiences:

It is maybe that tacit knowledge, that practical survivor knowledge both inside the company and regarding private life, that you can help them. (F)

The study participants' experiences in this kind of knowledge transfer were mostly informal and the motivation stemmed from a genuine interest to share their experiences and support other expatriates. This type of knowledge sharing was perceived highly positively since the knowledge transferors and receivers were connected through the similar experience. The participants were typically approached by another colleague who considered going to an international assignment and wanted to hear experiences:

For example, I have one colleague who is going to a same assignment, or similar assignment where I was, so she said that it would be nice to hear before she goes to that assignment on autumn, that it would be nice to hear your experiences. (C)

When people know that I have been somewhere, so there has been this kind of, like colleagues have come to ask something like he has this type of offer, he is

not sure what to think of it, do you have a minute to go through what you got, should he pay attention, on which things he should pay attention if he goes there, what are the things... (H)

When I returned, I made myself extremely ready in case someone would call me, I would definitely use time for that because I personally felt it was so important for me. (F)

Moreover, it was recommended for organizations to utilize this network of expatriates:

If this kind of network is built inside a company, which can help these expatriates and transfer the knowledge even prior the expatriation, it is an asset and when this works, this rotation of expatriates and the knowledge inside it, it can be systematized. (F)

4.2 Individual factors affecting knowledge transfer

In this section, the findings regarding individual attributes influencing repatriate knowledge transfer are presented. It was discovered that personality characteristics of repatriates, type of knowledge, and position after return influence the disseminative capacity of repatriates. Also, findings regarding the interaction opportunities are presented.

Moreover, it is highlighted that even though this study focus only on the role of a knowledge sender in a knowledge transfer process, an actual transfer requires two parties : a knowledge sender and a knowledge receiver. Therefore, the study participants could only assess their own role in the knowledge transfer process, and not be certain whether the knowledge receivers were actually absorbed the new knowledge and skills:

And when you are working with your colleagues back in Finland, how much of the knowledge is transferring, especially those soft skills, that how much of it are transferring and impacting in a way that I do not even recognize. Like it just impacts on that environment, like for example I came back to a role where I was leading a group, so how much that affected the group, that mine, maybe changed way of working. So, it is hard to say. (F)

You know kind of how to put it, the knowledge exact, is possible to share, but then the transfer really depends on the person that is acquiring it, if the person is ready to adjust. (B)

4.2.1 Personality characteristics

Starting from a decision to apply to a certain position, personality was noted to influence largely on the knowledge transfer process. For example, courage to share one's experiences and learnings and communicate actively can facilitate the knowledge transfer:

Yes it [personality] affects. In my case, as I went there to a supervisor position, I somehow was applied as, maybe as a proactive communicator and as a proactive person to that position, and it affects. If you go to a very narrow, technical role, when you are not necessarily as an active communicator to outside, but maybe very efficient to transfer knowledge in a technical way like what you should do there, so it does affect how well you can bring it [the knowledge] back. Like how you also, when you come back, how you can use it, share the knowledge to others, or utilize it yourself, what you have acquired during the trip [expatriation]. (H)

I think it [personality] affects, like on average I have... It might be easier for me to share these experiences and be talkative and be like... And I am not afraid of it, it is easy to share these, easy to bring these ideas forward. I don't think I am an extrovert, but I can be, and it makes it a lot easier.

Besides, personal responsibility of a knowledge sender was emphasized in the interviews. It was highlighted that a knowledge holder, a repatriate, has the information of the knowledge he/she holds. Therefore, organizations can offer opportunities for knowledge transfer and usage, but a knowledge holder is responsible for utilizing those opportunities and introducing the knowledge and skills he/she holds:

It is hard for me to think that anybody else could even make it [transfer the knowledge] because not anyone else know that personal experiment and the learnings you have. No one else can know how to dig those, you need to be able to bring them up by yourself. (F)

Similarly, participant H emphasize the importance of letting others aware of the information one holds:

Not everyone necessarily promote that they have been somewhere. But the best benefit is achieved, the other people as well as the company as well as maybe yourself, if you can share the knowledge, and you have to somehow bring it up. (H)

Moreover, it was highlighted that personality has an impact on the number of informal knowledge transfer opportunities:

Yes, it has a great impact, like what kind of personality do you have. And it has a direct impact on that last one [opportunities for interaction], that there always will be these situations in a company, and the question regards your personality, and motivation, and attitude that whether you share these and grab into that situation. No matter what your position is. (F)

Let's say that for my communication style and personality it was natural that there occurred lot of these informal situations when I returned to Finland. (I)

4.2.2 Type of knowledge

As presented in the first part of the findings, the type of knowledge impact on the participants' disseminative capacity. Specifically, the high level of tacitness of knowledge was noted to influence the participants' ability to identify the knowledge, which in turn influenced the knowledge transfer of the participants. Also, as the participants were abroad from 1,5 years to 15 years, and not only have acquired new knowledge and skills but also grown as persons:

But what [knowledge] could be applied, it just became like fully integrated in me, in a sense that I couldn't anymore distinguish like 'now I use exactly what I learned in India'. (B)

After that long time of period, you don't remember anymore how you were back then... Because it is quite slowly developing, that know-how and development, all kind of development...(I)

What comes to my mind first is that...that it is also difficult to know by myself when you come from this kind of assignment, 4 years somewhere, and you come back...especially when it is relatively early stages of your career, so you return as a quite different guy. (F)

Besides, many of the participants had international experiences prior the expatriation, which also affected the identification of the knowledge. For example, participant G has background in international business and previously had a supervisor who was located in another country, so it was difficult to identify which part of the skills he has learned during the expatriation:

It is difficult for me to identify what is exactly that, what happened during those year-and-a-half in there... [destination] (G)

However, even though the high level of tacitness affected negatively to the transferability of knowledge, it was not found to affect the potential usage of the knowledge by the knowledge holders. Indeed, one of the participants highlighted that the usage of the knowledge came naturally, because the knowledge was 'integrated' in her. Therefore, the high level of tacitness may have positive influence on repatriates' ability to utilize the knowledge:

It [utilization of the knowledge] was important, but it was also natural for me. So, it wasn't hard, because the knowledge I acquired in mind, it doesn't disappear somewhere. (B)

Similarly, participant F explained that a major part of the knowledge transfer and usage happens through actions. Indeed, due to the high level of tacitness, the knowledge is tightly integrated in the knowledge holders. Therefore, the knowledge can be utilized almost automatically through the job performance of the knowledge holders, compared to a direct knowledge transfer:

The knowledge transfer happened, not like the transfer receiver, my colleague in the company, not like he would understand and know the same things, not like that, but more like I can behave in a situation in a way that it benefits the company, and information is transferred for the company in that situation, and the company got the tools, or the tools are transferred, but it is very difficult to get the other party truly understand that 'this is how it goes'. (F)

Moreover, another characteristic of knowledge that was discovered to influence the knowledge transfer is the specificity of the knowledge. Indeed, the extent of how specific or generic the learnings and knowledge acquired were, affected the participants' ability to apply and transfer the knowledge:

Maybe not all of the knowledge that I acquired in India was possible to apply just simply because of the specific of that knowledge. (B)

Similarly, the specificity of the knowledge influenced both repatriates' perceptions whether the knowledge should be shared, and motivation towards the knowledge

transfer. High level of specificity was perceived to lower the knowledge receivers' willingness to acquire and adapt the knowledge:

I think that nobody really wanted to learn the details because as I mentioned this assignment was a project based. (A)

However, there were differences among the participants. For example, participant F perceived network knowledge more specific and assignment-related, whereas found other types of knowledge relatively generic and therefore easy to transfer:

I didn't feel that it would...there were a lot... maybe despite the network and also partly regarding it, but those working habits and kind of those learnings were quite generic, which I think was pretty easy to transfer into a new role. (F)

Moreover, the type of knowledge was also discovered to influence the participants' ability and motivation to transfer knowledge. Depending on whether the participants felt that the knowledge they hold should be transferred and would benefit the organization or colleagues was noted to have some level of influence on their willingness to transfer knowledge. For example, participant E acknowledged that he was not acquired that much work-related knowledge, due to the similarity of the work tasks before and during the assignment. Therefore, he felt that he does not hold the type of work-related knowledge that would benefit the organization and should be shared. However, he expressed that he had learned lot of soft skills and cultural knowledge and would have been willing to transfer it to others. The following quote describe the transferability of work-related skills:

...These work tasks were actually quite similar [in the host country] than in here. So basically it was not, I didn't learn that kind of things, like regarding the work, I really didn't learn, because I actually brought that action to there and we did it together. So basically... I didn't feel that I would've been able come and tell, like some big knowledge transfer to my own organization, for example regarding the work activities. (E)

Similarly, the perceived applicability of knowledge was also noted to have some level of influence on the participants' attitudes and motivation towards knowledge transfer. Whether a participant found the knowledge to be beneficial and applicable, influenced the participants' attitudes towards knowledge transfer. For example, participant G

highlighted the applicability of the market-specific knowledge, but also pondered whether it regards also other types of knowledges. As an example, a similar work community during and after expatriation can positively affect the applicability of certain personal skills:

It is maybe easy to transfer but whether it is applicable in there where you are trying to transfer that, so that is maybe the question. (G)

Similarly, participant C felt that the environment and the experience-level of her colleagues impacted on the utilization of the knowledge. In the working environment, it was very common to expatriate. Therefore, the participant felt that the knowledge does not necessarily benefit others:

If thinking about how it benefits when you return to Finland or how it can be shared, so in the [current workplace] there are so experienced people that they do not necessarily... like it [knowledge] is not gathered and is not directly benefiting, but of course it benefits in a sense that they have another employee who can do more, and she can be moved to different assignments. (C)

4.2.3 Position

A position was found to have various influences on knowledge transfer. A position was discovered to influence the knowledge transfer through the increasing opportunities to share and utilizes the knowledge. If a participant had broad responsibilities and high position power, he was most likely able to utilize the knowhow more efficiently. Large number of responsibilities were linked to a broad range of tasks, which also affected positively the opportunities to utilize knowledge in different ways:

...The expatriation experience, it basically prepares you to the next [career] step the best. Then you could have, everybody could have the greatest benefit if you could do the next step when you return, then you can utilize it the best way, the know-how you have gained, and share it the most efficiently. (H)

So, I think that those two in the middle have been in a very remarkable role, so position and commitment. To build both my own career, so to say, in this corporation, but also establish many new functions and positions which I have hired more than ten people over these couple of years. Which in turn, of course bring that opportunity to utilize that, those knowledges and those transferred things pretty easily and in various ways. Maybe that versatility is the important thing. (G)

Similarly, one participant explained the importance of position power, in terms of being involved in the decision-making in the company. He explained that the knowledge is transferred mostly through actions, and therefore a position has a major impact on the opportunities to utilize the knowledge. He described that he cannot necessarily transfer the knowledge to others, in a way that someone else would actually learn it, but he can utilize the knowledge through his own work:

I would go back to the fact that it [know-how] is transferred through actions. As an example, I would say that we would have a meeting, for example regarding our marketing strategy. This is a concrete example. And because I have been lived in that country, be an expatriate in there and knowing how our own company is working in that country, because I was there many years both as an employee and lived in that country, I could say in that meeting that 'hey, let's look at this marketing strategy again because I think this won't work in this country'. (F)

Moreover, the position influences whether the participants were surrounded by people they could share the knowledge or not. For example, supervisor position was noted to be positively affected to the usage and transfer of the knowledge:

With that of course it helps that if I was in a supervisor position, so I might have more of those situations where I can utilize different tools. From speaking about these things, to introducing people to each other, this network side, and companies. But also, that how I would organize my own team and the actions of my group. (F)

On the contrary, one participant explained that she was in a position where weren't so many opportunities to transfer the knowledge, but she mostly utilized it through her own work:

I wonder to whom I could share this knowledge, small team. It affects how I work in this role. It is in use in the daily activities, it benefits each day. Honestly, I do not think I could get to that position without that Saint Petersburg experience. (C)

Moreover, the position also influenced the knowledge transfer through the tasks the participants had. There were differences among the participants, whether the tasks influenced their capability to share knowledge. This was also linked to the type of knowledge acquired, as the following participants explained:

I didn't feel that it would...there were a lot... maybe despite the network and also partly regarding it, but those working habits and kind of those learnings were

quite generic, which I think was pretty easy to transfer into a new role. So I wouldn't maybe say... For me it wasn't that hard even though I was transferred to a new role. (F)

However, it was noted that it would be more efficient if an organization could offer a position that would be a logical next step after the return. If the offered position enables repatriate to utilize the knowhow broadly, it can benefit both the individual employee and the company. For example, participant H explained that the common challenge is that a company cannot offer a position or a role where the knowledge could be fully utilized. He described that during expatriation, the responsibilities are often broader, and the impact is higher. When he returned, the global visibility was much smaller. He also experienced that the position affected his opportunities to utilize the knowledge:

When I returned, I basically changed the product [which he worked with], I did different product that I did in China, I returned to another one, completely new product and when I returned, I couldn't totally use same knowledge but needed to adapt the usage. (H)

4.2.4 Opportunities for interaction

Opportunities for interaction was a theme that occurred many times during the interviews and was linked for example to a position or personality. As presented in the previous sub-chapters, position was found to affect the number of interaction opportunities. Also, extroverted personality characters were noted to positively affect the number of informal interaction opportunities. In this sub-chapter, findings regarding the influence of both formal and informal interaction opportunities to the knowledge transfer of the participants are presented. Majority of the study participants did not have formal knowledge transfer, which affected the findings.

During the interviews, it was discovered that informal interaction opportunities enabled study participants for telling stories and sharing their personal expatriation experiences. Also, the participants shared practical information and advice regarding expatriation, for example by supporting colleagues who were also considering going to an expatriation.

Besides, informal interactions were typically in forms of questions and spontaneous discussions, as the following quote presents:

Even though I basically did quite diverse things after returning to Finland, there were still, like the chairs were turned and they be like 'hey, can you check this one?' (I)

One participant explained that the informal knowledge transfer was mostly in forms of stories and shared experiences. He described that "The best places to transfer these knowledges is nearly the coffee room" (D). In the following quote, his experience of the informal knowledge transfer is presented. It can be noted that the type of knowledge that was transferred regards mostly personal experiences, ideas, and thoughts:

... It maybe goes to those stories. There [during expatriation] one got all types of strange experiences and through that, whether with colleagues, friends, or acquaintances, those are basically discussion topics and there one got excellent, great experiences and aha -moments, and sometimes little bit worse and poor experiences but all of those are learnings. And especially with colleagues that is kind of knowledge sharing. (D)

Moreover, majority of the study participants did not receive or receive only very little formal interaction opportunities. However, participant B who did have formal knowledge transfer find it clear and structured, and therefore an efficient way to transfer knowledge. Basing on her experiences, the formal knowledge transfer regards mostly work-related knowledge:

But the formal [interaction] was clearer, the expectations were clear, the format was clear, the attention was there. The informal was more about non-work thing, about the cultural thing. And the formal one was about the specific processes, specific knowledge about, like insights about Indian financial process. (B)

Moreover, she seemed to be very satisfied with the knowledge transfer. It was also discovered that one main factor influencing the transfer was the existence of practice in the company. It made the whole knowledge transfer process clear and structured, since the participant knew already in the beginning that the knowledge transfer is going to happen and were able to prepare for it. Also, her colleagues knew about the knowledge transfer, which also affected their attitudes:

And also the fact that the colleagues to whom I was transferring the knowledge, they also knew that it is going to happen. They didn't...they didn't see it as extra work, they didn't see it like nice to have, they saw it as part of our, it's like a standard set of closing the project, and going into normal support mode. (B)

Moreover, also participant H described that knowledge about cross-cultural communication were shared through formal knowledge transfer mechanisms:

Yes, there were exactly these formal occasions after the return, usually there are indeed. These kind of, like how certain cultures' cross-cultural communications, like what are the things you should pay attention to for example when it comes to Finnish - Chinese communication... (H)

Also, the information that he had been an expatriate was shared through the formal knowledge sharing mechanisms, which naturally encourages other employees to ask further questions for him. He emphasized the importance of letting others aware of the information one holds:

It is important, indeed, that you have to share somewhere that you had been there [expatriation]. And for that the formal information sharing worked for us, like how we act in a way that people remember that 'okay, that person has been somewhere, well I'll ask'. (H)

There were also finding regarding organizational receptivity and readiness to receive the new knowledge and views. For example, organizational culture was noted to influence whether a repatriate can truly utilize and transfer the knowledge in a way it would benefit the organization. For example, organizational culture with no space for change or improvement, may affect negatively on the perceived opportunities to utilize knowledge:

I would see that the biggest ones are the personality, and the other thing is the organization's readiness to use and receive [the knowledge]. Offer space for that experience. Offer space for these new ideas. If the firm or the unit, whatever is the context we are thinking, if it is very strongly committed to [the idea] that 'now we are doing this, this has been always done and nothing will be changed' it is difficult to bring anything, difficult to bring any new ideas and contributions. (F)

5 Discussion

In this chapter, the findings of the study are discussed in light of existing research. The aim is to provide understanding to the main aim of the research. First, the chapter focuses on the first research question of the study: *'What kind of knowledge expatriates develop and transfer?'* Secondly, the chapter moves to the second research question: *'How the individual attributes of repatriates influence the knowledge transfer?'*

5.1 Type of knowledge developed and transferred

This study considers the type of knowledge repatriates have developed abroad and transferred after return. The findings of the study support the proposition of knowledge as a key factor in individual knowledge transfer and sharing (e.g. Ipe, 2003; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). In the data, six types of knowledges that the participants had acquired were discovered: network knowledge, personal softs skills, job-related management skills, market-specific knowledge, general management skills, and knowledge regarding expatriation process. The data categorization was based on the typology of five types of repatriate knowledge by Fink et al. (2005), despite the last type of the knowledges; knowledge regarding expatriation process. Therefore, the study findings of the knowledge acquired support the findings of the study by Fink et al. (2005) to a large extent. Only one types of knowledges were found in the data which was not included in the typology.

Moreover, the findings of the knowledge acquired also support the other common typology of repatriate knowledge by Antal (2000). Similarly to Fink et al. (2005), also this typology consists of five types of knowledges which are categorized as following: knowing what (declarative), knowing how (procedural), knowing when (conditional), knowing why (axiomatic) and knowing who (relational). During the interviews, knowledges under each of the five categorizes were found.

Regarding the transferability of the knowledges, the findings support the general understanding of repatriate knowledge as tacit and highly contextual. None of the knowledges were found to be totally transferable, and three of six types of knowledges were found to be difficult to transfer. Also in Fink et al. (2005) study, only market-specific knowledge is described to be relatively easy to transfer, whereas the other types of knowledges are either partly transferable, difficult to transfer, or not transferable. Similarly, Antal (2000) present declarative knowledge as factual knowledge, whereas the other types of knowledges seem to be more tacit and integrated into the person acquiring it.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that **network knowledge**, the increasing professional contacts the participants acquired during expatriation, is relatively easy and partly transferable. The study participants had transferred network knowledge by introducing people to each other, and also sharing other types of information of their networks. It was noted that network knowledge was found to be relatively easy to identify and express. Moreover, the participants had personally utilized the networks in their projects and at work in general. The findings of network knowledge as partly transferable is in line with the results of Fink et al. (2005). The study results by Antal (2000) indicate that network knowledge, or relational knowledge, is possible to share but not truly transfer, because networks consists of personal relationships. The findings of this paper find also support for this claim. For example, the common working history cannot be shared, even though a repatriate could share the contact information further on. Therefore, the findings indicate that network knowledge can be partly transferred. (Antal, 2000)

Second, **personal soft skills**, were discovered to be difficult to transfer or even not transferable. The findings indicate that this type of knowledge can be verbally shared but not fully transferred. The transfer of that type of knowledge was noted to require personal experience or exposure, or a high level of adaptation by a knowledge receiver. Similarly, the findings indicate that also **work-related management skills** are difficult to transfer, but the participants had utilized their improved skills in their current roles. The findings are similar to Fink et al. (2005) results, which presents both personal soft skills and job-

related management skills as not easily transferable. There are also similarities to Antal's (2000) study findings of the procedural knowledge. For example, certain types of procedural knowledge, such as project management and teamwork skills, were found to be highly useful after return, since this type of knowledge is not culture bounded. Due to the same reasons, work-related management skills were found to be highly useful in the positions after return, even though it cannot be necessarily transferred to others.

Furthermore, the findings regarding **market-specific knowledge** found support both to Fink et al. (2005) and Antal's (2000) findings. Market-specific knowledge was found to be mostly factual and explicit knowledge, similarly to Antal's (2000) declarative knowledge, and rather easy to transfer, which is along with the findings of Fink et al. (2005). The participants had transferred the knowledge to their colleagues, and also utilized it through their own roles. However, the applicability and benefits of the transfer of this type of knowledge, due to its nature as highly culture- and market-specific, was questioned during the interviews. Nevertheless, the actual transfer was found to be easy.

The fifth type of knowledges, **general management skills**, was discovered to be transferred mostly through the participants' own work. The improvement in general management skills were positively affected the career paths of the participants. These findings are very similar to Fink et al. (2005). Moreover, **knowledge about the expatriation process** was emerged in the data as a distinguishing knowledge that was not suitable in the chosen categorization. The participants emphasized the knowledge they hold regarding the expatriation experience, from very practical knowledge to personal experiences. As an example of practical knowledge, the participants have increased their understanding of the local systems in a host country, for example of the suitable schools for children if one is expatriated with a family. Also, personal experiences and perceptions on how it feels to be an expatriate was mentioned. This type of knowledge was something that could have been shared, in order to prepare other employees for foreign assignments.

Please see the summarization of the findings of diverse types of knowledges in the Figure 7.

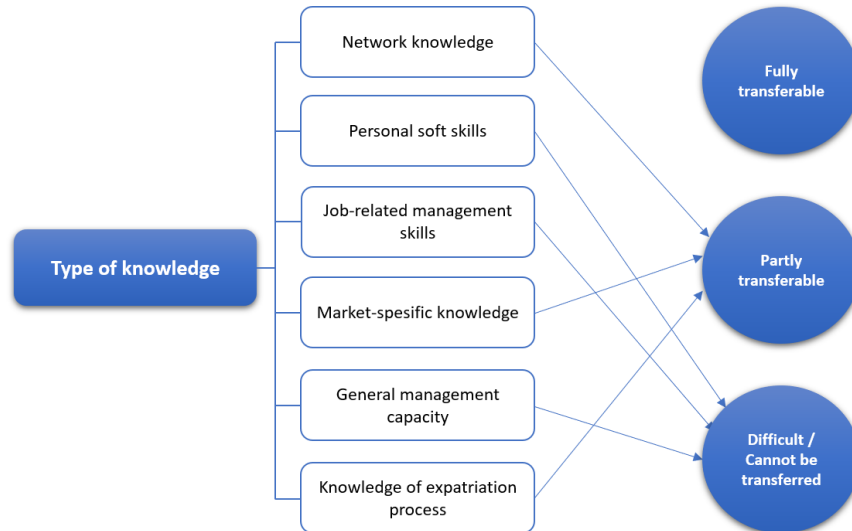


Figure 7. Summarized findings of the transferability of repatriate knowledge

5.2 Individual attributes influencing repatriate knowledge transfer

The theoretical framework of the study was based on widely adapted AMO-framework, which presents that individuals' ability, motivation, and opportunities have a key role in determining one's work performance. The findings of this study found support for the model and previous studies, which highlight that repatriates' ability and motivation (Burmeister et al., 2015, 2018; Oddou et al., 2009; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018), and the role that opportunities (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982; Burmeister et al., 2015) play in the repatriate knowledge transfer. In this study, it was discovered that the majority of the factors influencing repatriate knowledge transfer were linked to either the participants' ability to transfer knowledge or the number of opportunities the participants had. Therefore, the findings also indicate some level of similarity to Burmeister et al. (2015) study, proposing that repatriates' ability to transfer knowledge play a more remarkable role than their motivation.

The study findings indicate that **knowledge**, repatriates' **personality**, and **job position** have an influence on repatriates' disseminative capacity and a number of opportunities to transfer knowledge, which in turn influence the reverse knowledge transfer. Similar factors are proposed as potential drivers in previous studies. For example type of knowledge is proposed to have an influence on individual knowledge transfer (e.g. Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018) and individual knowledge sharing (Ipe, 2003). Also, diverse employee characteristics, such as intercultural personality (Furuya et al., 2009) and repatriates' ability to form social networks (Oddou et al., 2009), are presented to affect the transfer. There are also position-related factors presented to influence repatriate disseminative capacity, such as the level of position power and the similarity of the responsibilities during and after the international assignment (Oddou et al., 2009).

Knowledge

More closely, it was discovered that *the level of tacitness* and *specificity* of the knowledge influenced the study participants' ability and motivation to transfer knowledge. However, even though the high level of tacitness affected negatively to the transferability of knowledge, it was not found to affect the potential usage of the knowledge by the knowledge holders. In fact, one participant explained how the usage of the knowledge was natural due to the fact that the knowledge was 'integrated' in her, and therefore does not disappear. These findings are in line with the common understanding of repatriate knowledge as highly tacit and therefore difficult to transfer, and the essential role of application/adaptation in order to use tacit knowledge in a new context (e.g. Antal, 2000; Riusala & Suutari, 2004).

Moreover, *the perceived benefits* of the knowledge were also discovered to affect the participants' motivation to transfer the knowledge. For example, if a participant felt that the knowledge he hold does not necessarily benefit his colleagues in a company, affected

negatively his motivation to transfer knowledge. These findings provide empirical information for the conceptual framework by Lazarova and Tarique (2005), which indicate that repatriates' readiness to transfer knowledge depends not only on their motivation, but also having valuable knowledge to transfer.

Personality

Furthermore, it was discovered that personality has an influence on the ability to transfer knowledge. Thoughts and perceptions of the role of personality was also directly asked for the study participants. It was noted that some typical *personality characteristics of an extroverts*, such as being talkative and not being afraid of sharing personal experiences, may have positive influence on knowledge transfer. More specifically, there seems to be a positive link between extroverted personality characteristics and the number of informal knowledge transfer opportunities. In this regard, also personal responsibility to share the knowledge were emphasized. These findings are rather similar to the study by Oddou et al. (2009). Oddou et al. (2009) proposed that repatriates' expert power and repatriates' ability to form social networks influence, along with other factors, their ability to transfer knowledge. It can be noted that repatriates' expert power is linked to the notion of personal responsibility: the participants highlighted the personal responsibility of letting others become aware of the knowledge they hold and share the knowledge, which positively influence one's expert power. Therefore, not only the knowledge repatriates hold, but also their ability to bring it up influence the transfer. And in this regards, certain personality characteristics may have a positive impact on one's ability.

In addition, the findings of this paper indicate that the participants possess *intercultural personality characteristics*. For example, it was noted that many of the participants' adjusted well to the foreign environment and culture and learned to be highly culturally sensitive, which can refer to high level of listening and observation skills and valuing diverse cultures. Also, one of the participants described that even though she adjusted

well to a new culture, many of her colleagues did not. Therefore, it can be noted that it was not only the learnings the participants acquired, but also personality characteristics they had prior their assignments. Also, these findings are supported in the study by Yamazaki and Kayes (2004), who proposed in total of nine competencies that support learning from cross-cultural experience: building relationships, valuing people from different cultures, listening and observation skills, coping with ambiguity, translating complex information into another language, taking action and initiative, managing others, ability and flexibility, and managing stress. Similarly, Furuya et al. (2009) study findings indicate that intercultural personality characteristics positively influence global management competency learning.

Position

Regarding position, it was discovered that *the level of position power, versatility of tasks, and the similarity of participants' responsibilities* during and after the international assignment influenced the knowledge transfer. More specifically, all of these position-related factors were found to influence the number of opportunities the participants had, which in turn influenced their ability to use knowledge. Two of these position-related factors were also studied by Oddou et al. (2009). Indeed, it was proposed that both the level of position power and the similarity of the responsibilities influence the knowledge transfer by affecting repatriates' ability.

Furthermore, as described in this chapter, all of these diverse factors are linked to each other. Not only the participants' ability, motivation, and opportunities influence on knowledge transfer separately, but they are all connected. For example, high number of opportunities to transfer knowledge have influence on both repatriates' ability and motivation to transfer knowledge. Similarly, the emerged drivers (knowledge, personality, position) of repatriates' ability, motivation, and opportunities, can have various affect on knowledge transfer. For example, as described above, the position-related factors influence the number of opportunities to participants had, which in turn, influenced also

their ability to transfer and utilize the knowledge. This notion of connectivity is in line with the original AMO -framework. Indeed, it proposed that not only the three factors (ability, motivation, opportunity) influence on the performance, but they are each linked and interact with others. Please see the summary of the findings in the revised AMO-framework in the Figure 8.

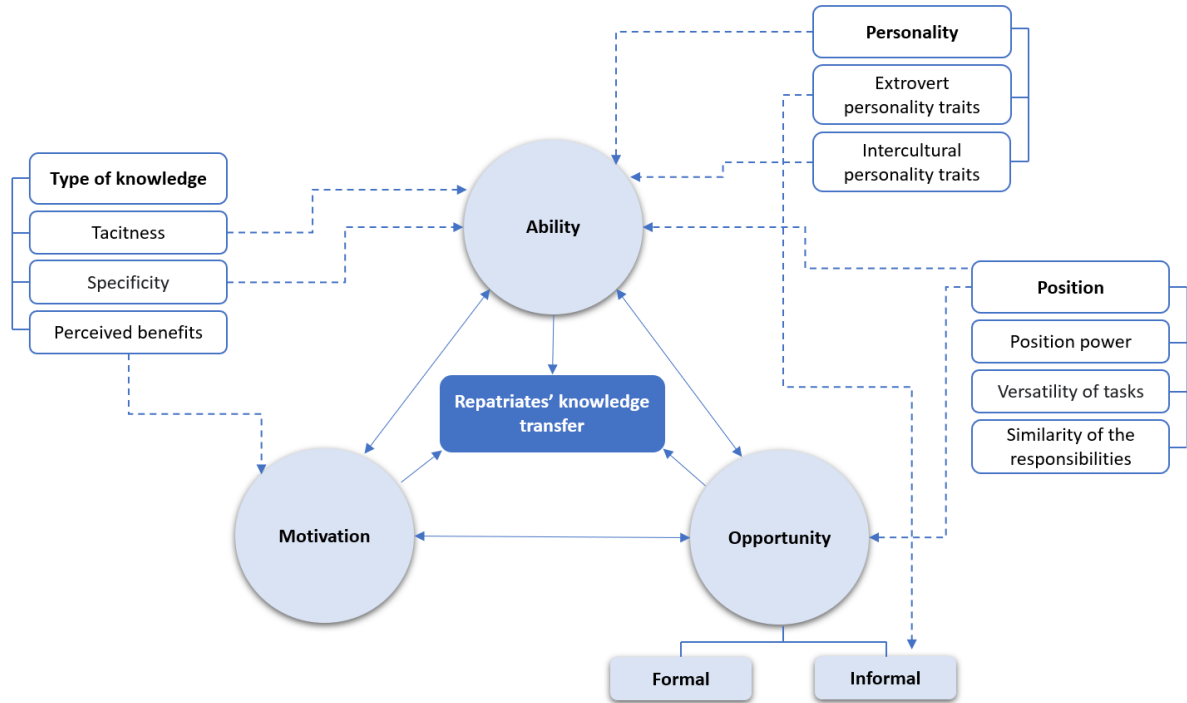


Figure 8. Summary of the individual attributes influencing repatriate knowledge transfer

Moreover, even though the focus of this study regards repatriates' individual attributes, there were also findings of the role of the knowledge receiver and organization. The participants emphasized the knowledge receivers' ability to receive knowledge and adapt, and organizations' role in offering knowledge transfer opportunities, for example in terms of a suitable position. These findings are supported in the literature, since knowledge transfer is a dynamic process including several actors. For example Burmeister et al. (2018) studied RKT from a process perspective and highlight the role of the diverse actors in the different phases of RKT, as presented in the theory section of this study.

6 Conclusions

In this chapter, the answers to the research questions are summarized. Then, the chapter presents the theoretical and managerial implications. After that, the limitations of the study are shortly discussed and suggestions for future research given.

This study proposes that the knowledge transfer of repatriates is influenced by the type of knowledge repatriates acquire and develop abroad, personality characteristics of repatriates, and repatriates' position upon return. It was discovered that repatriates acquire wide range of knowledge during their international assignment, which can be categorized under the following labels: network knowledge, personal soft skills, job-related management skills, market-specific knowledge, general management skills, and knowledge of the expatriation process. It was noted that the transferability of these diverse types of knowledges varies, which influence the reverse knowledge transfer. Specifically, it was noted that none of the knowledges are fully transferable. However, network knowledge, market-specific knowledge, and knowledge about the expatriation process seemed to be relatively easy and partly transferable, whereas personal soft skills, job-related management skills, and general management skills are highly difficult to transfer. Besides, the tacitness and specificity of the knowledge was discovered to influence repatriates' ability to transfer knowledge, and the perceived benefits of the knowledge was noted to influence repatriates' motivation towards RKT.

In addition to the type of knowledge, also personality characteristics and position are proposed as potential drivers behind repatriate knowledge transfer. Specifically, it was noted that extrovert personality traits influence positively on repatriates' ability to transfer knowledge and the number of informal interaction opportunities. Also, intercultural personality traits were noted to influence the expatriation experience abroad, which consequently influence repatriates' ability to participate knowledge transfer after return. Furthermore, position power, versatility of job tasks, and similarity of the responsibilities during and after the assignment were discovered to influence both the number of opportunities and ability to use and transfer knowledge.

6.1 Theoretical contributions

The theoretical framework of the study was based on a widely adapted AMO -framework by Blumberg and Pringle (1982) and prior research of the topic. The literature on repatriate knowledge transfer is scarce, and studies have stated a need for more research on the individual-level processes behind RKT (e.g. Harzing et al., 2015, Lazarova & Tarique 2005, Mäkelä & Brewster 2009). This study contributes to this gap in the literature, increasing understanding of the individual-level factors behind knowledge transfer. Specifically, understanding of the role of knowledge and individual attributes influencing repatriates' knowledge transfer is provided.

Moreover, this study finds support for the AMO -framework (Blumberg & Pringle 1982). This study indicates, similarly to Burmeister et al., (2018), that the framework can be adapted to repatriate knowledge transfer. Indeed, the findings support that repatriates' ability, motivation, and opportunities for interaction determinate repatriates' individual knowledge transfer at a large extent. Moreover, the main theoretical contribution of this study is the extended framework (Figure 8). Indeed, this study proposes a framework including three potential drivers behind individuals' ability, motivation, and opportunity. Also, relationships between the drivers are indicated.

6.2 Managerial contributions

This study provides several implications for managers. First of all, the study highlights the role of an individual, repatriate, in the knowledge transfer process. Similar to the prior research on repatriate knowledge transfer, this study proposes that repatriate's disseminative capacity, namely ability and motivation, and opportunity play a remarkable role in determining one's performance. Ability was noted to have a bigger influence than motivation. However, due to the high interconnectedness of the factors, this study suggests organizations to focus on each.

More specifically, it was discovered that repatriate ability, motivation, and opportunity are influenced by one's personality, type of knowledge, and position. To facilitate reverse knowledge transfer, organizations should pay attention on the position-related factors. Indeed, it is highly useful to provide a position where a repatriate can utilize the newly acquired knowhow in a broad extent. This can be done by offering a position with a remarkable position power, in order to invite a repatriate to decision-making and the process of improvement and change within the organization. Through these practices, organizations can enable circumstances where a repatriate can utilize not only the easily transferrable, explicit knowledge, but also the highly tacit knowledge which cannot necessarily be explicitly shared. For example, a repatriate can make decisions basing his/her knowhow, and through that the tacit knowledge can be revealed and utilized.

In addition to the level of position power, versatile job tasks and assignments provide opportunities to utilize the knowhow in a broad extent. Similarly to the prior studies on repatriate knowledge, it was discovered that repatriates acquire diverse types of knowledges during their assignment. Therefore, organizations should invite a repatriate to a diverse kind of assignments in order to gain the full benefits of the knowhow acquired. If a repatriate is positioned in a very narrow role, it can negatively affect the number of opportunities the repatriate has. Besides, also the similarity of the responsibilities during and after the assignment was noted to have an influence on repatriates' ability to utilize the knowledge. Therefore, organizations should focus on finding a fit between the position during the assignment and the position offered after return.

Furthermore, regarding the knowledge-related drivers, organizations should pay attention on how the repatriate knowledge is perceived. It was discovered that the perceived benefits of the knowledge influence the repatriates' motivation to transfer knowledge. Therefore, an organization should acknowledge the value of repatriate knowledge, and provide circumstances where the knowledge can be utilized. Also, regarding the role of personalities in repatriate knowledge transfer, it is suggested that managers pay

attention to the fit between one's personality and the most suitable knowledge transfer opportunities.

In addition, regarding the type of knowledges, it was discovered that repatriates typically gain information of the expatriation process itself. This was a distinguishing type of knowledge from the two common typologies of repatriate knowledge, and therefore emphasized in this study. It is suggested that organizations provide interaction opportunities, for example formal interactions, for repatriates and employees who are going or considering expatriation. Through that, the employees could acquire useful information already prior their expatriation, which may support the employees in their preparations for the assignment and in the adjustment process during the expatriation. Moreover, this could also have a positive influence on repatriates' motivation to transfer knowledge: these types of knowledge transfer opportunities may send a message for repatriates that the knowledge they hold is perceived as valuable and beneficial and should therefore be utilized.

To sum up, organizations can facilitate repatriate knowledge transfer by enabling suitable circumstances for the transfer and offering opportunities for interactions. It was noted that even though organizations can rarely influence directly on the individual factors, the role of opportunities play a remarkable role. In addition, an organizational culture which encourages employees for contributing, suggesting ideas, and making improvements inside an organization, play a significant role in the usage of the knowledge.

6.3 Limitations of the study

In this chapter, the limitations of the study are shortly described. First of all, this study takes an individual perspective, exploring the role of a repatriate as knowledge senders. However, the reverse knowledge transfer is a dynamic process, and the role of a knowledge receiver nor an organization cannot be neglected. Therefore, this study provides understanding only behalf of the knowledge holders and senders, repatriates.

Moreover, due to the time limitations of this study, a cross-sectional study design was adapted over longitudinal design. Therefore, the data was collected during a rather short period of time. In addition, the data was acquired from study participants who had repatriated during the years 2002 – 2017. Therefore, the data can be influenced by the time period between the actual repatriation and the time of the interview.

6.4 Suggestions for future research

Basing on the limitations of the study and the research field of repatriate knowledge transfer, suggestions for future research are provided. Due to the limited number of studies on the individual-level knowledge transfer, more empirical studies should be conducted. Both quantitative and longitudinal study designs would provide important information of repatriate knowledge transfer. For example, there are various potential variables proposed in conceptual studies that should be further studied and empirically examined. Also, studies examining the knowledge transfer from a process perspective are rare.

Regarding the findings of this study, it is recommended to conduct more studies to examine the potential drivers proposed in this study. Especially longitudinal and quantitative studies would provide useful information of the variables. Also, it would be interesting to examine the proposed variables more in detail. For example, a personality is a complex and broad variable including diverse traits, and its role and relationships to other drivers would offer interesting information for the study field.

Moreover, due to the dyadic nature of repatriate knowledge transfer, both repatriates as knowledge senders and domestic employees as knowledge receiver play a remarkable part in the knowledge transfer. Therefore, not only the individual attributes of repatriates but also the role of domestic employees should be further studied. Besides, a better understanding of the interactions and relationships between the knowledge senders and receivers would offer valuable knowledge for organizations, in order to better facilitate

the knowledge transfer process. Also, the role of organizational variables, such as organizational culture, could be taken into considerations in order to examine the phenomenon more comprehensively.

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