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**MANAGING TALENT IN SPORTS CLUBS: EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEIVED
BENEFITS OF SHORT-TERM INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS**

Master's Thesis in
International Business

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ABSTRACT:

Existing academic research on international assignments has been catered around traditional business. This study extends traditional academic research on international assignments to the sporting world in order to analyze what principles can cross over from one area to the other. The empirical findings show not only what existing academic theories can benefit sporting clubs; they shed light on what traditional business can learn from how sporting clubs utilize international assignments in talent management. From both a player and club director lens, the perceived benefits of an international assignment for soccer players are explored along with seeing where the different parties' interests are aligned. The extent to which the assignment influences any alteration in either party's psychological contract is also contextualized.

Qualitative data was gathered through a series of eleven semi-structured interviews with both club directors and players. For club directors and players, the goals of an assignment were to obtain a transfer, benchmark the player against his peers, improve brand reputation, and personal development of some kind. Prior to an assignment, the pre-existing psychological contract does not hold the clubs responsible to arrange an assignment, despite the value placed on it by players.

However, players expect the clubs to allow them to go on an assignment if the opportunity presents itself. Additionally, the psychological contract exists in that players generally assume that should the host club in an assignment offer a contract, they will be sold, regardless of the economic benefit to the player's home club. Contrary to traditional businesses, there is little evidence supporting any post-assignment alteration to either the player or club's psychological contract as a result of the assignment.

International assignments for soccer players have a broad range of potential benefits. Club directors are wise to control the process and take consideration to the complexities surrounding the appearingly simple endeavour. While it is not sufficient to categorize all interviewees similarly, there is a generally narrow view of the assignment by both clubs and assignees. The sporting world can benefit from examining the range of potential benefits from an international assignment in the way traditional business have. At the same time, in relation to psychological contracts, traditional business may benefit from sporting clubs in how they manage player\employee expectations pre and post assignment.

KEY TERMS: Human resource management, talent management, international assignments, sports management

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will give a background to the study and set the foundation for extending traditional academic studies on talent management to the business of professional sports, specifically soccer. The gap in research will be explained along with addressing the research questions, problems, and objectives of the study. The remainder of the chapter will discuss the limitations and structure of the study with some key definitions being provided.

1.1. Background to the Study

In the athletic world, there is an enormous amount of attention paid to the success of individuals and teams. This attention comes in the form of social as well as financial investment. Sporting clubs undertake various methods to try and achieve their goals.

Perhaps one of the most important pieces to the success of a club is its personnel. While a club can market itself and create an environment that facilitates success, it is doubtless limited by the manager and players at its disposal (Welch 2011). For this reason, clubs and in some cases national federations, spend a great deal of resources in acquiring or developing players (Devecioglu 2011; Goff 2014).

For many clubs, financial resources are readily available; therefore, the acquisition of talented players is made easier. In certain instances, the skill level required to perform at the standard necessary is extremely high, this will limit the number of individuals that can participate within that organization. Sporting clubs are faced with the similar dilemma that more traditional business have of whether to “buy or grow” the individuals capable of filling the needs of the organization (Devecioglu 2011; Wahl 2014). This study does not, however, focus on the decision of whether to buy or grow, but as it is mentioned later in the study, it may be relevant in analyzing some of the factors leading to various decisions made by clubs.

While acquiring players may be possible for some clubs, national teams cannot rely on the financial resources to acquire talent. They are generally limited to talent within their country or

citizens living abroad. National Federations may provide incentives for clubs to invest in youth players, they may limit the number of foreign players allowed to play in the league, or they may create their own centers of excellence (Kulish 2012). The United States Soccer Federation has a center for excellence for youth players in Florida (US Soccer 2012). The United States Hockey Association has a similar format for their under 18 and under 17 national teams (USA Hockey 2012). National Federations, therefore, may often times spurn the development of youth players. This may or may not be beneficial to the clubs.

While clubs do face the decision of whether to “buy or grow”, it is likely that there is going to be some development taking place throughout the career of a player. Additionally, clubs may often “buy” a player at a young age and seek to develop them as well (Fletcher 2011). One method used by sporting clubs as well as traditional corporations in developing players is that of an international experience, the focal point of this study.

An international experience requires a player, or employee, to leave the country where they are based to play or work in another country. Traditional business may send employees to work abroad for a period of time, or perhaps simply visit a foreign corporation. For the soccer player, the international experience can come in a variety of forms.

On the most basic level, a player may have an international experience simply by going with his domestic club to play against foreign clubs. Some players will go and train for a period of time with foreign clubs. Often, this is just in the form of training or trial, while frequently players are loaned to foreign clubs for an extended period of time. On the farthest end of the spectrum, players will have an international experience by signing a contract with a foreign club. This study seeks to examine the expectations and perceived benefits associated with an international experience in the form of short-term training.

A common purpose for the international experience for traditional business, and sporting clubs, is the growth and development of employees and players respectively (Glanz 2003). National Federations may develop their players with the intent of improving or sustaining the success of their national team. Professional clubs may develop players for a variety of reasons. It can be

assumed that player development will ultimately improve the first team. However, some clubs may develop players with the sole purpose of selling them to larger clubs (Devecioglu 2011). The transfer fees paid for players can be a primary source of revenue for smaller clubs. This can create a unique setting for clubs in the sense that the interests of players, coaches, and club directors may not be aligned.

In addition to the interest alignment of the different members within the club, the uniqueness of the sporting world creates an interesting setting for decision making regarding player personnel. Professional sports teams are continually faced with difficult decisions when trying to balance success on the field with off-field economics of profitability and sustainability that face traditional businesses (Garcia del Barrio & Szymanski 2009). This balance of winning on the field versus profitability of the business can possibly be likened to the challenge that traditional business face when trying to balance the goal of increasing shareholder wealth with social responsibility (Turban & Greening 1996).

It is generally safe to assume that the various stakeholders of a professional sports club would like to see on-field success of the team. However, financial restraints undoubtedly limit what type of personnel a club is able to acquire and retain. Decisions on when to buy, sell, and develop talent is likely going to be viewed differently by various stakeholders. It is probable that players, coaches, and supporters may be more concerned with short-term success on the field and not as concerned as the chairman about the club's profitability and long-term sustainability.

In the context of traditional businesses, employees and employers may have different reasons for an assignment. An example would be an employee taking an assignment as an avenue to explore future job opportunities in a foreign market, or to improve his or her CV, while the employer may see the assignment as a developmental tool for the individual. There are likely similar dilemmas in the sporting world as seen by employer versus employee motivations for assignments. The assignment may be mutually beneficial, but it may be costly to the employer. For this reason, empirical research in this study is valid to see how motivations of player versus club align.

This carries over to another unique characteristic of the environment surrounding professional sports and its relationship to talent management; turnover. It has been argued that the modern workforce is transitioning to an element of high employee mobility (Beechler & Woodward 2009; Hay Group 2013). While employee turnover rates are different in given countries and industries, businesses are faced with increasing challenges of acquiring and retaining talented individuals (Jamrog 2002). Traditional businesses may be faced with challenges regarding turnover and talent acquisition; however, the challenges faced by professional sports clubs are enormous.

One reason for the high turnover rate may be the limited time in which a player is able to be a professional. Age is doubtless a limiting factor in player retention, and forces professional sports clubs to continually replenish their talent pools. Additionally, players may also seek lucrative contracts or new challenges, knowing that they have a very limited time to earn a large amount of money and achieve their goals as a professional. This coupled with changing regulations on player personnel; salaries, etc. are likely to influence a club's decision on how much of its resources to use in developing players (Taylor 2008). A club's developmental tools, along with the amount of investment, must be carefully evaluated to maximize the return on overall player development expenditures.

Regardless of resources available and the surrounding sporting environment, there is huge financial and social benefit to producing talent within the club. The goal of this paper is not to weight the importance of developing talent versus acquiring talent. It is assumed that at some level talent development is important to national teams as well as professional clubs. One of the means of developing players is to send them to train or trial with a club in a foreign country. The goal of this paper is to analyze the effects of an international training program and explore different purposes and motivations of various stakeholders involved in the training experience.

1.2. Research Gap

The nature of this research is exploratory in extending traditional academic business studies to the professional sporting world. While traditional academic research in international assignments

is ongoing, there is significant research that has already taken place. Existing research regarding talent management, as well as the effects of international assignments, cover a variety of business topics including, but not limited to: development, expatriation, brand image, social exchange, and interest alignment.

Employee development can certainly take place within ones country; however, a frequent view is that living and working in a foreign country can greatly increase ones skillset (Hollenbeck & McCall, 2001). Mobility and job rotation are often used to present employees with new challenges that will hopefully enable them to broaden their competencies and expertise. Short-term international assignments can be beneficial when they are learning-driven with the goal of experience and development. (Evans, Pucik & Björkman 2011; Hollenbeck et al 2001).

Certainly, significantly more attention and research has been done on development in relation to international assignments. Where there seems to be a lack of research, particularly academic research, is how traditional studies carry over to sporting business. There are certainly many documented critiques of various players' decisions to go and play abroad. Additionally, there has been an article questioning the benefits of players training abroad (Bueno 2011). However, these seem to be natural critiques of player career moves rather than explorations into relationships to academic theory and additional purposes to short-term assignments.

An extremely common subject when referring to international assignments is expatriation. A common focus is the cultural values learned and the difficulties presented with repatriation. Expatriation, along with social exchange theory, can be interesting when examining the effects of an international experience. The scope of the research will be outlined later. However, beyond the measuring of the return player's development, it is also necessary to define any furthered expectations the player has from the club, or vice versa, and if those expectations are correlated to the international assignment.

Research on the expatriation and repatriation phases are often focused on the failures and challenges associated with each (Adler 1997; Black 1992). Significant research has also been done on social exchange theory along with psychological contracts that can be created, and the

possible behavioral interactions that result from varying circumstances. While these theories can be represented from different points of view, they can be more simply stated as a study of unwritten contracts between various stakeholders of an organization (Schein 1978: 112; Kotter 1973). Additionally, when organizations invest in talented employees, those employees are likely to respond in a positive manner with improved performance and loyalty (Cropanzano & Mitchel 2005).

Rare studies have even gone on to show the relationship that psychological contracts have on repatriation success (Zhu 2002). There is unquestionably a gap in research linking these two theories. However, studying the repatriation of a professional soccer player upon completion of a short-term training assignment is not only useful in gauging the successfulness of the assignment on the player's development and team chemistry. It is necessary to see if psychological contracts impact actual contract negotiations, retention, unrest of other players in the team, or the recruitment of new talent. If there is significant influence on psychological contracts from an international assignment, clubs can evaluate the process in detail with full knowledge of the risk\rewards involved.

Along with social exchange and psychological contracts, one of the areas that can affect the outcome of an international assignment is the motivations of various stakeholders surrounding the international assignment. There is an overlap of themes in that potential misalignment of interests can be seen as part of psychological contract research. However, this study differentiates the two in order to emphasize the perceived benefits from an assignment as that is critical in extending this research to traditional business. The complex nature of sporting business makes it almost certain that players, coaches, and front office staff have differing motivations. How these interests align, and the inter-organizational communication that takes place amongst these stakeholders, possibly impacts the results of the international experience.

Research has been done identifying that various stakeholders do not necessarily have similar interests and motivations (Alchian & Demsetz 1972; Jensen & Meckling 1976; Fama & Jensen 1983). Additional research has been done on ways in which corporations can help align the interests of various stakeholders and antecedents for interest alignment (Hackman et al 1975;

Gottschalg 2005). While there may be additional research needed in relating interest alignment to international assignments, this study will examine the varying interests of different stakeholders, the extent to which they align, and any effects from misalignment.

One potential stakeholder purpose for an international experience is for brand recognition. The effects of the international experience on brand recognition and additional benefits will be researched in this study. However, it can be hypothesized that an international experience can have a positive effect on corporate performance and organizations that meet societies' expectations on performance will likely develop positive reputations and strengthen their image. (Turban et al 1996; Handelman & Arnold, 1999; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Slater & Dixon-Fowler 2009). This study will seek to determine if brand recognition is a motivating factor for any stakeholders relating to international assignments in relation to sport. If brand recognition is a key benefit to international assignments, there is a gap in what additional benefits stakeholders hope to realize from the international assignment.

As outlined above, when analyzing traditional businesses, there may be research gaps in the areas of development, expatriation, brand image, social exchange, and interest alignment when looking at the impact international assignments have on these. However, this study does not seek to further these with regard to traditional businesses. This study seeks to expand existing academic studies and research the effects of international experiences in the context of the sporting world. This is where there is the most evident gap in academic research.

1.3. Research Questions and Objectives

The objective of this study is to extend existing academic theories on talent management from traditional business settings to professional soccer. This research should not only benefit professional sports clubs; traditional businesses are likely to benefit from understanding the impacts of assignments in the context of professional sports. The focal area of study will be on short-term international assignments for contracted professional soccer players. In narrowing the study, the goal is to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the perceived benefits of an international assignment?

- (2) What are the obligations and expectations of different stakeholders relating to international assignments?

The objective of this study is to answer these research questions from the player and home club perspectives. Utilizing psychological contract theory as the theoretical foundation, a continual objective is to determine the relevance existing studies have on professional soccer and to what extent these theories carry over and align with the data collected from this study.

1.4. Limitations and Scope of the Study

As mentioned, the international assignment can be expressed in different ways; this study is limited to short-term training or trials. The cases studied will involve players that were under contract with a professional club in their home country. While they were under contract with their home club, they went for a period of one to four weeks to train with a professional club in another country. After the trial or training period, the player returned to his home club.

The sample of players interviewed included all Nordic players with one North American player. All the players were between the ages of 16 to 20 when they had the assignment in question. Many of the sample players had previous international experiences, and some responses may be influenced from that; however, the commonality is that all had an international assignment while they were under contract with their professional clubs.

Nearly all the assignments involved a player going to a club that was perceived as a higher level of play and compensation. The sample players' international assignment was spread out from first team, reserve, and youth team trainings. The manner, means, and purpose in which the international assignment was presented varied; however, it was random and not predetermined by the researcher.

The sample of club directors interviewed was also primarily Nordic with the exception of one North American director. One of the club directors had no cases of international assignments and was purposely interviewed because of that. The directors had varied tenures, playing experience, and directing experience. This was random and not predetermined.

Research is limited in that club directors and players were the stakeholders interviewed, with one director acting as an interim coach. This is essentially an employer\employee study, with the employer being top management. While in reality, perceived benefits of an assignment and psychological contracts are influenced by a variety of stakeholders. Agents, coaches, family members, and to some extent fans, have the ability to influence a player or club director's general view of an assignment.

1.5. Structure of the study

The structure of the study contains five different chapters. The first chapter is introductory with the intent of giving necessary background information. Justification for research will be presented in this chapter along with the identification of the research gap. This should serve as a basis for further literature in the following chapter. Clarification of the research objectives and research questions are identified in chapter one.

Chapter two presents existing theories and will lay a theoretical framework for the study. Appropriate literature and previous research will be discussed and highlighted in this chapter. Critical areas of review and analysis will be in the areas of development, expatriation, brand image, social exchange, and interest alignment.

In chapter three, the research methodologies will be presented. This description of the research methodologies will show the research approach, design measurements, data collection, and the reliability of the research. Additionally, this chapter will describe the industrial setting that characterizes professional soccer clubs.

The fourth chapter presents data from the study's empirical research. Description and analysis of the data will take place, along with the relationship the empirical evidence has with existing theories. Chapter four will look to provide answers to the research questions presented in the introductory chapter.

The final chapter will include a summary of the research. Key findings, theoretical contributions, practical implications and future research suggestions will be presented. This chapter will conclude the research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will expand on issues discussed in the research gap along with providing a clearer picture of the philosophical mindset of professional sports and the unique setting they operate in. Identification and analysis of existing literature on development, expatriation, social exchange, interest alignment, and reputational effects will be presented. When applicable, all literature will be linked and related to international assignments. For this reason, there will be significant carry over in topics. Expatriation and the club setting will likely be touched on in all areas of the theoretical framework.

Some of the topics discussed in the literature may not appear to be of great relevance to interest alignment and psychological contracts. However, it is deemed necessary that a general description of the perceived benefits of an international assignment be presented. This is done in order allow open creative thinking by both sporting clubs and traditional businesses when analyzing the implications of international assignments. More detailed discussion of practical implications relating to interest alignment and psychological contracts is presented later in the study. Given the generally narrow view of assignments, a broad range of benefits is valuable to discuss in this study's literature review.

2.1. Development

Talent management is a critical function within an organization. Employees can now be seen as the key assets to an organization, because they may possess information that is difficult to transfer. Firms predict the need for, develop, and retain human capital through the process of talent management (Evans, Pucik & Björkman 2011: 257).

In their article in Newsweek, Jack and Suzy Welch write that even with all the talk about strategy, technology and asset management, in the end

“winning teams win because they have the best players and a coach who knows how to make the sum greater than the parts (Welch 2011).”

This line captures the war on talent in a nutshell. It also encompasses different components of talent management like recruitment, development, and retention of talent.

One of the key components to talent management is development. It is likely that at some level, corporations, as well as soccer clubs, must develop individuals, regardless of the resources available to recruit them. The focus of this section is not on talent identification, but carries over into a clubs decision on whether to buy or grow talent. It is a necessary component in assessing developmental needs of an organization. After reviewing talent identification, this subchapter will address some reasons why international assignments are used as a vehicle for talent development. The subchapter will conclude by differentiating the types of assignments. Throughout each sub chapter, challenges and dilemmas for both traditional businesses and sporting clubs will be discussed.

2.1.1. Buy vs. Grow and responsibilities.

Managers may say that all of their employees are talented and valuable to the organization. While this may be true to some extent, it is rather idealistic. The reality is that many employees can be easily replaced. Therefore, talent can be described as those that are currently, or have the potential to be, critical to the success of an organization. (Evans et al 2011: 260.) When linking talent identification to development, it has been stated that the identification process should be on those that have the potential to grow. (Evans et al 2011: 312.).

A recent theoretical perspective to talent management is that first one must identify the most critical positions in the company; then, find, train and develop the best talents to these positions (Collins et al 2009). The investment required to develop these individuals may be larger than the cost to hire an experienced employee from outside the organization. In this instance buy may be the preferred alternative to grow. The assignment may influence the employee's psychological contract and potential loyalty to the firm. That needs to be taken into consideration amongst many other things when clubs determine whether to make or buy their talent.

Many amateur sporting clubs may exist to develop young players sporting and life skills (Coakley 2011). They are to some extent responsible to the individual player. Professional soccer academies develop players to transition to the club's first team (ECA 2014). Athletes have their own unique learning patterns (Elferink-Gemser et al. 2011). These patterns may not be complementary to the curriculum set forth by youth academy coaches whose responsibility is collective benefit to the first team. A common thread of successful athletes is the ability to take on the responsibility of development and regulate their learning (Elferink-Gemser et al. 2011).

There are, however, significant challenges that face organizations regarding the assignments actual effect on the individual's development. One of those can be described as excessive mobility. Researchers have used excessive mobility to debate appropriate length of time necessary for an international assignment to be affective. A distinction made in this paper regarding excessive mobility with soccer players on short-term assignments is the frequency and overall accumulation of international assignments.

The short-term assignment can be an indicator of talent (Evans et al 2011; McKinsley 2008). However, for a soccer player, a high frequency of international assignments may be an indicator of inability to perform at the level necessary to receive a contract or justify a particular transfer fee. In essence, this can somewhat cross over to the section on brand image, but primarily deals with the players individual brand image.

Some have proposed that while an international assignment is a powerful tool in development, it is also extraordinarily expensive for a firm. Most of the firms are not getting good returns on this investment (Black et al 1999). This statement may not necessarily be accurate when relating to short-term training or trial assignments for soccer players as it would appear to be logical that the logistical, replacement, and relocation costs along with preparatory training is not as significant, if relevant at all in short-term training assignments.

Challenges also exist with quantifying the return on investment of international assignments and succession planning for the short-term loss of employees and potential permanent turnover (Evans et al 2011; Capelli 2008). Additionally, dualities exist with excessive mobility, feedback,

and emotional competence (Michaels et al. 2001; Goleman et al 2002; Kets de Vries 1989; Judge et al 1999).

2.1.2. Developmental reasons for international assignments.

It has been said that individuals learn through challenge, demanding assignments and working outside of ones geographic expertise (Evans et al 2009: 302.). The international assignment is often designed as a way to challenge and grow individuals outside of their geographic comfort zone (Nadler &Nadler 1989: 6). The global competencies that individuals develop by living and working overseas can be imperative for their future success (Hollenbeck & McCall, 2001; Vance &Paik 2005).

One method of challenging employees is through job rotation. An international assignment may see an individual in a similar role as in his or her home country. However, the change in geographic setting is a form of job rotation as it is a different job, perhaps the same role, just a change in environment. Studies have shown that job rotation helps employees see a bigger picture, while still allowing them to focus in on key details (Evans et al 2009: 302). This can be supported by McCall (1998), which people generally learn by doing things they have not done before.

The justification for job rotation being a causal factor in employee development has been stated. This author argues that an international assignment is a form of job rotation, or job mobility. Further evidence of the benefits of international assignments is that the multicultural experience has a positive relationship with creative performance (Leung, et al 2008).

Another purpose for an international assignment is technology transfer (Tahvanainen et al 2005; Collings 2007). The technology transfer can often be from the employee sent over to a subsidiary, or it can be the employee learning some technology from the subsidiary. When relating this to a soccer player's international assignment, it could be that the player is sent to a specific club because they have the ability to teach that player something he would have difficulty learning. An example would be that if a player has trouble playing a long ball, he

could perhaps be sent to an environment where he is best suited to learn that skill. The same can be said for any facet of the game that a given player may need to develop. In the opinion of this author, that is the essence of technology transfer in relation to a soccer player's international assignment. This would be on an individual level for the player. It will be discussed later at a macro level for the club.

One final developmental tool that the international experience may provide is feedback (Evans et al 2009: 312,320). An international assignment may be a way for an individual to benchmark his ability against peers. This may be especially applicable for a soccer player on an international assignment. On an individual level, the player may see himself, or be provided with information, where his strengths and weakness are on a global level. This information may also be valuable to managers and directors.

Based on previous research, one can clearly assume that an international assignment can be beneficial to an individual's development. One can summarize the developmental benefits from previous research as primarily a way of challenging individuals with an assignment outside of their traditional functional or geographic setting. Feedback can also be a valuable developmental tool. Finally, transfer of particular skills from the host organization to the individual on assignment can be one of the means of development for the individual.

2.1.3. Learning vs. Demand driven assignments

One important distinction with international assignments is that of demand vs. learning driven assignments. This distinction is particularly relevant when dealing with individual development. When evaluating the effects and purposes of the assignment it is important to differentiate the two (Pucik et al 1992).

The demand driven assignment would often be used when a skill gap exists with a foreign company (Edström & Galbraith 1977). The expatriate employee would be sent to fill that skill gap and solve particular problems. It is often viewed that demand driven assignments call for immediate success. (Evans et al 2011: 140). A demand driven assignment in professional soccer

may occur when a player is sent on loan to another club, or an affiliate club. In this case, the player is there to help the new club achieve success.

Another purpose for demand driven assignments is for the home club to receive a transfer fee, or possibly help the club network with foreign clubs. That transfer fee may come in the future. Therefore, the networks generated from the assignment may not be realized until the distant future, so the assumption that a demand driven assignment is focused on immediate success does not seem applicable to the professional soccer world with short-term training assignments. That being said, if the international assignment is a way of generating a transfer or loan right away, along with an immediate expansion of networks, then it could be justifiable as an immediate success.

A different motive for the international assignment is that of a learning driven assignment. Studies have shown that short-term learning driven assignments can be beneficial for individual development (Evans et al 2011; Hellenbeck et al 2011). One of the distinguishing factors of the learning driven assignment is that the primary purpose is on the development of high potentials, rather than the selection of the individual that is the most ready for the job (Collings et al 2011). The dilemma is that pressures on firms for success can make it difficult to find learning driven assignments (Evans et al 2011: 329).

To transfer over the learning driven approach to the sporting world, a soccer player may be sent to train with a foreign club because they feel this player will learn the most from the experience. There may be players that would serve network building roles, and some more likely to receive a transfer. However, the decision may be made to select a high potential for the learning driven assignment as they will benefit the most in terms of development.

Challenge has previously been described as critical to development, along with feedback being a valuable tool in the developmental and training process. Studies have shown that hardship experiences can be beneficial in developing individuals. This carries over into a term called emotional competence (Goleman et al 2009; Evans et al 2011). This essentially means the ability to handle emotions, which can be very valuable when an individual is faced with negative

feedback. While feedback can be a useful tool in individual development, it can also lead to a loss of confidence and potentially hindered performance or development (Kets de Vries 1989). Challenges also exist with quantifying the return on investment of international assignments and succession planning for the short term loss of employees and potential permanent turnover (Evans et al 2011; Capelli 2008). Additionally, dualities exist with excessive mobility, feedback, and emotional competence (Michaels et al. 2001; Goleman et al 2002; Kets de Vries 1989; Judge et al 1999).

The challenge of balancing feedback and hardship experiences is where the duality exists for organizations. The feedback and hardship may be beneficial to one individual's development, while it could be career damaging for another. This duality may not be negative from an organization's perspective. The organization may be looking for individuals that are able to use hardship as something positive. In the eyes of an organization, the hardship experience may show that some individuals were improperly identified as talent and further investment, as well as treatment as high potentials, is no longer necessary.

While a distinction is important between learning driven and demand driven assignments, one does not need to exist independent from the other. The assignment could serve the organizations short-term demand objectives while still serving as a developmental tool for the individual (Larsen 2004). Evans et al (2011) describe the balance between demand and learning on international assignments as working in "*split eggs*". This subject will also be addressed when discussing interest alignment as it is possible the individual's motives for the assignment may possibly be different than the organization. However, for the purpose of this section, it can be stated that a soccer player can be sent on an international assignment that will develop his skillset, and provide the organization with a transfer fee or networking contacts.

2.2. **Social Exchange Theory**

A common theme throughout the assignment is what expectations various stakeholders have, and what influence the assignment has on those expectations. More specifically, how are psychological contracts contextualized in the setting of international assignments for professional

soccer players? While psychological contracts are focused on in the empirical research, an understanding of the theory's roots in social exchange is presented first.

Typical economic markets are often characterized by exchange of goods or services. These exchanges are often tangible or outlined through a set of legal obligations. Economic activity can often be specific, and the transactions clearly defined in terms of rewards and the costs associated with them. However, extra economic expectations may exist with social and economic exchanges. These exchanges may have unspecified obligations for the various actors in a transaction. (Blau 1994: 91; Zafirovski 2005).

Economic exchange tends to rely on personal markets with legal regulations; whereas, social exchange may rely on personal trust (Cook 2000: 687; Zafirovski 2005). This subchapter will present some groundwork on the nature of social exchanges along with the popularized theory of psychological contracts that has emerged from studies on social exchange. A review of social exchange and psychological contracts will be presented. However, the goal of the section is not to be overly critical of the theories, rather to simply use existing principles to set the foundation for analyzing the nature of psychological contracts in connection with short-term international assignments for soccer players.

2.2.1. Groundwork and basic principles

While the term social exchange may have come to the forefront in works in the 1960s to 1970s, it has been argued that the theory dates as far back as Adam Smith's work. (Homans 1961; Emerson 1969; Blau 1964; Zafirovski 2005). Studies on social exchange, or exchange theory as it is often referred, can be seen a combination of psychological, social, and economic studies (Nord 1973). While significant research will not be addressed, it should be noted that this paper follows the view that social exchanges, or extra economic exchanges, are often imprecise, and not bound by legal contractual guidelines (Cullinane & Dundom 2006; Nord 1973). The view of this paper is that social exchanges not be bound to the idea that they are exclusively non-economic exchanges (Emerson 1976). While the transaction itself may not involve precise boundaries and a direct economic exchange, it is the opinion of this writer that the exchange

takes place out of the hope of future economic benefit, whether direct or indirect. In order to concentrate the existing theories and key features relating to exchange theory, this study's literature review will focus on theories of rational choice, network exchange, and reciprocity.

The theory of rational choice in social exchange is a rather simplistic one. Individuals will rank all the alternatives, and choose the one that will yield the most utility. This theory is often called utility maximization (Heath 1976: 8). Critics of the theory maintain that individuals act impulsively rather than in a rational manner. Ordinary people would look to choose alternatives with the most satisfactory outcome, rather than the outcome that maximizes utility. Heath goes on to address critiques of rational choice at length by stating, that amongst other things, a rational decision can be made quickly without complete information. Additionally, the rational decision need not be conscious. (Heath 1976: 75-81).

For an exchange to take place, both sides must view the transaction as better than any other option available (Heath 1976: 19; Thibaut & Kelly 1959: 22). One interesting distinction is that the exchange does not mean both parties will be better off than they were before; it simply means that they would be better off than they would be without the exchange (Heath 1976: 19). The theory extends well beyond simple economics. Rational choice would indicate that exchanges are made for a number of reasons, not limited to, but including: power, acceptance, social approval, dependence (Heath 1976: 23; Becker 1991).

A theory that can be complementary to rational choice is network exchange theory. This network exchange is rooted from the logic of collective action in rational choice theory (Macy & Flache, 1995; Heath 1975: 30). One key element to the network exchange is bargaining power. Specifically, various actors will adjust their positions based on their dependence of the transaction (Macy et al 1995). The inclusiveness of a party in the network can also be a factor in determining their bargaining power (Markovsky et al 1995).

Studies on network exchange and collective action have stressed the goal of mutual gain (Heath 1975: 30; Macy et al 1995). This can be seen as a form of cooperation that has seen a recent surge in research. Firms may depend on each other and have some shared goals, yet they are

competing for a greater share in the resources available. This network action may manifest itself in the sporting world where clubs are sharing interest in a player. A given club's dependency on transfer money, need for the player, and other available players to transfer will be reflected in its bargaining power. Additionally, the selling and buying clubs may have non-economic reasons for buying or selling a given player.

The final topic to be discussed under social exchange is reciprocity. An important view on reciprocity is that it can be seen as the foundation for initiating social exchange. One person, or company, is willing to invest in another in the expectation of some form of reciprocal investment (Gouldner 1960). Reciprocity is often seen as a social and moral norm (Nord 1973). While strict reciprocity may not be necessary, this paper holds to the belief that some form of reciprocity is often the basis of social exchange.

The intended goal of this section was not to critique differing social exchange theories, or how bargaining power is affected amongst various network actors. Rather, it is to set the foundation for researching and extending social exchange to the setting of international assignments. For this, we assume reciprocity to be a factor in typical business transactions. Therefore, it is valuable to determine if there is any reciprocal action that is expected by from the player, host club, or home club.

2.2.2. Psychological Contract

The psychological contract is an extension of exchange theory. Similar to exchange theory, the psychological contract is generally characterized by unspecified obligations. At the very least, it is not bound by written contracts. The psychological contract moves beyond the confines of legal contracts, and focuses on subjective elements of employee\employer relationships (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Arnold 1996).

There seems to be no universal definition of the psychological contract (Anderson & Schalk 1998). Similar to social exchange, literature on psychological contracts emphasizes implicit obligations and reciprocity as fundamental to the theory (Tekleab & Taylor 2003). One thing that

seems to differentiate studies on psychological contracts from those of social exchange theory is the emphasis on employee and employer relationships. An understanding of expectations of the individual and the firm are deemed as slightly more critical, as well as the economic impact that those expectations can have on human resource development and job performance.

In Cullinane and Dundon's (2006) critique of existing psychological contract literature, it is stated that psychological contracts involve implicit reciprocal promises or obligations (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006). The focus of the study is not intended to redefine psychological contracts. However, these general principles will serve as an accurate foundation for analyzing the effects that an international assignment has on influencing psychological contracts.

Beyond the futile debate on differentiating what employees view as obligatory as opposed to simply the individual employee's expectation, there are critics that would argue that the psychological contract is overly subjective, and exists only in the mind of the individual (Boxall & Purcell 2008:188-195). Therefore, it cannot justifiably be viewed as a contract. While it is agreed that the psychological contract is subjective, this paper takes the stance that practical implications are not affected based on the use of the term "contract" and renaming or redefining psychological contracts would be unnecessary for this study.

In addition to the literature debate on the legitimacy with the usage of the term contract, there has been argument on what perspective the psychological contract involves. It has been argued that the contract is seen as an employee perspective. Others feel that research should include employer's expectations and obligations of the employee. (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Boxall & Purcell 2008:188-195). This paper views employer, as well as employee perspectives as relevant in the study of international assignments and their effect on psychological contracts.

Given the relatively ambiguous definition that existing research has provided with regards to psychological contracts, it is necessary to summarize what is meant by psychological contracts, and what practical implications may arise from international assignments. It is clearly assumed that there are imprecise obligations or expectations that are present in the view of both employees and organizations. These expectations may exist prior to employment, and are

subject to change throughout the employment process (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006). Additionally, unmet expectations can be the result of misguided expectations, and can be detrimental to individual, as well as organizational performance (Conway 2002). Relatively little research exists linking international assignments to psychological contracts. Empirical evidence from this study may prove to be useful in analyzing any intended effect of international assignments on psychological contracts.

2.2.3. The role of expatriation

The repatriation phase can often be seen as the most critical part of an international assignees international experience. Given the short length of the assignments in this study, the effects of the repatriation phase may not be identical to those traditionally studied. The repatriation process will likely not be influenced by cultural and familial adjustment (Black 1997). However, the broadness of expatriation literature provides value in crossing over from traditional business to the sporting world. The repatriation of assignees provides a benchmark in gauging the success of an international assignment (Allen & Alvarez 1998). Research has emphasized challenges and failures in the repatriation process (Adler 1997; Black 1992; Larson 2006). Much of this research has addressed the cultural and familial issues with the repatriation process (Larson 2006). These issues are valuable in analyzing the repatriation process; in turn, they will likely be instrumental in analyzing the effects of a short-term assignment for soccer players.

The critical elements of repatriation relating to this study are that of the potential for increased turnover, which will be addressed in “the club setting” section of the paper, along with potential psychological contracts developed from the assignment. The development of an individual may be manifested in an individual’s performance upon repatriation. However, the short time of the assignments in question would signify that it is less likely, and has little to do with the traditional studies on repatriation. For this study, the repatriation phase is most intriguing when determining any psychological contracts that may be changed from the assignment.

Often individuals will see an international assignment as a means of investment by the clubs in them. If this experience is positive, it could lead to improved performance and loyalty

(Cropanzano & Mitchel, 2005). On the contrary, if the expectations of the assignment are not met, this could lead to weakened performance and increased employee turnover (Stroh et al 1998).

The lack of research on the international assignments' causal effects on the alteration of psychological contracts is identified in Zhu's study (2002). Here the creation of psychological contract model in repatriation is presented, but is focused on longer term assignments. It is valuable in that problems of misalignment are addressed, and a restructuring of international assignment evaluation is presented. Employee and Employer perspectives are presented as necessary for evaluation. However, it is not entirely specific to this study as developmental factors are also present, not solely the creation of psychological contracts.

Empirical research from this study may be valuable in determining if a short term assignment, as in question in this study, will have an effect on psychological contracts from the club or player. If so, it is possible that the assignment may have effects on player wage demands, or on and off field responsibilities given to the player. Additionally, there is the potential that organizations will demand more of the player, in terms of performance, based on the assignment.

2.3. Interest alignment

International assignments can create some difficulty in aligning the interests of various stakeholders in an organization. It should not necessarily be assumed that all parties are necessarily in favor of an individual going on an international assignment. However, assuming that the decision has been made for an individual to go on an international assignment, research supports the logical assumption that not all the stakeholders have similar motivations or aligned interests (Alchiam & Demsetz 1972; Hackman et al 1975; Gottschalg 2005). This subchapter will look to expand on how and why various stakeholders may have varying motivations for international assignments, along with highlighting some of the causal factors and results from properly or improperly aligned interests of stakeholders.

2.3.1. Varying motivations

When analyzing the varying motivations, it is easiest to approach it from the view of various stakeholders. Naturally, there will be some coexistence with the varying stakeholder motivations. However, the underlying motivation, or ultimate purpose, for different stakeholders may not align (Gottschalg 2005).

The international assignment has been shown to enhance stakeholder awareness, perceived values, and provide rare resources to the assignee (Slater 2009). This statement can lead to the notion that an international assignment can develop an employee. Improvement of an employee's skillset is likely to be viewed as a positive thing by both employer and employee, or player and club in the case of this study.

While the developmental goal of the assignment may be to improve the player, the club and player may have alternate motives. The club may want to improve the player for the upcoming season and the long-term sustainability of the organization. On the other hand, the player might be using the experience to showcase himself to other clubs in the hope of signing a contract with a foreign club, or at the very least garner a better position for negotiating a contract domestically. This is supported by the notion that international assignments have led to higher salaries for CEO's (Slater 2009).

Some assignments run the risk of limiting the potential of employees by keeping them overseas (Lancaster 1995). However, this is likely not transferable to short-term assignments like those in this study. In fact, if previous academic research transfers over to the sporting world, soccer clubs would run the risk of losing players to overseas clubs, or potentially having to pay more to retain their players (Slater 2009).

One unique aspect to the sporting world is that of a transfer fee. A player is essentially open to be purchased by a club. This can be a great source of revenue for some clubs (Football League 2013). A club may look to send a player on an international assignment with the hope of securing a fee in exchange for the player's services at a club that has a need for him.

The clubs desire to receive a transfer fee may coexist just fine with the player's motivation to go on an international assignment. However, the lack of communication in this could lead to unmanaged expectations on the assignment. A potential problem would be that a player does not prepare himself properly for the assignment, as he views it simply as means of individual development rather than an opportunity for the club to sell him. This could potentially miscue the potential worth of the player, or damage his, or the clubs, reputation internally and externally.

In addition to the transfer fee and developmental purposes, a motivation for international assignments is a way to internationalize the organization (Slater 2009). This can carry over into the effect of brand image. However, more the focal point is the use of an international assignment to gain entry into a market (Athanassiou and Nigh 2000).

The entry into a new market may be facilitated, or legitimized by an international assignment. It may be a way to gain exposure and trust amongst agents, clubs, and possibly fans. This does carry over into brand reputation, but the distinguishing factor is the international assignment's role as a means of entry or at the very least a way of decreasing the internationalization process (Athanassiou and Nigh 2000). For a player, the assignment may be a way of gaining access to international markets through exposure to other agents, or other clubs. If the player or club has different motivations, the assignment may potentially be negative and not allow either party to achieve their goal of successful internationalization.

Traditional academic research suggests that organizations are able to achieve the greatest amount of success when individual motivations and goals are aligned with those of the organization (Gottschalg 2005). From traditional research, it would appear that various stakeholders' goals of development, internationalization, and transfer possibilities are best achieved when the players and clubs have similar end goals. However, a contrarian position might suggest that there is the potential for the greatest achievement when the player or club is not made aware of the others motivation. In this case, the club or the player may facilitate the other stakeholders' long-term goal in an attempt to achieve their own.

2.4. Reputational Effects

An international assignment may have purposed or unintentional reputational effects on the individual assignee, the host firm, and more specifically to this subchapter, the assignees home corporation. This subchapter will briefly introduce some general principles of brand image, and the potential impact of stakeholders' perception of the firms' brand image. The chapter will conclude by discussing how an organization's reputation may influence recruitment and retention of talent.

The overall goal of this subchapter is not to delve too deep into reputational effects in terms of brand image, as it may shift attention towards more of a marketing study. The material discussed in this section will be geared towards giving a foundation for what reputational effects, if any, that may be created from an international assignment. In order to look at macroeconomic effects of international assignments, a small foundation in reputational effects is deemed necessary.

2.4.1. Brand Image

Multiple definitions of corporate or brand image exist in literature (Brown & Dacin 1997). The purpose of this section is not to scrutinize minute details which are relatively insignificant in the greater goal of providing a foundation for linkage of international assignments to brand image. This paper takes the position that brand image is the mental picture one has about an organization (Britt 1971). The perception, including feelings and attitudes, towards a company will affect a company's brand image (Hansen & Christensen 2003).

One important component to the foundational analysis of brand image is that there are multiple perspectives, or audiences (Brown & Dacin 1997). The potential talent that can be recruited, as well as retained will be addressed in the following section. However, the perception of consumers is critical to a company's brand image (Hansen et al 2003).

Previous studies have suggested varying results in consumer product preferences based on a company's image (Dacin & Brown 1997). While mixed results may exist, there is evidence that

correlates a positive relationship between a company's brand image to consumer product responses and a firm's credibility (Hansen et al 2003). It is then presumed that a firm's positive brand image creates a competitive advantage for the organization.

Much of the competitive advantage from a positive brand image will be discussed in relation to attraction and retention of talent. However, there are additional competitive advantages that are likely to arise based on a positive brand image. The ability to charge premium prices, potentially cooperate with competitors, and generate repeat business are sources of competitive advantage for firms (Shapiro 1983). Price premiums, cooperation, and repeat business are clearly a source of competitive advantage. It is important to contextualize how traditional academic studies of brand image may potentially operate to the world of professional sports.

With a positive brand image, clubs may see marketing effects from jersey sales, ticket prices, or sponsorship revenue. This may be related to the positive image created from sending a talented team member to train or trial with a high profile club. More specific to price premiums is the effect on transfer price. An assignee's successful performance may increase the player's transfer value by increased exposure generated from the assignment. This value adding activity may result from the host club's in depth look at the player, or from outside clubs newly generated interested based on positive performance with a high profile host club.

The international assignment may also increase the cooperation between the home and host clubs of an assignee. The clubs may be competing over talent on a global stage, but there may be mutually beneficial activities that are created from the relationship formed through an international assignment. These could include youth academy partnerships, loaning of players, financial support, or information exchange.

The ability to maintain the relationship and trust is potentially valuable for repeat business. If one player provides a good showing on an international assignment, it may prove easy to facilitate future assignments with the host club. Additionally, a successful transfer may serve as a foundation for getting more players signed to foreign clubs.

2.4.2. Recruitment

Training and developing employees can certainly be valuable in improving the performance of a firm. However, systems and technology can be replaced. It is the talent within an organization that is the key driver. Without the proper talent at a company's disposal, corporate training programs are limited. Talent, therefore, becomes a strategic asset to a corporation (Cheryl 2009).

Certain people and positions can be more easily replaced than others (Collins et al 2009). However, companies still report that a shortage of talent is a major concern they deal with. The ability to find talented employees is becoming significantly more difficult. (Oliver 2001; The Economist 2006; Harvard 2008:63-65).

Difficulties with talent availability can be due to the complex skillset required to operate some positions, or the location of the given job. Other difficulties have been attributed to an aging workforce, lack of loyalty leading to high turnover, and increased global competition for talent (Margol 1993). Regardless of the underlining factors that have contributed to talent shortages, the ability to recruit talent is not only necessary, but should be a critical part of a company's talent management strategy.

Some studies have proposed that relocation abroad may be a deterrent for some individuals as it may be seen as career damaging (McKinsley 2008). However, that may be limited to an individual's career decision and the option to go on an international assignment would likely not have adverse recruiting effects. A large percentage of younger workers desire to work abroad at some point in their careers. In fact, many organizations are using international assignments as a means of recruiting talent. (Crown 2013; Rynes 1991)

Job applicants, or talent, have incomplete knowledge about organizations. They use what information they are able to gather in order to make judgments about prospective companies (Rynes 1991). People are drawn to organizations because of the attributes that the given organizations possess (Chatman 1989). If individuals value the experience of an international

assignment, the ability of a company to provide that should have a positive impact on talent recruitment.

A short-term international training assignment for soccer players will likely not create the same mobility issues as traditional job relocations. The benefits, however, should still remain to some extent. Therefore, it is possible that international assignment opportunities have similarly positive effects on the recruitment of talented soccer players as they do with traditional business talent recruitment.

2.4.3. Retention

Previous sections in this literature review should have provided adequate justification on why it is necessary for firms to have talented individuals at an organization. Most of the attention has been given to why and how firms recruit and develop talent. However, the ability for an organization to retain talent is essential.

Given the difficulty in recruiting and developing talent, along with the effort that is placed in these areas, it would seem logical for an organization to make every effort to keep talented employees. Firms that are able to retain employees incur lower operational costs compared to those firms with higher turnover rates. Previous sections have touched on this subject and the following chapter on club setting will address some issues. However, it is important to address some links with the international assignment and retention. (The Economist 2006; Lalli 2009).

While not wholly sufficient as a singular means for retention, the international assignment has been used by corporations as a means to retain talent (Crown 2013). Current economic climate with high turnover is often seen as a lack of loyalty amongst employees to their firms (Jamrog 2002). Part of this may be attributed to the assumption that firms do not care about their employees. When organizations are able to encourage employees and provide a path for individual and career development through exciting and challenging experiences, they are more likely to increase employee loyalty to the firm (Lalli 2009). Employees tend to associate themselves with the organizations where they work (Ashforth & Mael 1989). Similar to

recruitment, the international assignment can have positive effects on talent retention when seen as a means of CSR to the employee.

Aside from difficulties in repatriation, this may not be specifically relevant given the short nature of assignments in this study; the international assignment may have detrimental effects on the clubs ability to retain talent. When an individual is going to train with a foreign club, whether it be for training or a trial, there is the inherent risk of losing a player to another club. The exposure from an international assignment may make the player attractive to the club he is training with, or improve his status to other clubs. The player may be disillusioned with his home club, or demand a higher salary that the home club is unwilling or unable to provide (Slater 2009).

Another challenge facing organizations in the use of international assignments for development is that of succession planning. In practical purpose, succession planning is how an organization plans to fill the potential vacancies left from the departure of an international assignee (Capelli 2008; Evans et al 2011). The international training or trial for a soccer player may take place in the off season, so there is not necessarily a need to have a successor for the vacant position. The theoretical implications of succession planning will likely carry over to the soccer world should the player become injured while on assignment, or get sold to a new club.

The international assignment is likely to provide some positive effects on player retention in that it shows the club invests in the player. However, the downside may be that international assignment may also increase turnover when the player has alternatives abroad, or domestic, that result from the assignment. It is likely that the effects of an international assignment on retention are similar in traditional businesses as they are in professional soccer.

2.5. Summary of Literature

International assignment literature has shown that individual development is often a reason for assignments (Nadler et al 1989:6; Evans et al 2011: 302). Assuming that companies have assessed the potential return on investment from an assignment, they then determine if a learning

or demand driven assignment is most beneficial (Pucik et al 1992). The unique nature of the sporting world presents a potential 3rd category of assignments where clubs can generate revenue by loaning or selling a player. This can potentially categorize an assignment as rent or revenue generating assignments.

While the developmental benefits of an assignment may be largely focused on the individual, clubs may benefit from an assignment in their overall brand reputation. The brand reputation benefits can primarily be seen through recruitment and retention (Rynes 1991; Lalli 2009). The assignment has the ability to influence the overall perception and mental picture towards a firm. When credibility is strengthened, numerous additional benefits follow (Hansen et al 2003).

Throughout the study's empirical research, psychological contracts and interest alignment are discussed. Psychological contract theory is born from social exchange; it focuses on unspecified obligations and employee\employer relationships (Cullinane & Dundon 2006; Arnold 1996). Complementary to the obligations of various stakeholders is the fact that not all parties necessarily have the same motivations for the assignment (Gottschalg 2005).

What remains unclear is how these psychological contracts are manifested in professional sports. It is unclear where employees and employers, or in the case of this study clubs and players, have their interests aligned. The existing literature provides a necessary foundation when extending traditional research to the sporting world. The current research is valuable to measure against empirical evidence from the study to determine where traditional businesses may benefit from professional sports.

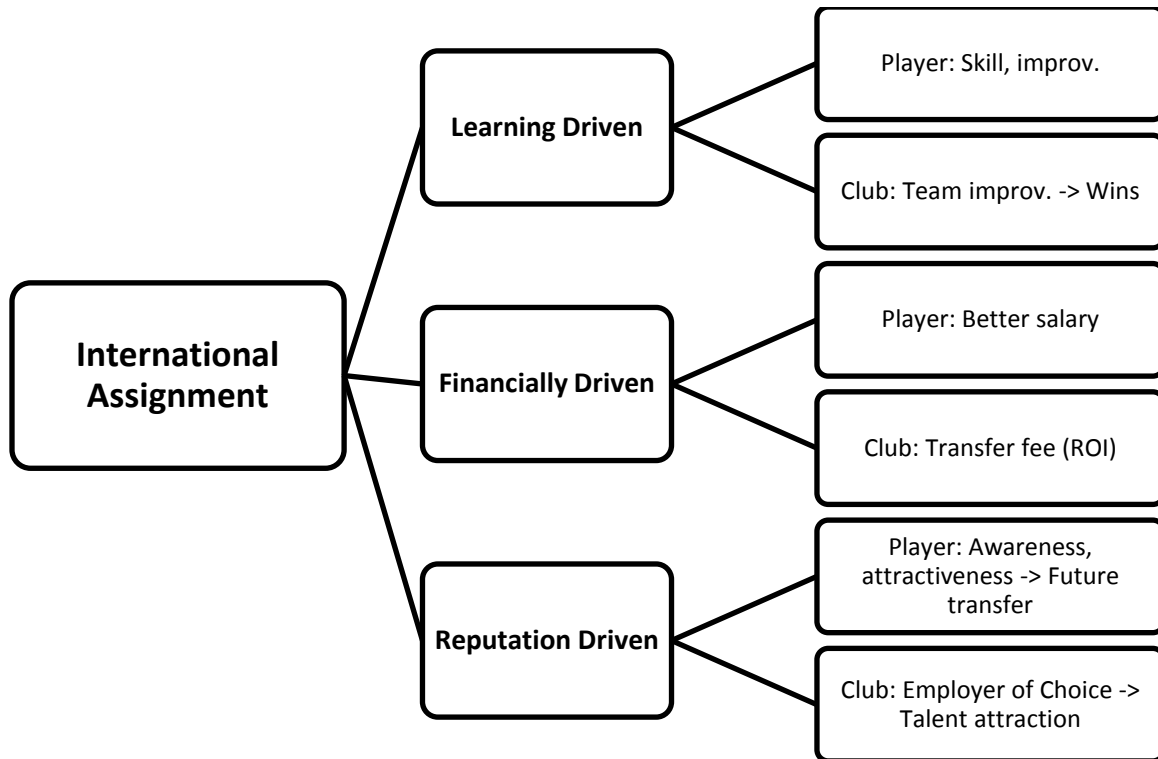


Figure 1. Perceived Benefits

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The following chapter presents the methodologies used in this study. The first section discusses the approach and strategy to the research study. Then an explanation of the research design is presented. Section three gives detail on how data was collected, including necessary information on the chosen sample. Following this, a description of the study's data analysis is provided. The chapter concludes with justification for the reliability and validity of the data in this study.

3.1. Research Approach and Strategy

As opposed to a deductive research approach where theory is the starting point, this study follows an inductive approach to research. With an inductive approach, data is collected prior to theory development (Saunders et al 2000: 87; Hyde 2000). The inductive approach is most applicable given that the study is exploratory, and the subject has relatively little academic literature to date.

To properly extend traditional academic research to the sporting world and seek new insights, an exploratory approach is taken. This is done in order to not limit the boundaries of the study (Robson 1993: 42). The deductive or explanatory approaches may be too rigid and limit the range of topics discussed; therefore, an inductive exploratory approach is more suitable (Saunders et al 2000: 89).

Exploratory studies can be difficult for an inexperienced researcher (Yin 1994). Lack of research experience is overcome with the researcher's prior history in the sporting world. This enables general themes to be covered in research that are relevant to the study. Therefore, there is an element of grounded theory in the study formulated from the researcher's prior experience and observations. With an open and objective stance, this allows for flexibility in research when common themes occur. (Saunders et al 2000: 94, 392).

It should be noted that this study could have taken on a deductive approach. There is also an element of deduction that takes place when analyzing data. Therefore, to some extent a mixed

approach is taken. This may be due to the presence of grounded theory based on the researcher's observations throughout the study. However, the general characteristics of inductive research are most prevalent, and more accurately describe the nature of the study.

3.2. Research Design

Two common methods in the acquisition of knowledge are quantitative and qualitative research (Hyde 2000). Frequently, qualitative research follows an inductive exploratory approach. The use of qualitative methods is appropriate in that the goal is not to answer how frequently events occur. Rather, the goal of this study is to explore and extend traditional studies to the sporting world. Exploring new topics necessitates creativity in research. In order to garner the appropriate responses for the study, a non-standardized approach is necessary. Therefore, the qualitative research method is most appropriate. (Saunders et al 2000: 381)

Exploratory research can be done in different ways. One alternative is to speak with experts on the subject (Saunders et al 2000: 97). Qualitative data for this study is done through the use of multiple semi-structured and non-standardized interviews. These interviews can be classified as respondent interviews in that the researcher directs the interview. However, interviewees are encouraged to speak freely and address items they feel pertinent. (Robson 1993; Saunders et al 2000: 243).

The use of semi-structured interviews allows for flexibility and adaptation to gather necessary information. Basic themes and general questions are predetermined. Some questions are left out of certain interviews. Likewise, questions can be added to some interviews to further probe for additional information. The ability to adapt to an interview as it unfolds is very important when trying to explore new topics. Additionally, understanding the context in which events occur is critical when extending the study from traditional academic studies to the sporting world. (Saunders et al 2009: 242-252).

In order to expand the width of the study, the semi-structured interviews are cross-sectional and longitudinal. Despite the difficulties with access, it was deemed necessary to speak with top

management within the soccer organization. To accomplish this, access to a sport director, or senior official that is the primary decision maker in the contractual negotiations and transfer process of players, at a club is required. Additionally, interviews include players that have gone on international assignment. A third cross-section is included of the players that were teammates of a player on international assignment. This gives a unique perspective, and potentially broadens the relevant issues discussed. The longitudinal aspect occurs when interviewing players and directors at different stages in their career after the player returns from assignment. This may potentially allow for different responses based on time elapse and the maturity of the player. (Saunders et al 2000:96).

Aside from the ease of access, the study intentionally interviews a segment that has some level of previous personal interaction. Some interviews are done over the phone as well as in person. The trust from familiarity, as well as the setting, is used to potentially generate unique responses. English is the language used in interviews. This provided linguistic equality in some cases; while in the majority of cases, this provided the researcher with a linguistic advantage. The linguistic advantage may be problematic in some instances to garner appropriate responses. However, the linguistic advantage may be beneficial when interviewing a player or sport director of high status. (Welch & Piekkari 2006).

While one of the weaknesses of qualitative studies is subjectivity, the freedom and flexibility allow for expansion of exploratory research in this study (Saunders et al 2000: 381). The limited amount of interviews and large amounts of uncontrolled variables, denies the ability produce substantial quantifiable data (Saunders et al 2012:557). However, the goal of this study is exploration into the unique issues surrounding professional sports and to see how traditional academic theories may extend to that unique environment. For this, qualitative research with many variables is justifiable in that it presents more opportunity to broaden the range of issues from respondents.

3.3. Data Collection and Sample

All of the primary data for this study is collected through semi-structured interviews. The previous section gave the justification and design for the use of qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews. This section will explain how the data was collected, as well as give more information on the chosen sample.

3.3.1. Data Collection

Background research was done on players that have gone on international assignments. Some of the players that have gone on assignments have been previously acquainted with the researcher. Likewise, some sport directors were previously known by the researcher. Those warm leads were the starting point; the players and directors were then approached via telephone to see if their assignment fit the necessary requirements. Attempts at triangulation were done by asking the sport director or player, respectively, to interview the other party within their club. This was to see how responses overlap.

When players did not meet the necessary requirements, they were asked to provide a referral to players that may fit the necessary criteria for the study. This method of collection proved useful in most cases. Finally, cold calls were done to sport directors of top tier clubs in Scandinavia and North America to see if they met the sample requirement, and would be willing to be interviewed.

All of the interviews were done by phone with the exception of two. Those two interviews were conducted face to face. All interviews, phone and face to face, were private where the researcher recorded the interviews from a conference room at the library.

3.3.2. Sample Criteria

Sample criteria were chosen based on individual, club, and assignment levels. Players interviewed needed to be under contract with professional clubs in their respective homeland

while going on assignment. The players needed to have returned to the club directly after the assignment.

Sport directors in Scandinavia, or general managers in North America, were chosen as the most valuable source of information on a club level. Regardless of the title, the sample candidate needs to provide the necessary link of soccer knowledge in assessing players, as well as being involved in the business aspect of transfers and contract negotiations. Club representatives were screened prior to the interview to confirm that they provided that link. The interviewees chosen had to have been involved at the club while a certain player, that met the necessary criteria, was sent on assignment.

It was deemed necessary that the home club be in the highest league of the given club's country. This is to ensure a relative sense of professionalism. The level of the host club did not necessarily need to fit into that description.

The assignment itself needed to fulfill basic criteria as well. Short-term assignment length in this study is limited to one to six weeks. The timeframe of which the assignment occurred relative to the home club's league fixtures was not a criterion. However, the general principal was that the assignments took place in the home clubs off-season and during the season for the host club.

The assignment also needed to involve some degree of geographical or cultural adaptation. This was not the focal point of the study. However, in the subjective view of the researcher it was seen as potentially more interesting to explore cross-cultural moves. This may provide more meaningful interviews with a potentially broader range of responses with an assignment likely having more components when these boundaries are crossed. Therefore, Scandinavian players needed to have an assignment outside of the Nordic countries, and North American players had to have an assignment outside of North America.

There were no criteria placed on the age of the player while on assignment. Additionally, the time gap from assignment to interview was not a criterion. However, interviewees were deliberately selected at different stages of their careers pre and post assignment. This was to

potentially provide a different perspective, and the ability to see how the assignment is viewed at different stages of a player's career.

In order to fully gain access to the some potential pitfalls in international assignments, two interviews were conducted outside of the standard requirements. One interview took place with a sport director who does not incorporate international assignments to his club. Also, one interview took place with a player that was part of the team before and after a teammate went on assignment. These two interviews were deemed necessary as they have the potential to unlock unique insight to the effects of an international assignment.

3.3.3. Selected Sample

The selected sample for this study consists of eleven total interviews. Five of these interviews are with club representatives. There are another five interviews with players that have gone on assignment. For the sake of the study, these players will often be referred as talent. The last interview is with an individual that did not go on an international assignment; however, this player was a member of a club before and after one of his teammates went on an assignment.

The first sport director interviewed was chosen due to the access of talent and non-talent interviews for triangulation. This director was a professional player for almost fifteen years with the Finnish club he currently works for. There is a previous relationship, but not on a personal level, with the researcher. Given the sport directors recent retirement from the game, the interview is likely to encompass a unique perspective from a recently retired player.

One sport director was selected because of his strong business background. This individual worked as chairman and director of a few different clubs in Finland. Prior to directing clubs, he served as an agent for some Finnish national team players. Aside from his work as an agent and club director, this sport director worked as a director for a few different companies throughout Europe and Asia. The purpose of this selection is to potentially provide more business decisions relating to the international assignment. There is no professional playing or coaching background

from this individual. This interview also allows for overlap with one talent interview from the club.

The third interview is conducted with an individual that currently operates as a head coach in Finland. However, his role overlaps with the sport director. Additionally, this individual previously worked as a sport director for another club. This trainer has played professionally for over fifteen years, and has been coaching professionally for nearly ten years. He was selected in order to provide information on the development and repatriation phases. The unique insight from both coaching, and overlapping duties with the sport director, would provide a manager as well as sport director view to the study. Perhaps more soccer specific insight will be obtained from the interview.

One general manager from the United States was chosen. This individual was in his position for five years, and has since worked at similar positions for ten more years. A shared first language with the researcher, and a North American perspective to the subject were the primary reasons for this selection.

The final sport director interviewed works with an elite club in Norway. The reason for this selection is that the club does not incorporate international assignments as a club practice. This was a first year sport director, but has been a coach at the youth and professional levels for this and other clubs. The reasoning behind not using international assignments for the players is interesting to discuss for the study.

Selection of talent players was first done based on familiarity with the researcher. Then referrals from sport directors allowed access to some players who recently went on trials. Generally speaking, the players went on assignment early in their careers. It was not intentional, but all of the players interviewed were members of their respective youth national teams at the time of assignment. The assignment was not necessarily linked to national team performance. However, the level necessary to play at the professional level at a young age is likely the cause of involvement in a youth national team.

The first interview is with a player that has recently retired from a career that saw him playing for several Scandinavian professional clubs. His international assignment occurred at the age of seventeen, just one year after his first professional season. This interviewee was selected as a trial interview due to the familiarity with the researcher. Additionally, the fact that this player is ten years removed from his assignment, and is not playing professionally, may allow for more uninhibited responses throughout the interview.

Two players were interviewed as referrals from sport directors. They were both sent on assignment after their first year as professionals, and had just returned to their clubs for preseason at the time of the interview. Both players had two years remaining on their three year contracts at the time of assignment. Both players trained and played with the reserve teams of Italian and German clubs respectively. These players were selected to provide fresh responses as their assignment was so recent. However, the recent assignment and youthfulness, may limit the ability to look back on the experience to see how it shaped their career. At the same time, it may prove useful in examining how it affects a player at the time of assignment.

A North American player was selected to give a perspective outside of Scandinavia. This player is a current professional at a lower level than he was playing at the time of assignment. He is eight years removed from his assignment, yet still playing professionally. Aside from the North American viewpoint, the perspective of a current professional, which is still eight years removed from assignment, is likely valuable in allowing one to look back on the assignment, but still relate it to his current profession.

The final talent interview is with a player that went on two assignments at the ages of twenty and twenty-one. This player was selected primarily to give some insight on both experiences. However, the player was and currently is a member of the same club as one of the sport directors and non-talent interviewed. He is four years removed from assignment, yet was a professional for three years prior to going on assignment. This provides a unique perspective to the other talent interviews, as he had more professional experience prior to the assignment.

Concluding the sample is the non-talent interview. It is somewhat unjust to label the player as non-talent as he is a current professional player and was a member of youth national teams in Finland. There is a chance that non-talent interviewees may be hesitant to open up to the researcher about the true feelings surrounding a teammate going on assignment. Therefore, it was deemed appropriate to select a player for the non-talent interview that is not only familiar, but comfortable in a social setting with the researcher. The mutual trust is likely to allow freer, less restricted, responses throughout the interview.

Sample selection criteria are limited to only incorporate short-term assignments. The length restriction that an assigned player is to return to their home club post assignment is also a controlled variable in the study. However, the age, experience, and background of the players or club officials were purposefully not controlled in order to allow more information to be gained in exploration.

3.4. Data Analysis

Exploratory research done through the collection of qualitative data can pose problems when analyzing data. A reason for the problematic nature of qualitative analysis is that there is not a generally accepted or standardized approach to analyzing qualitative data (Suanders et al 2000: 382; Sekeran & Bougie 2010: 370). The data consists of words rather than numbers. Generally, the data is large and complex in nature (Saunders et al 2012:546). The overall goal of the analysis is to form valid conclusions from what can be an overwhelming amount of data (Sekeran & Bougie 2010:370). Data analysis in this study follows the process of data reduction, data display, and the drawing of conclusions that was proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994:10).

Data reduction in this analysis is primarily done through data categorization. The names or headings are derived from a combination of three sources. These sources include terms that emerged from data, the actual terms or phrases used by interviewees, and existing topics in academic theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998). After the interviews were typed out, the key data was highlighted according to which heading they were classified under. While the study is inductive,

observations and general knowledge of existing theory is used by the researcher. Therefore, categories are both concept and data driven (Saunders et al 2012: 557).

Initial coding was done prior to the interviews based on observations and general knowledge. Additionally, categories and subcategories were formed prior to the interview process. New categories were developed and merged with existing categories as information was gathered throughout the empirical research. Later literature review provided an aid for naming and categorizing data in an academic manor.

Data display in this study is not done in a particularly formal way, and uses a combination of several display techniques. Additionally, the data display often overlaps and aids the categorization and reduction of data. Summaries and self-memos, along with full transcript of interviews serve as analytical aides in analysis.

During and after interviews, short summaries and self-memos were handwritten to identify critical themes. After the interviews, full transcripts of the interviews were written. Units of data were then put into various categories appropriately. Short recaps and summaries were written of relevant information after the transcription to again aid the researcher in developing common themes to aid in conclusion drawing.

Conclusion drawing through conceptual and relational analysis consisted of identifying the underlining meaning of themes, and explaining patterns and relationships throughout the data. New empirical data was constantly compared throughout the process with existing data. This was not only done to help draw conclusions, but to ensure that the research saturation existed and relatively no new data was produced at the end of the empirical research process. Constant analysis in this study is necessary in that a pre-determined sample number did not exist. (Saunders et al 2012: 569).

An important note is that in this exploratory research, analysis occurs throughout the data collection process (Saunders et al 2012: 562). This can help shape the collection of data. Continual qualitative analysis can allow for further exploration into topics and themes in later

empirical research. The exploratory nature also indicates that an element of abduction, or theory development, is present throughout the entire process as empirical data is combined with existing academic theory on traditional businesses.

3.5. Club Setting

Given that this study is an extension of traditional academic research and is exploratory in nature, additional information on the unique environment of sporting clubs can be useful. The aforementioned challenges faced by traditional businesses are applicable. However, sporting clubs are presented with heightened and additional challenges.

Sporting clubs exist at various levels. At a grass roots level, they can serve as a platform of outreach and development for small children, as well as a source of pride for the community. Differentiating the purposes and challenges associated with youth, amateur, and professional clubs is not necessary. The focal point of this study is on international assignments; all the players, and clubs questioned are professional. It was merely deemed necessary to state that varying challenges may or may not exist outside of the professional ranks.

This section will seek to address a few key challenges that are either unique, or at the very least, heightened for professional sports clubs. The first section will address the challenges clubs face in balancing winning on the field and bottom-line business decisions. Next, employee turnover in the setting of professional soccer will be addressed. The final section will address the role of third party intermediaries.

3.5.1. Winning vs. Business Economics

It can be assumed, at some level all clubs care about winning on the field. The extent of which they coincide with bottom line profitability may vary. The best business decision may not necessarily align with short or long term success on the field.

A club may spend great sums of money in order to achieve success on the field. This may also burden the club with large amounts of debt. Increased spending for success may be a business decision to improve potential television and sponsorship revenue, which may or may not materialize. Some of the most leveraged clubs are those that perform at the peak of European soccer, the Champions League. (Smart Football 2010)

Another potential motivating factor in short-term winning is the owners' commitment level to the club. An owner may have bought a club with the intention of selling it in a short period of time when the profit potential is realized via an ownership transfer. It may be difficult to determine if a club owner's spending is due to a lack of concern for long-term sustainability, or if it is something that should be seen as a long term investment for success. These items may not be mutually exclusive and the author is not arguing for, or against their co-existence. (Smart Football 2010; Markham 2013; Devecioglu 2011; Conn 2008)

Frivolous spending for success may be a business decision as mentioned above. At the same time, there will be cases in which clubs directors will sacrifice success on the field for profitability, or at the very least sustainability. This focus on profitability may be in the sale of a key player, reduced spending in a transfer period, or wage cuts. Some of these decisions may have negative consequences on a club's on field performance, but are seen as economically sensible. As noted above, it may frequently be unclear if lack spending is shrewd business and the capital will be reinvested in the club, or if it is a means of profit taking for the shareholders.

The goal of this section is not to try to analyze or critique motivations of club owners. It is also not to suggest that winning on the field cannot, at times, coincide with a profitable business. The goal of this chapter is merely to suggest that at times clubs are faced with difficult decisions that may benefit one facet of the organization, and be detrimental to another. Clubs may have to sacrifice either profitability or winning.

3.5.2. High turnover industry

Current economic climate sees employees becoming significantly less loyal to their employers. A number of factors may be attributed to increased turnover. The goal of this section is not to list the factors that contribute to employee turnover, nor to analyze them individually. However, some factors relating to turnover may be mentioned as they are specific to that of the sporting world. (United 2012)

Traditional businesses retain their employees for little over four and half years (United 2012). The average age in which most individuals leave the labor market in most countries is between sixty and sixty-five (OECD 2012). While traditional businesses view employee turnover as a major issue, the contract duration and career length of professional soccer players is significantly lower.

The average career span of a professional soccer player is around 8 years. Typical professional soccer contracts vary based on leagues and levels. However, standard contracts can range from one to four years. It is also to note that a player is not necessarily going to stay at his club for the duration of the contract. Player transfers are frequent, and clubs often feel compelled to let players pursue greener pastures and new challenges. (Taylor 2008; Guardian 2010)

Prior sections have outlined purposes for international assignments. The short contract length and limited career span of players add another dimension to retention strategies. However, one of the unique things with the professional soccer world is that some clubs may in fact not look to retain players. Their business model may be created to generate revenue from the sale of players to other clubs.

This transfer fee may be the reasoning behind an international assignment. The assignment may be a means of exposure to sell the player to another club. Yet problems may arise if the club decides to wait until the players' contract expires before signing.

Based on the statistics, it would seem sensible for professional soccer clubs to be cognizant of players' contractual status and projected career length before assessing the value of an international assignment. Additionally, the struggles that traditional businesses face with retention are still present with sporting clubs. They seem to be merely heightened. Naturally, the assignment should still be viewed from a macro-economic level in what additional benefits may be realized for the club, not simply the individual.

3.5.3. Role of third party intermediaries

Academic research typically addresses international assignments contextually relating to the individual and the firm. Positive or negative effects are typically viewed in relation to the two key stakeholders, that of the firm and the individual. This holds true with professional soccer as well. Sports agents may play a significant role in the creation of an international assignment for a player. However, third parties are not studied in depth here.

It is not necessary to emphasize a player's role in the creation of an international assignment as that has been addressed in previous academic literature throughout this studies theoretical framework. However, player agents often have significant financial gain from a transfer (BBC 2012; Devocioglu 2011; Gibson 2013). Financial gain may be from a clause in the player's contract that allows the agent a share in the transfer. It also may be from a "finder's fee" from a new club. Networking and reputational effects from a high profile training experience may enable the agent to recruit better talent to the agency, or help place future players. (Smart Football 2010; Football League 2013)

Therefore the agent is potentially a catalyst in creating an international assignment. The assignment may be beneficial to the player, club, and the agent. However, the interests of the agent may not necessarily be aligned with those of the other stakeholders. The agent simply presents another actor that may be involved in international assignments at some level.

3.6. Reliability and Validity

With a deductive approach to research, reliability of research can be assessed by determining if the measurement methods will produce the same results on different occasions. An inductive approach, which this study primarily follows, is reliable if similar observations and generalizations will be made by different researchers (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe 1991: 41). The reliability of this study may be mildly dependent on the ability of other researchers to derive similar observations. However, a non-standardized approach allows for flexibility in exploring complex issues. Given that this study is exploratory and an extension of traditional academic theory, the study is not necessarily un-reliable if additional or contrary observations are experienced (Marshall & Rossman 1999; Saunders et al 2000: 251).

Threats to reliability can be separated into four main categories: subject error, subject bias, observer error, observer bias (Robson 1993:227). Subject error or bias may occur when the surrounding circumstances may lead to interviewees giving incomplete, automated, or other responses that don't accurately express their true meanings on the subject. Observer error or bias may occur when the researchers interviewing process, and own beliefs influence responses from the subjects. (Easterby-Smith et al 1991: 41; Saunders et al 2000: 101, 250-261)

Much of the issues in reliability have been addressed in previous methodologies sections. These issues primarily deal with the potential errors in the collection methods or techniques. All samples were willing to spend the necessary time for an interview. Careful thought was put into accommodating players and officials so that ample time was spent. While there is natural stress with the job, sport director interviews were scheduled when they felt the least amount of external stress.

Some of the fore mentioned threats to reliability were actually deliberately used as variables in samples. This was in order to get a range of responses from individuals to aid in exploration. Subject bias is likely present with some of the younger interviewees as they recently returned from assignments. Additionally, they know of the triangulation with their respective club representatives. Likewise, sport directors may be hesitant to share negative comments about

specific players that are currently at the club. However, these issues are resolved by samples that include players or club representatives that are longer removed from the assignment, and do not have current ties to their club or any sample members. Familiarity of the researcher was also used to access full information from some subjects.

Observer bias may be present in that the researcher is familiar with the sport, and has gone on an assignment of some level in the past. Potential bias is reduced in that very little information is given prior to the interview, and open ended questions are asked without leading to possible benefits or purposes for assignments. Following the open ended questions, probing questions are used to explore topics in detail. Closed ended questions are simply used for confirmation of interviewees own thoughts and ideas. The researcher's background simply serves as a foundation for understanding the process and gives credibility to the researcher, along with the ability to build rapport prior to the interview.

Validity of a study can often be seen as the ability to gain full access to full meaning of subjects or interviewees (Easterby-Smith et al 1991). One of the difficulties with this type of research is the ability to generalize large populations from a small sample group (Saunders, et. Al. 2000). However, the flexibility and ability to use probing questions should allow for abduction in extending academic theory to the sporting world. The qualitative methods should allow for some validity in generalizations to the specific nature of subjects. However, overall generalization of large populous groups is not necessary and abduction is more a priority.

4. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND RESULTS

The goal of this chapter is to present the critical themes that were found from the exploratory research. Critical themes are presented in three different categories: perceived benefits, risks for negative results from assignment, player and club expectations. This chapter should answer the study's key research questions:

(1) What are the perceived benefits of an international assignment?

(2) What are the obligations and expectations of different stakeholders relating to international assignments?

Description of the sample was outlined in Chapter 3. However, a table is included below as a point of reference for this Chapter.

Sample	Job\Title	Nationality	Repatriation (years)	Perceived Benefit
1	Director	Finland	Less than 1	Transfer
2	Talent	Finland	Less than 1	Transfer, Benchmarking
3	Talent	Finland		Transfer, Benchmarking
4	Coach\Director	Finland		Transfer, Development, Benchmarking
5	Director	Finland		Development, Brand Rep, Networking
6	Talent	Finland	More than 3	Benchmarking, Transfer, Development
7	Non-talent	Finland		Brand Reputation
8	Director	Norway		No Assignment
9	Talent	Finland	More than 5	Benchmarking, Transfer
10	Director	USA		Development, Brand Reputation
11	Talent	USA	More than 5	Development, Transfer

Table 1. Outline of Sample

4.1. Perceived Benefits

Benefits from an international assignment are likely to be numerous, reaching a broad range of subjects. However, the qualitative research displayed a handful of key topics presented by the interviewees. The primary benefits of an international assignment that were discovered from the empirical research were as follows: benchmarking, transfers, brand reputation, player development.

It is important to note that perceived benefits mentioned above have the potential to be harmful should the assignment not have positive results. Additionally, the benefits are not necessarily valuable to various stakeholders. The entire chapter will look at benefits and risks from the lenses of the study's two primary stakeholders that were interviewed: players, and club directors. The topics presented are derived from both player and club director interviews. Benefits will be discussed not solely from the lenses of one stakeholder, but will also be discussed in how it may affect other stakeholders.

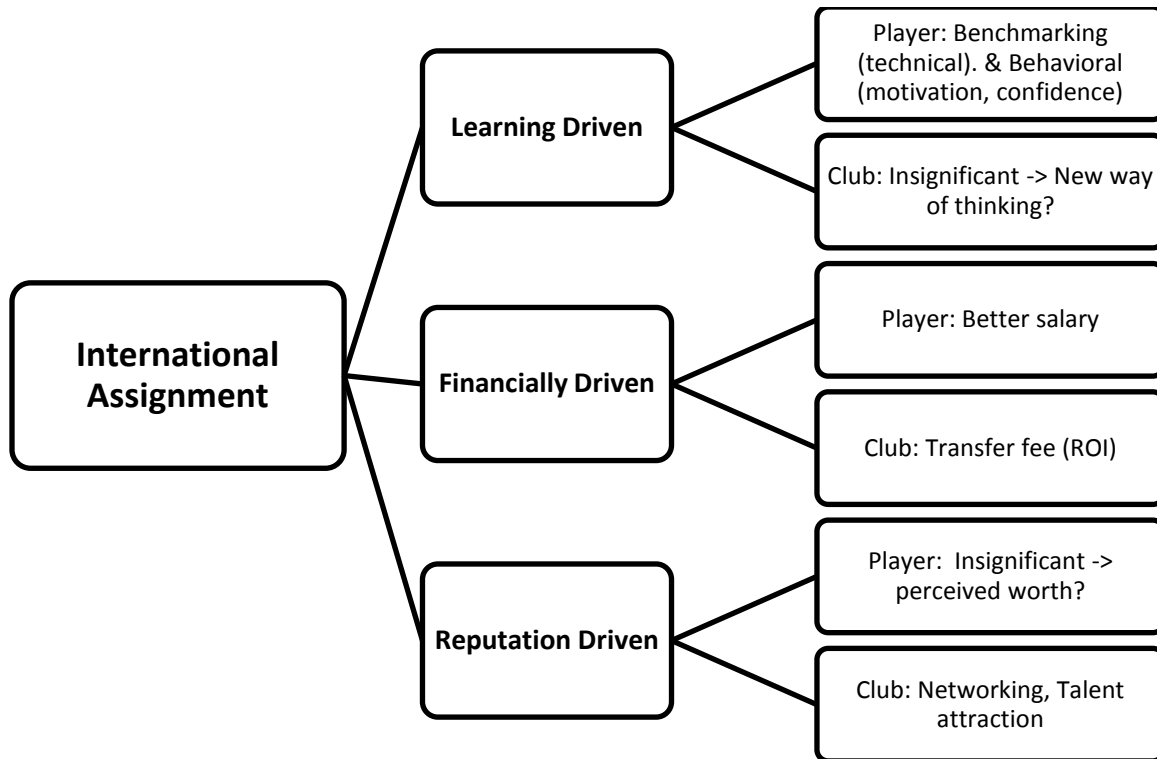


Figure 2. Actual Perceived Benefits

4.1.1. Benchmarking

The ability to compare one's individual abilities to those in another country seems to be a common thread among soccer players going on an international assignment. This benchmarking is not limited to an individual level. The international assignment seems to provide minor forms of benchmarking at a macro level to the player's home club (#1). However, the perceived benefit of benchmarking for international assignments is primarily from the players' perspectives.

Of the five players interviewed (talent) about their international assignment, three of them had benchmarking as one of the primary reasons for the international assignment. Interviewee number two said that one of his purposes for the assignment was *"to see how good I was compared to Italian players my age (#2)"*. Similar reasons were given from two other players. Number 9 said that it was to *"see how good we are, and to see what the level is among players"*

the same age (#9).” The other player mentioned benchmarking slightly more indirectly to the experience in that it was the overall level of play at the club abroad (#3).

Two of the players interviewed did not have benchmarking as a reason for them going on the assignment. However, they did say that benchmarking was a benefit from the assignment. They just did not mention it as one of their motivating factors for going on the assignment. One of the players stated that *“to know that I could play at that level gave me immense confidence (#11).”* This was in regard to his assignment in Germany. Player 6 said that after his assignment in England *“the step is not as big as you think...”* Additionally, he felt on a more micro scale of benchmarking, he was able to identify skills that he needed to work on (#6).

One club director identified that benchmarking was a positive thing from international assignments, because assignees *“know that their players are not better”* than them. This club director also sees it as an opportunity for the players to benchmark their home club. This will be addressed later in the section on repatriation as the assignment allowed the player to realize that his home club was the right place (#6).

While there was limited attention and recognition from the club’s standpoint that the assignment was a form of benchmarking, it was never really addressed as a purpose for the assignment from the club’s perspective. Rather it was seen more as an experience for the player and generally not addressed as something that the players viewed as valuable. However, there is a unanimous agreement amongst player interviewees that a benefit of an international assignment is benchmarking. Of the five players interviewed, three of them had benchmarking as one of the two primary reasons for initially accepting the assignment. While it was not mentioned by the other two players if benchmarking was a motivating factor prior to going on assignment, it was mentioned as one of the benefits from the assignment.

4.1.2. Transfer

One of the unique aspects of the sporting environment is ability for club’s to receive compensation for the sale of a contracted player to another club in the form of a transfer fee.

There can be instances when a player receives a portion of the transfer fee. While players may be cognoscente of the clubs desire to receive a transfer and want the best for their home club, the transfer from the players perspective in this study is likely to be seen as a career move from an individual level. The focus of this study is on the benefits of an international assignment, not those of a transfer. With that said, from the players perspective it could include prestige, financial compensation, and career development.

From the European club director's perspective, a transfer is always a top priority with an international assignment. The three European club directors interviewed all stated that it is almost always the primary reason for going on the assignment. One director stated that "*there really is just one purpose*" for an international assignment, and that was a transfer (#1). There did appear to be other benefits based on indirect responses to questions. However, from a business standpoint, a potential transfer is the only reason a player should go on an international assignment.

Another club director said,

"The first purpose is always a transfer, because that is the main reason for a player to go abroad. Not only for training, but the main reason is always has to be that you are aiming for the transfer possibility (#4)."

This club director identified that there were individual benefits to the player's development which were valuable.

The third European sport director had a reasons beyond the transfer. This director felt that certain cases warranted an international assignment when a transfer was not a discussion point with the host club. While certain assignments are designed to have benefits that are more important a transfer, the majority of assignments have the long term goal of a transfer. (#5)

The US sport director did not have a transfer as a reason for sending players on international assignments. This is likely due to the unique structure of the soccer league in America (MLS).

Financial compensation the clubs receive from the sale of a player can be fractions of the actual transfer price. This will be addressed in the section on retention. However, the U.S. Sport director recognized that anytime a player goes to train with another club, there is an element of trialing involved and they accept that a transfer request is part of the territory in international assignments. (#10).

As mentioned earlier in the study, the assignment can be set up as a trial with a new club, or simply a training period. Regardless of its presentation and primary purposes, there is agreement from all interviewees that there is some degree of hope in a potential transfer to a bigger club from the international assignment.

Of the five players interviewed, four of them state the transfer as one of the major reasons for an assignment. When asked about his individual reasons for the assignment, one player said *“of course I wanted a deal...(#2)”* Player number six echoed those sentiments when asked about the assignment. *“...I always wanted to go to Europe and get a transfer to another club.(#6)”* Interviewee nine said that along with benchmarking he wanted to see if the training period *“...goes to concrete things. If we make it really well, then maybe they want to have us there.”* (#9). Similarly, another interviewee said

“Well of course, I thought I will do my best and see if they want me there or something like that. Because, of course, when I go on a trial I hope that the team will want me and if I’m good maybe they will want me and I will go there (#3).”

Only one of the five did not express the primary reason for his assignment. There may be a multiple of reasons for this. The club had communicated that it was for developmental purposes. Additionally, the nature of his contract in MLS, combined with the perceived high level of play of the host club, made the transfer appear to be a long shot. With that acceptance of unlikeliness and training as the motivating factor, there is still an element of players showcasing themselves, for the host club. *“...as a player you are always optimistic.(#11)”*

From the player and club standpoint, there seems to be overwhelming support of the notion that a transfer is a perceived benefit. Even when the assignment is not set up as a trial for the potential of a transfer, there is an element of showcasing (#10, #11). The European clubs and all players, see the transfer as one of, if not the, primary benefit to an international assignment. In this area of the assignment, the player and the club have aligned interests. Desired goals of both parties are met when the player gets a new contract, and the club receives a transfer.

4.1.3. Reputational effects

The international assignment seems to have a reputational effect on the home club's brand image. This reputational effect can also extend to the assignee's individual brand image. However, the individual brand image will be addressed in the section on potential risks of an international assignment.

This section will focus on the international assignment's reputational effects on the club. The benefits are primarily seen in the clubs ability to attract, and potentially retain players. Secondly, an international assignment may be used to network and create formal or informal partnerships.

4.1.3.1. Attraction and Retention

While the potential transfer and ability for the player to develop were seen as the two primary objectives for the club, one director felt that the assignment would help his club attract players. When asked directly if he felt the assignment would attract other players, he responded:

“Of course, that is one of the main strategies that we are building up...to be more attractive among the player (#4).”

This director felt that an international assignment shows players that if they are at his club, there is a path to progress their careers. In his opinion this could help attract not only talented players

to the youth academy, but also attract young players from outside the area to sign with the first team. (#4)

Retention of talent is addressed in the section on potential risks. However, it should be noted that one sport director felt that international assignments and the potential for a transfer help the club “*get a longer contract with them, so we have the possibility to transfer them (#5).*” Networking was the primary purpose for his club’s most recent assignment, and a transfer is always a long term hope. However, similarly to the sport director in the previous paragraph, he sees that an assignment is useful in recruiting players as it shows they have the ability to take them to the next stage in their career. (#5)

Two of the four sport directors interviewed felt that international assignments aid in attraction of players to their club. The North American director that was interviewed explained the complexities of MLS, and that free agency does not exist. However, from a hypothetical standpoint, he felt that the international assignments his players were allowed to partake in would have certainly attracted players to the club. He did say that the assignment was important to show respect for the players and their careers. In his mind, this was instrumental in a high-profile player signing an extension with the league. (#10).

Empirical evidence from player interviews seems to support the notion that an international assignment is beneficial in attracting players. However, the extent of its influence is limited or unclear from the data. None of the players interviewed said that the international assignment was a reason they signed with their club. However, one player said if he was not allowed to go on assignment it may have affected his decision to re-sign with the club.

“If they said I cannot go for a trial or stuff, of course then I would consider again that this may not be a good thing [to re-sign with the club](#6)”

One player did not give any direct mention of himself, or any other players, willingness to sign for the club based on the international assignment. However, he mentioned the assignment gave

him a “*positive association*” with the home club. The assignment allowed his home club to “*show that they have connections*” and it gave him “*hint of what can happen in the future*”. (#9)

Interviewee seven did not go on assignment, but was interviewed as one of his teammates did. He felt that “*every player wants to have the opportunity to go abroad*”. A teammate of his being able to go on an international assignment gave him a positive reflection of his club and made him think more highly of it. He thinks that the international assignment would “*absolutely*” attract younger youth players to the club. (#7).

The interviewee that discussed an international assignment’s ability to attract players in the most detail was also limiting in the extent of the assignments influence.

“I don’t think that a club in Finland always understands that even if the player won’t get a deal, it’s a very big thing for a player to go to Italy. Even if it’s three days, it helps something (#2).”

However, the assignment “*would not be reason enough*” to change clubs. It “*would have an effect*” on his decision to sign a long term deal though. (#2).

Empirical evidence from this study seems to suggest that international assignments benefit player recruitment in the eyes of club directors. Information obtained from player responses, seems to support the perceived benefit. However, it remains unclear from responses what the magnitude of the assignment’s influence has on player recruitment and retention.

4.1.3.2. Networking and partnerships

Two of the sport directors cited that the international assignment has been influential in networking and the formation of contacts. Another director dismissed the benefits of networking as he felt his contacts abroad were sufficient (#1). The extent and purposes of the networking and partnership varied on the two sampled directors.

The Scandinavian sport director stated that the generation of contacts was of utmost importance for the most recent international assignment that a player from his club went on.

“Well of course for me to have access to people and in this case clubs...Also, of course a good possibility to tell about our club”.

The potential reasons for the networking include the possibility for exhibition games with partner clubs, a foreign club's investment in their youth program, and the loan of a first team player to the home club. At a simple level, the assignment created an additional international assignment for a current youth team member. This player is scheduled to go train with the same host club as the most recent assignee. (#5)

An international assignment developed from a match between a foreign club and a North American club. A multilevel partnership was formed that involved

“promotion, sales of sponsorship, best practice sharing on the front office side (as well as the technical side), and exhibition games (home and away)”

There was additionally a *“cross-training benefit”* for the players as they were able to go on an international assignment (#10). This particular partnership was formed from a competitive match. However, it is reasonable to assume that similar networking benefits, or partnerships, could be derived from an international assignment. (#10).

Perceived benefits from networking are only clearly derived from one of the interviewees (#5). However, it would appear that the openness and thought process that allowed a successful partnership with the North American director could also be derived from an international assignment. One of the interviewees made no mention of club to club networking as a benefit of an international assignment (#4). An additional interviewee dismissed the need for networking benefits (#1).

Empirical research results display networking benefits primarily through the lens of the clubs. There is nothing to suggest that networking benefits do not extend to an individual level when a player goes on assignment. However, the only discussion of networking benefits came from the club directors. From that viewpoint, information was only derived from two directors, but appeared to open a wide range of sub- categorical benefits to networking and partnerships.

There is justification based on the empirical research to show that there is perceived reputational effects on the home club's brand image. However, the evidence is not nearly as conclusive as the benefits of benchmarking and a transfer. Having said that, there is relatively little evidence from the clubs side to refute the positive effect an international assignment has on a company's brand image. Additionally, there is nothing from the player's perspective that would suggest that the home clubs brand image has been damaged by an international assignment.

4.1.4. Development

An international assignment has the potential to enhance an assignee's individual development. Club directors have varying views on whether an assignment is to be used as a developmental tool for players. Players, on the other hand, have seemed to agree that an international assignment benefits their individual development.

Developmental benefits come in different forms. These forms include: technical, fitness, professionalism, confidence, motivation and focus. Some of these benefits are directly cited from interviewees. Other players, and directors, did not consciously address these aspects as developmental benefits from an international assignment. However, open-ended discussions and probing questions lead to the discovery of the different physical and mental benefits from an assignment.

4.1.4.1. Technical Development

Empirical evidence from interviews do not suggest that technical development is an agreed upon benefit from a short-term assignment. The majority of players and club directors feel that an

assignment under one month does not yield technical developmental benefits.

When asked if any technical or tactical improvement was made on assignment, one player said “*well it was just a week, so it is hard to learn many things in a week*” (#3). Another player responded to the same question saying that no specific skill was learned on assignment (#1). One player did not feel he benefited, but stated

“I think you need to experience it [the assignment] for a longer period of time in order to develop...maybe after one month you would see a difference already, but it is hard to say” (#6).

The final Scandinavian player interviewed, made no mention of any technical improvement, but no evidence suggests that we can eliminate technical development like other interviewees proved (#9).

There was only one player that clearly believed technical development took place from his assignment. The North American player said that an assignment was beneficial “*because you get exposed to a different style of play*”. The different style of play helped him improved on a few aspects of his game like crossing and heading. (#11).

European sport directors do not seem to identify that technical development does or does not take place on a short-term assignment. There is relatively little mention of technical development. However, one director was asked if he noticed any improvements in assignees. This director felt the assignment was “*too short a time*”, but continues to use short-term assignments for “*developing our players*” (#5).

Another director had a contrary opinion that players trained in “*a different environment*” and they felt that made them better players (#6). There was not a huge emphasis in this interview on the technical developmental benefits, but it was identified that certain leagues have different technical levels. It is also unclear from this interview the extent of technical improvement from an international assignment.

While empirical evidence limits the effect of short-term international assignments on technical development, it may be more beneficial than those involved realize. This study shows that benchmarking is a perceived benefit. If the ability to identify flaws in a player's game is achieved from an assignment, it would be logical to assume that the player can take some of that information and improve on it upon repatriation to his home club.

Collectively, empirical evidence suggests that the perceived benefit of technical development from an international assignment is quite low. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that a player may develop technically from an assignment. There is an added component of benchmarking which may enable technical development upon repatriation. However, the majority of players and directors do not perceive technical development to be a benefit of an international assignment.

4.1.4.2. Tactical Development

Tactical development can be seen as an individual's ability to improve on the mental aspect of his game. Unlike professionalism or focus, tactical development is closer to a skill that is learned, rather than a mentality that is developed. This study and open-ended questions were not focused on tactical development. Additionally, very little evidence surfaced relating to the subject.

The primary component of tactical development that was identified by players was that of decision making. More specifically, the speed in which decisions must be made is how speed of play is manifested. On assignment players noticed that *"the tempo is much higher"* you need to *"know your every move before you see the ball... you have to think really fast"* (#6). One player noticed that the biggest difference in a new environment is *"the speed of play"*. The speed of play is something that definitely helped him improve as a player.

"I was used to seeing things that I was playing faster, shooting faster, moving faster. Yeah, when I came back in preseason, I was used to playing at that level...I still feel the effects of it, without a doubt (#11)."

Aside from the tempo and speed of different leagues, different strategies or styles were noticed. One player said, *“they play a bit different in Italy...I don’t know how you say it, but it is different”* (#2). This particular player did not identify any developmental benefits based on the exposure to new style of play. However another player felt that the different style of play not only helped him improve the speed of his thought process, it also helped him with what runs to make and decision making with the ball (#11).

Empirical evidence relating to tactical development is limited in this study. However, it appears that there is tactical development that takes place from an international assignment. Additionally, the tactical benefits gained from an international assignment may be noticeable immediately, where technical benefits may take longer.

One of the difficulties in analyzing the impact of international assignments on tactical development is the level of play at the host club. Of the two respondents that believed the assignment to be beneficial to tactical development, both stated that the level of play was higher. It remains unclear from the research how much of the development was the result of the international component of the assignment, or if similar benefits could have been experienced from playing with better players in the respective player’s home country.

Overall, it appears that there is certainly a benefit to playing with better players, regardless of the geographical location. *“If you train with better players, you are going to develop (#6).”* At that same time, *“a different environment can be a good thing, even if the level is the same (#6).”* The international component seems to open players up to something unique. One sport director said assignees told him

“it was a very good experience for them, because it was different. Equally professional, but it was a different environment...(#10)”

This statement certainly does not limit the benefits to tactical development, but it does encompass the international component.

Evidence is indeed limited on the tactical developmental benefits of an international assignment. Additionally, the extent of influence the international element of the assignment has is not entirely conclusive. However, empirical evidence does suggest that tactical development is a perceived benefit from an international assignment.

4.1.4.3. Fitness

One of the perceived benefits for an international assignment is for a player's fitness. *"You need to keep in shape (#6)."* The North American director actually had training, or fitness, as the primary purpose for an international assignment.

"Training was the primary goal and keeping in shape in the off season...most of the players' cases, they came back physically more fit (#10)."

There is very little attention paid by sport directors or players to the perceived fitness benefits to an international assignment. Injury and over training concerns exist. Unaligned interests can cause overtraining or injury if a player pushes himself too much. However, the benefit of improved or maintained fitness is present from an international assignment.

There is not much evidence to suggest that fitness cannot be achieved independently of an international assignment. The following section on focus may point to why an international assignment may be more beneficial. However, from a practical standpoint, it may not be entirely necessary for a player to go on an international assignment to improve fitness levels. Regardless of its necessity, one of the perceived benefits of an international assignment is to improve or maintain a player's fitness.

4.1.4.4. Professionalism

The ability of a player to develop professionalism can be difficult to define, much less quantify. Simply put, professionalism is a behavior that is expressed from an individual that does their job

well, in this case a soccer player. Professionalism can involve certain technical aspects to the game. However, the primary focus of the development of professionalism in this study is manifested in players' activities to prepare them on and off the field for success. The aim of this section is not to bring clarity to the term professionalism; rather, to determine the effects an assignment has on a player's professionalism.

Three of the assignees interviewed cited that professionalism was something that was learned on their international assignment.

"It is good to see what it takes to be at that level and like really see for me professionally...also the importance of everything around football like eating healthy, and sleeping and all the stuff...I learned a lot about that when I was there [on assignment]" (#6).

Another player learned the *"style and mentality of how they carry themselves on and off the field...(#11).*" Similarly an assignee said,

"You will always remember how the players handle themselves when they come to training...how they socialize, how they come into trainings and how they prepare themselves, how they eat. You can go into all kinds of details...but you can get so much out of the ten days. I felt like I got a very big portion of it with me.(#9)."

The two remaining assignees interviewed made no direct reference to professionalism, nor were they asked any direct questions regarding the topic. However, both cited that it was good to see the culture around the respective host clubs (#2,#3).

Club directors also perceive development of professionalism to be the result of an international assignment. Part of the assignments goals are

"learning professionalism (#10). [Assignees] come back with a great understanding of what the game is about at this level. I think it is fair to say they bring back that with them

and respect the game more, and carry themselves more as professionals when they are back. (#10)."

Another club director said that one of his players was not signed because of his behavior off the field and how he interacted with the hosts club's coaches. He was able to learn from the experience and was later signed to another club (#1).

It is important to note that one of the sport directors above felt that his club was "*one of the more professional environments*" from what he heard. Veteran European professionals "*brought that professionalism to the team.*" At the same time the assignment allowed players to "*experience the same sort of professionalism, but in a larger context*". Despite the professional nature of the home club, the director still confirms that assignees repatriated with improved professionalism. (#10).

The other two sport directors made no direct link to the development of professionalism of assignees and the international assignment. However, one used the assignment so his players

"get a good experience...so they see what football is, what is the circumstances, what is the training facilities in Germany and what is the working culture. And, what is around the football in these countries that they go" (#4).

Empirical evidence does not dismiss the idea that professionalism can be learned in a player's home country. However, the international element of a training or trial is shown to enhance a player's awareness of professional conduct.

"I think you are always going to benefit...because it's a different style, a different way they go about things, a different atmosphere. Even away from soccer it's a different culture... (#11)"

Going to another country, things are done in

“ a different way, different thinking, different training...it’s good to see new things also and maybe you can look at things in a different way and see new perspectives after that” (#6).

Evidence suggests that the professionalism is certainly developed from an international assignment. Additionally, the effects seem to be learned in the short period of time these assignments took place. The perceived benefits of professional development are clear and directly linked by both players and sport directors.

4.1.4.5. Confidence

“As a player, your confidence is everything. You know you have to believe in yourself, almost too high at times, almost to a fault. Because if you have that [confidence], then you are able to make plays happen that are almost crazy, but there is a fine line between crazy and genius” (#11).

Confidence is a mental state that has the potential to allow players to improve their own performance. It is generally regarded as a very important element to a professional soccer player’s ability to perform at the highest level possible. Therefore, confidence is an attribute that is categorized under perceived developmental benefits of an international assignment.

The ability to gain or improve confidence was not a reason or motivation for any of the players to go on assignment. Nor was it a reason for club directors to send players on an assignment. However, after the assignment, confidence is one of the biggest perceived benefits to an international assignment from a player perspective.

Three interviewees said that one of the results of the assignment was their confidence is better. *“Well of course my confidence is better... (#3)” “When I see that I could play with them I get more confidence (#2)”. “To know that I could play at that level gave me immense confidence (#11).”*

The empirical research suggests that players' confidence may be improved as the result of benchmarking. However, benchmarking was a major reason for players to go on assignment. The confidence is a result from the assignment.

The confidence during the assignment seems to carry over to the repatriation process as well. One player said that his "*playing was at an all-time high*". He wished that he could have gone straight from assignment into the season, but it did carry over to the following season. (#11).

Club directors do not place as much emphasis on the perceived benefit of confidence from an international assignment. In fact, it will be addressed later that it is a concern for coaches and directors that the player may lose confidence on assignment (#4,#1). One of the directors did notice that the two players, he had on assignment after the season, had come back the following season with "*a bit more confidence with the ball*". He was not certain if this was the result of the assignment or not.

Players clearly see confidence as a direct benefit of an international assignment. Three of the players interviewed were in agreement with that statement. The remaining two assignees made no mention of confidence being improved from the international assignment. Yet, there is nothing mentioned that refutes the perceived benefit of confidence. Sport directors place less emphasis on it and a loss in confidence is a potential worry. However, empirical evidence suggests very little concern for a loss of confidence having long-term effects.

4.1.4.6. Motivation and Focus

Focus and Motivation are two characteristics that can potentially be categorized along with professionalism. However, this study groups focus and motivation as having a direct impact on a players' performance at the training ground. A player's desire to play well and improve, along with the concentration levels are examined in this sub-section. It is assumed that a player that is more focused and motivated will work harder with greater concentration, hence yielding better performance in training and matches.

Improved focus or motivation is addressed as a perceived benefit by all five of the players on assignment. One of the assignees limited his increased motivation to the time he was on assignment. There was no mention of the player's motivation levels upon repatriation. It is likely that the increased motivation on assignment was beneficial in the player's ability to improve technically and tactically while on assignment. (#11).

Four of the assignees said their motivation levels had improved upon repatriation to their respective home clubs. Justifying the reasoning behind a player's improved motivation or focus from an international assignment is not the primary concern. However, benchmarking and the potential to get a transfer seem to play a large role in player's increased focus and motivation.

"...I get more motivated to see that I can play with good players in Italy...I feel very motivated at this time, so every day I want to train. Maybe someday I will sign a deal with some bigger club (#2)"

"I was thinking about it every season...I am not at the same level I was before...so, I was really hoping for another chance (#9)"

One of the players cited very minor improvements in motivation, but felt that he has always been very motivated (#3). The final assignee was wary of the potential risks and damages to motivation, but echoed the same improved motivation and justification of benchmarking and a potential transfer.

"My motivation actually went up...I noticed the step is not as big as you believe; so, my motivation went up, because I could see that it is not impossible and the guys are not that much better (#6)"

Similarly to confidence, club directors see potential damage to players' motivation or focus as the result of an international assignment. However, negative impact will be addressed in the following sub-chapter. This section will present the empirical evidence that club directors do see

improved focus and motivation from assignees.

One director noticed his assignees had more *“concentration with the ball”*. However, he was hesitant to attribute the improvement to the assignment (#4). Another director said that players *“come back more focused, fit, and motivated”* (#10).

Aside from a particular countries football culture, there is justification into entering a new environment to help a player focus and improve.

“When you are going there [to another country] specifically to work...your life becomes your work...they [players] don’t have those distractions of their family, friends social obligations. You get that commitment to work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week...I think that creates a focus on their work that maybe they don’t have when they are back home (#10).”

One unique aspect of an international assignments ability to improve player motivation is that the perceived benefit is not limited to the players on assignment. While assignments may potentially cause strife with non-talent (those not on assignment), club directors see it as a motivating factor to players at the club when a teammate goes on assignment.

“[Younger players] know that if everything goes alright with them next year, they will probably have a possibility to go abroad after next year...They know that they are systematically on the same path... Everything depends on their own work(#4).”

Another club director wants players to desire to go abroad; therefore, sees it helping non-talent also. The assignment will improve the play of players at the club. The assignment shows it is possible to go abroad.

“they will have to perform for us. They will have to develop. They will have to score some goals if they want to go there” (#5)

Club directors' view that an assignment has the potential to motivate non-talent is supported by empirical evidence. There was just one interview with non-talent. However, it is clear that this player felt that seeing a teammate go on assignment improved his motivation.

“I personally got a bit more motivated; because, it showed me and the other players that there is a chance to go abroad. So yeah, I was a bit more motivated personally (#7).”

Empirical evidence overwhelmingly supports the notion that motivation and focus are a perceived benefit of an international assignment from the player perspective. Club directors are not in total agreement. Directors can be wary of potential damages the assignment may do to a players focus or motivation. However, evidence from certain cases is there to support that an assignment has a positive impact on a players focus and motivation. Additionally, evidence clearly suggests that an international assignment has positive effects on the motivation and focus of non-talent.

4.2. Interest alignment and Risks

An international assignment is not void of risk or negative effects. The previous section discussed the perceived benefits of an assignment. This sub chapter will present the club directors and players general perceived risks of an international assignment, as well as those resulting from interest misalignment.

It is important to note that the majority of empirical evidence was not conclusive or definitive in the potential risks associated with an international assignment. Additionally, many of the perceived risks can actually be benefits to the player. The following sections will present the perceived risks identified from interviewees: retention, slowed development, danger of not signing.

4.2.1. Retention

One of the concerns or risks of an international assignment from the club directors' point of view

is retention. Even when the international assignment is designed for training purposes, the element of trial exists (#10). Therefore, employee turnover can become an issue if the player decides to go abroad, or demands a transfer.

When a player goes to trial while he is under contract with the club, there is the potential for the club to receive a transfer fee. However, in some instances, the money from a transfer is not enough to replace the player. This topic will be addressed in another section, but it would seem logical for the club not to sell the player if they are not able to replace him. However, it is worth noting here that the clubs seem to feel undue pressure to not only allow players to go on assignment, but to be transferred (#10,#5). This has been supported by players in the previous section on benefits. A potential transfer was a desired goal for all the interviewees. Therefore, there is naturally a concern by sport directors on the retention of their players.

Aside from pressure from clubs to allow players to leave for a transfer, there is the potential that the assignment may cause the club to lose a player to a foreign club when their contract is up. In this situation, the club would not be guaranteed to receive any direct financial compensation for the player leaving. Two of the players cited the goal to sign for a foreign club “*in the future*”. (#2, #3). Another player said that “*every season*” he wanted to go abroad to play (#9).

In such cases, the players’ desire to go may not align with the clubs desire to use the assignment as a means of retaining talent. What remains unclear is the extent that the international assignment has on the players desire to go abroad. Does the assignment create or enhance the player’s desire to move abroad? Or, is it natural for most players to desire play in a foreign country?

Results from this study show that most players had the desire to go abroad prior to the assignment. “*Everyone who plays in the Veikkausliiga, I think, wants to have the opportunity to go abroad...(#7).*” Another player stated that the international assignment has very little to do with his desire to go abroad “*because it has been a big goal for me always*” (#6).

While players have the desire to go play abroad irrespective of having gone on an international

assignment, two of the interviewees distinctly mentioned an increased desire to play abroad after their assignment. Regarding his post assignment attitude, one player said “...*my goal after that is even more clearly to get abroad someday (#2).*” After repatriation, another player said

“...that if I want to go to the highest level and to the top, I will have to take risks and maybe go abroad if there is a chance. I don’t know when. If it is like a year, or two years, but I know that I will have to go abroad to be at a high level. (#3)”

A desire to play abroad to further ones career is likely present prior to assignment. However, the previous section suggests that the assignment can in some instances magnify the players’ perceived need or desire to play abroad. Aside from the career reasons, an assignment has the potential to open a players mind to a unique, potentially more professional environment. This will be examined in the section on psychological contracts. However, the potential concern for clubs is that if the host clubs are run more professionally, with better coaches, the players may become frustrated with their home clubs upon repatriation (#1, #10).

No specific examples were given by club directors to show that retention will be an issue, because the players are exposed to a perhaps more desirable club. However, two of the directors merely mentioned the foreseen potential negative impact of such exposure (#1,#10). Players seem to support this in that some players have an appearingly idiosyncratic view that the clubs will let them leave if opportunities are presented. Additionally, players understand that much of the benefits experienced abroad are not realistic domestically due to financial constraints. “*We would have the same things in Finland if we would have that much money (#2.)*” Another player said that he understood the way his home club operated, because “*I think you take in consideration the money aspect of things. Everything is done on a budget (#11).*”

As previously mentioned, the perceived risks can also become benefits. One club director said that players repatriate and say the coaching “*is not better than in our club here*” and that players know “*they are at the right club for the time being (#1).*” This can also influence players’ willingness to sign longer term contracts with the home club (#5, #10, #2, #6). An interesting caveat to contract negotiation and retention will be presented in the sections on risks of not

signing and psychological contracts.

4.2.2. Slowed Development

It was previously mentioned in Section 4.1 that many of the perceived risks of an assignment can be benefits. The reverse also holds true. This section analyzes whether an international assignment is also perceived to damage or stunt a player's development.

There was little evidence of a perceived benefit in regards to technical development from the international assignment. No mention of a noticeable technical deficiencies obtained by the player while on assignment were mentioned either. Therefore, this section's emphasis will be on determining if an international assignment is perceived to also be harmful to a players focus, confidence, and motivation.

International assignments have the potential to shift players' focus from the home club to that of the host club. The club director interviewed that said international assignments are not implemented for contracted players, because

"We don't want to upset them. We want their heads with us...we feel they have to make their grades here (#8)".

Only one of the assignees interviewed identified that an assignment *"can disturb your focus if you go on many trials."* His reference is to trials during the season. *"Off season is a good time to go for trials (#6)."* One of the players said that his focus is back on his own club and does not suggest that the assignment disturbed his focus (#3). The remaining players made no reference to the assignment disturbing their focus.

Confidence was shown to be a critical element of a player's success on the field. Some of this was due to the benchmarking that took place from an international assignment. One sporting director could not immediately think of any negative impacts of an international assignment. However, later in the interview, he identified that there is the potential as a coach that the

player's confidence will be damaged if the assignment is a bad experience for the player. If the player's confidence has been diminished as a result of the assignment, the coach would *“have to work again more with this player's confidence [upon repatriation](#4).”*

While the confidence may be a concern, it was not immediately mentioned and given the context of the interview, seems pretty minimal in the overall analysis of this sport director's opinion. From a player perspective, the risk of losing confidence is fairly minimal. None of the players reported to have lost confidence from the assignment.

When asked directly if they performed badly on assignment if their confidence would be affected, one player said

“no, I would not have been affected by it. Had I gone there and realized that level was just too good, I would have said fair enough. I understand there are better players and better teams, and better leagues than where I am as a player. So, if I would have gone there and realized I was outclassed, I would have said fair enough...I don't think anything harmful could have happened” (#11).

Only one of the players mentioned anything negative in relation to benchmarking. It was not directly linked to confidence, but the results were limited in the time it would have affected him regardless.

“I think that it would have been a little negative...I will be upset, but I think in a few weeks it would not be negative...I would be depressed a week after the trial, nothing more(#3)”

Motivation is grouped with focus in one of the sub-sections of perceived benefits of an international assignment. It is analyzed separately in the section. The reasoning is to bring clarity to the respondent's perceived risks of an international assignment. The majority of respondents, both player and club director felt that players' motivation increased from an assignment (#10,#5,#2,#3,#11,#6). This also extended to the players not on assignment. *“I personally got a*

bit more motivated (#7)."

There is a danger that when the length of repatriation is extended, a player's motivation can decrease. While the majority of this sport director's assignees had positive results from an assignment, they noticed that one player *"didn't have the same playing spirit as he had before he went on trial (#5)."* This was the result of a few unsuccessful trials.

One player stated that

"when I saw some things weren't being taken care of as well as they were being taken care of...maybe it lowered my motivation a little" (#9).

However, the lack of motivation was overcome.

"I just think about myself and I have to be as good as I can, so maybe I can reach a club [like the host club] someday. So it's always more or less and everyday battle as a football player" (#9).

Additional risks that an assignment may include overtraining and injuries, amongst others. *"You worry about injuries (#10)". "You need to keep in shape, also. You need to rest also! You cant be all off-season trialing everywhere (#6)."* An important component to this is that it is monitored and evaluated by the club. Communication is instrumental, and clubs should control the process (#10).

To reiterate, all the perceived risks of an assignment can also be benefits. Empirical evidence suggests that the potential risk of a player losing confidence from an assignment is not supported. However, there is limited support that motivation and focus can be damaged from an international assignment.

The decision to not implement international assignments may be partly due to the reputation of the league in the minds of foreign clubs. If they prove themselves in the Norwegian league, a

player “*does not need to go to train at Manchester United for a week, they already know what he can do.* (#8)” This sport director later went on to say that if a foreign club asked one of his young players to go on assignment, the club would not say no. However, it has not been required for the players to go on trial to be sold to his knowledge.

4.2.3. Negative impact of not signing

The negative impact of a player not signing encompasses a wide range of things. Much of the negative impacts of not signing have been discussed in relation to a player’s mentality and how that affects his performance. The focus of this section is on the impact of a player not signing, and how it changes his brand image. More simply put, how are other parties’ perceptions changed by a player not signing, and what are the risks associated with that.

From a player perspective, essentially nothing was discussed relating to any negative consequences from not signing. Based on club directors’ opinions, it may be valuable for players to take into consideration the negative impact that an assignment can have on others perception of them. Pros and cons of this assignment will be addressed in the following sections on repatriation and contract negotiation. However, the negative impacts for the club, and more specifically the player is analyzed here.

Naturally, a player not performing well on assignment can be detrimental to the credibility of the home club, agent, scout, or anyone associated with the player going on assignment. Much of the benefits from an assignment may not be derived. However, the player himself may be devalued from not signing with a club he is on trial with.

In the age of modern technology, there can be great media attention when a player goes on an international assignment (#1, #5).

“If you are 17, or 18, and in today’s world, it is on the same day in [the] internet that this guy has tried training with let’s say Liverpool, and then when he gets back to Finland, you know it’s on the internet that the guy left Liverpool and he is back in Finland. And

everybody knows that Liverpool didn't sign him. And that's is not good for the player at all, because if Liverpool has not signed him, why would Tottenham sign him...they take a big risk if they visit a club...they come back and nobody is interested in them anymore.”(#1)

Like many of the perceived risks, there is a benefit to the club. The player's options to go abroad may be reduced. Hence, the ability for the home club to retain the players may be improved. However, from a player standpoint, there is a risk that the individual brand image will be damaged if too many unsuccessful trials are associated with him. *“If you go there and never sign a contract, then people start asking, why doesn't anyone sign a contract? (#5).*

The damage to a player's individual brand image, or outside parties' perception of the player, was not discussed by many interviewees. Only two of the interviewees, both being sport directors, discussed the possibility of an assignment hurting players' future opportunities. However, there was not much emphasis, or leading, on the interview to have them bring up the topic. The information provided is sufficient to suggest that there is a potential that a player not signing a contract from a trial can limit his potential to sign with other clubs.

4.2.4. Risks contextualized

When examining the risks of an assignment in relation to the perceived benefits, the risks appear to be minimal. Retention is a risk with misalignment, but few examples link the actual assignment to turnover. However, it deserves attention. Slowed development was a perceived risk from the club's point of view, but there is insufficient empirical evidence to support these claims, aside from one player's loss in motivation.

The negative impact of not signing was not thoroughly studied, but enough evidence was presented to think that what is in a clubs best interest for their brand reputation, may not be aligned with what is best for a players individual brand reputation, or vice versa. Negative effects of this misalignment are likely to be seen in the club's inability to retain players; or, a damaged individual brand image may limit his ability to go abroad in the future. Brand reputation carries

over to retention issues, creating the most glaring risk with misalignment of interests.

4.3. Psychological contracts

This section examines how psychological contracts work in the setting of a professional sports club, specifically relating to an international assignment. An assignment can potentially create expectations by the assignee, club, and non-talent. Psychological contracts are present prior to an international assignment; however, the assignment may alter expectations of various stakeholders.

The club and players will likely have unique perspectives on the assignment. Hence, psychological contracts and social exchange are likely to not be similar. The study's empirical research relating to psychological contracts is more fascinating when discussed from the player's perspective. Therefore, the majority of data analysis in this section will be relating to the psychological contracts in the minds of the assignees, and to a lesser extent, the non-talent. However, club directors were asked direct questions in regard to repatriation and contract negotiation. The major topics presented in relation to psychological contracts are: training and transfer, repatriation, contract negotiation, social exchange and trust.

Obligations & Expectations

Player	Club
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No expectation for assignment - No expectation of different treatment upon repatriation - Allowed to go on assignment - Sold if a contract offer is presented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not responsible for creation of assignment - No increased demands on player upon repatriation - Obligated to let players go on assignment - Sell player if transfer offer comes in

Table 2. Player and Club obligations

4.3.1. Training and transfer

It was discussed above, that whether the assignment is designed as a training or trial, there is an element of trial involved. Any international assignment provides the player the opportunity to showcase himself. This section looks at what expectations players have toward their home clubs regarding the assignment. More specifically, what are the expectations players have regarding the ability to go on assignment, or be allowed to leave the club should an opportunity be presented?

None of the players interviewed, felt that it was the clubs' responsibility to arrange an assignment; however, it was appreciated. Often the club did not arrange the assignment; it was the result of an agent or scout. When the assignment was arranged by the club, it *"was a nice thing for"* his club to do (#9). *"It wasn't something they had to do (#11)."*

The lack of expectancy on the clubs to arrange the assignment appears to be resulting from the players' belief that, if they perform well at their home club, an opportunity will present itself. The lack of responsibility for clubs to arrange trials is supported by the non-talent interview. This player said that it was not the clubs responsibility to arrange the trials. A teammate of this interviewee got to go on assignment *"because he actually played pretty well the first season...he got the opportunity through that, because he played good"*(#7).

One assignee did not say that he felt it was the club's responsibility to arrange an assignment. However, he did have the suggestion that clubs *"could be more active"* in arranging assignments. *"...It is a very big thing for a player to go [on assignment] ...[clubs]should do some cooperation with some clubs abroad (#2)."*

There seems to be relatively no responsibility in the clubs' view to arrange assignments for players under contract. Some of the club directors interviewed did arrange assignments themselves or through an intermediary. However, the reasoning was not out of a sense of responsibility to the player (#8).

The closest one came to feeling a responsibility to arrange the trials was a club director that said “*we try to help them*”. In this director’s view, even if players felt it was the clubs responsibility to arrange trials, it is not necessarily a bad thing.

“It is a lot more interesting for us to have players that want to develop, to go on to a bigger club and more money, than to have a player that is satisfied. If they want to move up, they will have to perform for us...(#5).”

Players and club directors do not feel that the presentation of an assignment is not the responsibility of the clubs. At the same time, the players’ perception seems to be that the clubs should not limit them from going on assignment. One player said his club told him “*if you need to get a trial go ahead*”. If they would have not allowed him to go on assignment, he would have reconsidered playing for the club. (#6)

One thing that seemed unique about the international assignment was that assignees seemed to be under the assumption that if they were offered a contract, that they would be allowed to leave. All the assignees in this study were under contract with their respective clubs. Therefore, the clubs have the ability to receive a transfer fee for the sale of their contracted players.

The tone of the interview in all the players seemed to reveal that if they were good enough for the foreign club, that they would be sold. While there are benefits to selling a player, clubs also are businesses, and need to receive a transfer. Some may let a player go free, but when compensation is not fair for the home clubs it may be “*in a way underestimating the work that you are doing in your club (#1)*.” Additionally, clubs seem to be faced with immense pressure to let players leave, despite players being contractually bound to the home club.

While there is a sense of reason with a transfer, it appears that sometimes the pressure to sell a player can be overcome with the immediate financial benefit of the sale. One sporting director recalls that compensation received from the sale was

“never going to replace him with the allocation money ... However, the greater good was served, and his teammates saw that the team didn’t stand in his way and supported him, and I would like to think they responded with an increased support of the team”(#1).

The necessity to allow players to leave appears, even when not immediately beneficial, seems to be born out of the notion that holding a player back from what they perceive to be a beneficial move will be detrimental to other players commitment, trust, and ability to retain or attract players.

Empirical evidence suggests that there is no expectation by players, nor is there the sense of responsibility of club directors for the club to arrange an international assignment. However, there seems to be the expectation of players that they should be allowed to go on an assignment. Club directors feel that with communication, they are better served allowing the players to go on an assignment if they wish. Additionally, there seems to be undue pressure on the clubs to allow players to be sold within reason, even when the financial compensation is not enough to replace the short-term loss of the player.

4.3.2. Repatriation

The repatriation phase in an assignment can entail many elements. This phase can often be the measure of a success of an assignment. While valuable, this section chooses not to directly link the repatriation phase with an assignments success; rather, it will analyze what psychological contracts may be present in the eyes of players and clubs.

Psychological contracts, in this section, are analyzed from a broad perspective relating to expatriation. The primary topics discussed are what, if any expectations players had with respective home clubs upon repatriation from an assignment, and if they felt they were treated differently. Similarly, did the club had any expectations for the players post assignment, or if they saw a change in attitude from the players?

Three of the assignees interviewed felt that they had no change in expectations or treatment

because of the assignment (#2, #3, #6). *“I don’t think anything changed, it was pretty much the same when I came back (#6).”* Two of these three assignees were interviewed within a year of repatriation. There is the potential that after time, one’s opinion would change. This is supported by the two other assignees.

One player said that

“[on an] unconscious level, I started to demand more from a club, because when you get to see an environment that deals with all the issues that have to be dealt with, then you start at least unconsciously, you start to demand [more] when you go back to your original place....(#9).”

Additionally, this player felt that his home club’s perception of him may have changed; although, he does not have concrete evidence.

“...I have been there and he got some feedback from Charlton that I did well there, so it must have influenced things somehow (#9).”

The North American assignee didn’t expect to be treated any differently upon repatriation; however, similarly to the previous player, he felt that positive feedback may have influenced his home club’s perception of him as a player.

“I don’t think I was expecting anything. If I did, I think that I was effectively thought of in a different light, because when somebody else shows appreciation of you as a football player, I think that it’s typical that your own team is going to think of you more(#11).”

This changed perception by the club may combine with the significant variable of an additional year in the league as a professional.

“As a rookie you kind of get a free pass a little bit. Like, ‘ok you are still learning’, but by the second or third year, you are expected not to carry yourself that way (#11).”

The club directors interviewed were clear that they did not feel that an international assignment had any effect on the club's overall opinion of the player, nor expectations or obligations for the player's future performance. Additionally, they did not feel the player expected anything additional from the club as a result of the assignment. *"We haven't had any problems (#5)". "I haven't seen anything like that (#4)."* If any additional expectations were placed on the player, it was likely the result of an additional year as a professional, rather than a result of the assignment. Two directors did note that if the home club is run unprofessionally, it could become *"a point of contention"* when they are disappointed with how the home club operates in relation to the host club (#10,#1).

An interesting view when analyzing repatriation of an assignee is that of the other players on the team, the non-talent. The one non-talent interviewee said that the assignee's attitude or expectations had not appeared to change in the repatriation phase. He did start to suggest that the treatment of the assignee by the club had changed in his view; however, he linked that to on field performance opposed to the assignment.

"I think it did change. I'm not sure if it depended on that because he went there [on assignment], or because he actually played well the year before...I'd say it depended more because he played good, not because he went abroad (#7)."

Data from the interviewees in this study show psychological contracts on the part of the club towards the player do not change upon repatriation. Meaning, the club directors interviewed do not view assignees differently because of the assignment. Additionally, while acknowledging that it is potentially problematic, club directors have had no issues with players during the repatriation phase from an assignment. The only suggestion of psychological contracts changing, relating to repatriation, came from two players who are over 5 years removed from their respective assignments. One of the two expected a bit more out of the club, and the other felt the club perhaps expected a bit more out of him. Therefore, there is minimal empirical evidence linking player demands and club expectations, in the player's mind, being influenced by psychological contracts (#9,#11).

4.3.3. Contract negotiation

As an extension of repatriation and player\club expectations, the psychological contract may influence contract negotiations between players and their home clubs. An assignment may change what a player feels he is worth; similarly, it may limit options and hinder a player's ability to negotiate. This section extends psychological contracts to see what effect, potentially or actually, the assignment has on the dynamics of players and clubs negotiating contracts after repatriation from an assignment.

The previous section on repatriation showed that there was very little evidence to suggest players feel they should be treated differently upon repatriation from an assignment. However, one player discussed the potential leverage the assignment may provide to contract negotiation. Three of the sport directors interviewed either said directly, or indirectly, that the assignment can have an effect on contract negotiations (#1,#4,#10). While other sections of the paper identify various reasons the assignment may directly or indirectly influence contract negotiations, the focus of this section is on how the mentality, or perceptions, of the player's worth influences the contract negotiations. It should be noted that the following section on trust can be valuable to reference with contract negotiations.

The North American assignee mentioned that the unique nature of his MLS contract made it unlikely for the assignment to influence his future contract negotiations. However, he felt that it could have influenced the negotiations for one of his teammates who went on assignment with him. When asked if the assignment helped his teammate get a full senior contract (more than double the pay of his previous contract), he responded

“yeah, I think it could have helped him and probably did help him...I think it increased his value. It increased what he thought he was worth, and I think [the home club] probably thought he was worth more (#11).”

Allowing players to go on assignment, or even be transferred, has been shown to have a perceived benefit in attracting players. This can also overlap with the clubs ability to sign players

to long term contracts - contract length being a facet of the negotiation process. It was stated that the trust garnered from allowing players to move on in their careers can help a club sign players to longer contracts (#5, #10, #2, #6).

An interesting caveat to the players signing long term contracts is the potential for the club to leverage uninterested foreign clubs to sign players for less than they may actually be worth. One sport director had said that if players do not get signed by clubs, then “*all the players will play [in our club] ...they come back and nobody is interested in them anymore (#1).*” While it was not directly cited by clubs as negotiation tactic, it would seem logical that when the perception of the player has gone down in the minds of club directors, the player’s options will be limited. This would likely put the club in an advantageous position for negotiating contracts.

There is not much discussion in this study on the psychological contracts relating to contract negotiation. However, it appears that the assignment can enhance trust, allowing the clubs to sign players to longer term contract. Additionally, there is the potential that the assignment may increase or decrease a players worth in his perception, as well as the clubs. This likely has some influence on negotiations. Overall, evidence is limited linking an international assignments ability to influence contract negotiation.

4.3.4. Social Exchange and Trust

Trust and social exchange were never mentioned as reasons for anyone to go on an assignment, nor was it directly cited as a perceived benefit of an assignment. However, the evidence suggests that an assignment can serve as a building block for trust between player and club. The link to social exchange is less of a psychological contract and more a result of the assignment.

One sport director clearly felt that the assignment helped players trust the club more. Even when pressured to sell a player, he felt the trust gained from an assignment increased the commitment level of players to the club.

“From a psychological standpoint, I really believe at the time our players appreciated

that we showed trust in them and took an interest in developing them...we were rewarded with better mental commitment from them when they came back. They recognized that the team supported them in their career endeavors...Word gets around the league who is treating players well and who is not. Part of that proper treatment is showing them trust and respect, not holding them back in their careers (#10)."

The ability of an assignment to create trust is supported by the North American assignee. *"It showed me that he put trust in me and faith in me in that situation (#11)."* This trust and appreciation is binary; it can be reciprocated from club to player and vice versa.

"I think when somebody trusts you, and you back up that faith with delivering a good performance for them, you know a boss is always going to appreciate that (#11)."

One sport director said that the assignment has the potential to have negative impacts on social exchange and trust. *"In a way, you are underestimating the work you are doing in your club (#1)."* His direct response was referencing letting a player be sold without adequate compensation; however, the principle can perhaps be extended to international assignments – particularly in regards to player development.

The ramifications of the trust from an international assignment remain unclear. Even one player admitted that it was tough to quantify the benefits from trust in an exchange. *"What affect does that have? You never quite fully know...(#11)."* There was also limited response relating to social exchange and trust. However, the respondents do show evidence that the assignment was a means of expressing trust in, as well as receiving trust and commitment from the player.

4.3.5. Psychological contracts contextualized

In summary of the empirical evidence relating to the subject matter, psychological contracts seem to clearly exist regarding training or transfer to an international club. There is general expectation of players, that the clubs will allow them to go on assignment-clubs seem to feel very little need to resist the players' wishes in this regard. Despite the perceived benefits club,

player, nor non-talent do not feel it is the clubs responsibility to arrange and assignment. Somewhat surprisingly, there is a general assumption of players that should the host club in an assignment want to offer them a contract, they will be sold – nothing is mentioned about the fairness of the offer from an interested club.

The repatriation phase has unclear results regarding any alterations of psychological contracts as a result of international assignments. Most assignees returned with no expectation of different treatment, nor did the club expect more out of players because of them going on an assignment. Although, one player did feel he demanded more from his home club after the repatriation process had settled. Sport directors had virtually no evidence suggesting problems with players' expectations in the repatriation phase as a result of the assignment. However, they did acknowledge the potential of players to be dissatisfied with the home club after an assignment.

There was limited evidence to support that an assignment can express, or create trust between a player and his home club. This trust can carry over to contract negotiations. Some sport directors feel that the assignment has enabled them to sign longer term contracts with players. While no hard evidence is provided from interviewees, it is suggested that an assignment may have an impact on contract negotiations between clubs and players.

5. DISCUSSION

The final chapter in this study will begin with a summary of the study, along with key findings. Next, the study's theoretical contribution will be discussed. Practical implications for both players and club directors will be presented in the third section. The fourth and concluding section will suggest different research possibilities for the future.

5.1. Discussion and Key Findings

This study extends traditional academic research on international assignments to the sporting world, where a gap in research exists. Given the limited existing research, an inductive approach is taken to this exploratory research. Qualitative data is gathered from a series of semi-structured, non-standardized interviews. Aside from merely extending academic studies from traditional businesses to professional sporting clubs, this study analyzes both players' and club directors' perceived benefits of a short-term international assignment. Additionally, the qualitative data outlines the varying stakeholders' expectations surrounding the international assignment.

Primary benefits from an international assignment are as follows: transfer, benchmarking, brand reputation, player development. This can generally confirm to some extent the benefits seen from international assignments of traditional businesses, aside from the transfer fee. A transfer fee is unique to the sporting world and was a common goal of international assignments. Clubs are searching for a source of revenue from the sale of a player, and even when the goal of the assignment is for development, there is an element of trialing involved. Interestingly, clubs are not necessarily seeking a transfer out of greed; rather, a way to bring in funds necessary for survival.

There was limited direct support for individual skill development from a short-term international assignment, which appears to be contrary to traditional businesses. However, the suggested benefits of improved fitness, professionalism, confidence, motivation, and focus along with the ability to benchmark the players' ability, are likely to aid individual player development upon

repatriation.

From the clubs' perspective, the international assignment can enhance its brand image. This can potentially help retain or attract talent. Additionally, the clubs ability to network can be improved from an assignment; this may facilitate future transfers or investment into the youth academy. There is some cross-over from the sporting world in terms of excess mobility when a player\employee goes on too many assignments. However, the harm to an individual's brand image appears to be more noticeable in the sporting world.

Of course, there are risks involved in having a player go on an international assignment. There is an inherent risk that a player gets hurt, or moves on to another club. Traditional businesses face similar retention risks, but seem to be more concerned with combating them. While sporting clubs generally acknowledge and accept these risks. Additionally, the risk of non-talent becoming dissatisfied seems to be unwarranted in the sporting world. The assignment is viewed as a positive motivating factor for non-talent. Generally speaking, the risks associated with a short-term international assignment are minimal when compared to the perceived benefits.

Determining who was responsible for international assignments and what expectations players had with their home club, and the other way around, was unique. Players seem to have no expectation that their home club will arrange an international assignment. Likewise, clubs feel no pressure to arrange an assignment for their players. However, players seem to feel the club should not prohibit them from going on an assignment if it is presented to them. Additionally, there seems to a general view by players that should the host club offer a contract, the home club will reach an agreement for a sale, allowing the player to pursue a more lucrative individual offer.

Upon repatriation to the home club, there seemed to be relatively no increased expectations placed on the player, due to the assignment. Psychological contracts seem to be heavily altered from international assignments in traditional businesses, while any alteration of the players' and clubs' psychological contract was largely due to experience gained from the previous season. From the clubs' perspective, there was no expectation on the players' performance because of

the international assignment. Players did exhibit some expectation on professionalism as well as the potential for contract renegotiation. It is, however, discussed that the assignment plays a minimal part in that.

5.2. Theoretical Contribution

One of the theoretical contributions from this study is adding unique research from the sporting world to existing research on international assignments in traditional business studies. Therefore, the study fills a research gap from traditional studies to that of the sporting world. This study discusses how professional sports club can potentially benefit from an international assignment in the form of player recruitment and retention, while enhancing their brand image and networking capabilities.

In addition to supporting existing theory, evidence from this study can complement traditional academic studies with additional benefits from an assignment. The ability for individuals to benchmark themselves against peers is extremely important to players. Additionally, for a period of time upon repatriation, players feel they are more focused, motivated, and have more confidence. The ability to benchmark is undervalued by traditional businesses. The sporting world, almost inadvertently, appears to be ahead of traditional businesses when it comes to the use of an assignment to compare individuals to their peers. Not as identifiable as it should be to assignees on an individual level, soccer players are able to use the assignment as a means of self-evaluation to improve weaknesses.

There is relatively little existing research linking international assignments to psychological contracts. Overall, there is little support for the alteration of psychological contracts deriving from an international assignment. However, information from this study is limited, but it provides an interesting start. Further research may be required to formulate a concrete theory linking the assignment to changes in psychological contracts.

In the sporting arena, there is a relatively small amount of evidence supporting psychological contracts being influenced by international assignments. Rather, it is a psychological contract

that existed prior to the assignment with little alteration upon repatriation. In this instance, the empirical evidence from the sporting world is contrary to some of the struggles facing traditional businesses. However, the assignment did serve as a building block for trust, which is extremely difficult to quantify, and can ultimately influence psychological contracts at some point in the player\club relationship.

A unique aspect of the sporting world is that of the transfer. In this, a contracted player is sold to a club in exchange for monetary compensation. The aspect of the transfer could lead to the formation of a new economic theory. Clubs are able to offset employee turnover with revenue generation from a transfer fee. Clubs or businesses may be specifically designed to produce talent in order to sell, rather than retain talent. It is not certain, nor was it the aim of the study, how the aspect of a transfer fee may influence traditional business. However, the uniqueness of the transfer in the sporting world is interesting when discussing the studies theoretical contribution.

Strengths that cross over

Sport	Traditional Business
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Benchmarking -> using self-evaluation to improve - Understanding competitive nature and players’ desire to advance - Use employee turnover to aid in recruiting and building trust - Managing expectations of non-talent and assignees upon repatriation - Use misalignment as a positive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Utilizing broad range of benefits - Pre-assignment preparation and analysis - Understanding who “consumer” is and coordinating benefits/alignment - Differentiating assignments (learning vs. demand) - Using assignment as a developmental tool and finding specific skills for assignees to learn

Table 3. Strength that cross over

5.3. Practical Implications

Practical implications for both clubs and players are enormous in regards to an international

assignment. On a simple macro level, clubs need to understand what an important thing an assignment is to a player. Clubs also need to understand the range of potential benefits from an international assignment. On a lesser scale, players need to be aware and open minded of potential individual benefits. It is important for all stakeholders to not take a narrow view of the assignment, and realize the complexities that accompany it.

It is generally accepted that there is a risk of injury or turnover resulting from the trial. However, club directors should give more attention to assessing and analyzing the assignment, as well as the individual assignee beforehand. While many international assignments are not generated from the club itself, there are concerns that should be addressed if the club arranges the assignment.

The starting point for club directors in assessing an assignment should be who the club wants to send on an assignment, and what type of assignment, or where specifically. Examples of this would be learning vs demand driven assignments. Some players may need to be setup to be challenged and learn from hardship, while other players might need to succeed. Literature from traditional businesses puts more emphasis on differentiating the two, where sporting clubs could be proactive in finding the right type of assignment by letting some players learn from hardship experiences.

Clubs should also look at succession planning and what players they can produce easily. If certain positions or nationalities are harder to come by at the club, while others are developed easily, the club needs to take that into consideration. A player that is easily replaceable should be sent on an assignment where he is likely to be sold. Players that cannot be replaced and the club will not want to see go, should maybe be sent to an assignment where they will develop, but not necessarily have a good chance at signing a contract.

Similar to succession planning, a player's contractual status should be taken into consideration prior to them going on an assignment. The assignment may prove to be what is needed for the player to sign a longer term contract. Additionally, when a player does not receive a contract abroad, it may limit his options, and help the home club in negotiating. On the other hand, if the

assignee does well and is at the end of his contract, it may strengthen his bargaining power or even allow him to sign for the host club without a transfer fee.

Another highlighted area in the club level analysis phase is that of brand image. Clubs need to be aware of what they are trying to accomplish, if anything, regarding their brand reputation. It is important to understand who their “consumer” is: potential players, host club, current contracted players. If the primary consumer is the host club, then it is important to send a player that can impress and create a good foundation for the relationship in the future. If the market is other players, then perhaps a high profile club is the priority, and it is not as important as how the player does on assignment. Who goes on assignment, and where, will likely be influenced by understanding who the consumer is, or how the brand image is enhanced.

The repatriation phase of international assignments is of critical importance to traditional businesses. Perhaps it is due to the nature of a short-term assignment or the frequency in which players change clubs, but contrarily, the sporting world does not put much emphasis the repatriation phase for assignees. It is wise for club directors, and coaches to assess the individual upon repatriation. Perhaps a meeting to encourage development and improved performance is valuable. On the most individual level, clubs should educate players prior to going on assignment, and keep them open-minded for the potential.

To expand upon the repatriation phase, sporting clubs are at an advantage with the ability to receive a transfer fee. Because of the undue pressure on clubs to allow players to further their career, a transfer is not always possible or beneficial. However, traditional business can learn from sporting clubs on how to utilize the traditionally negative aspect of employee turnover to leverage recruitment and commitment of other players\employees.

Traditional businesses can benefit from the sporting world in the use of benchmarking and utilizing employee turnover to their advantage. Perhaps clubs and players can learn from traditional businesses on how to use the assignment as a developmental tool by identifying weaknesses in a players’ game prior to assignment that they can hopefully improve. The lack of specific skill development gained from a short-term assignment is relatively surprising compared

to traditional businesses.

Sporting clubs should learn from traditional businesses on how to fully utilize the range of benefits from assignments. In this study's sample, the short-term assignments had a relatively low cost. Additionally, the effects on psychological contracts appear to be minimal and the clubs seem to manage misalignment issues almost to their benefit. Therefore, it would appear that the clubs can be more proactive, as traditional businesses are, in creating and evaluating assignments.

5.4. Future research suggestions

In this study, international assignments were analyzed in the Nordic countries and North America. Club directors and players were interviewed. The assignments were short-term training or trials in a different country.

This study was a starting point for extending academic research from traditional business to the sporting world. Additional research could prove to be valuable in a different type of assignment, like a long term loan. National teams, college programs or amateur youth clubs could provide interesting sources of data as well.

Samples could also come from different geographic regions, specifically outside the Nordic countries or North America. Nearly all the assignments entailed assignees visiting a host club that was perceived to be a higher level of play. Valuable information could be derived from analyzing players training or trialing at foreign clubs that are perceived to be similar or even lower levels of play.

The current sample consisted of players and club directors. It was noted that there is relatively little expectation for the clubs to create an assignment. The state of psychological contracts was explored. However, the identification of who is expected to be responsible for the creation of an assignment remains unspecified. Beyond that, the question of who is ultimately responsible for a player's development remains in question.

Further research to answer who is generally responsible for a soccer player's development, and more specifically to this study, a creation of an international assignment is interesting. In order to answer these questions, expanding the level of stakeholders involved is necessary. Managers, youth coaches, scouts, and agents are all good sources of information. These third parties likely influence the players' and club directors' perceived benefits and psychological contracts.

As complex as it may be to try and determine who is responsible for a player's development, the study can be extended further. Sporting clubs have a unique way of limiting not only their responsibility for the creation of an assignment, but the expectations of the assignee upon repatriation. This lack of expectation and responsibility reduces the risk for non-talent dissatisfaction. Additionally, sporting clubs seem less vulnerable and accepting of interest misalignment than traditional businesses. What remains uncertain is how these sporting clubs are able, almost accidentally, to limit the expectations of stakeholders, and understand varying motivations. Further research to determine how they are able to do this can be of immense value to traditional businesses.

Finally, an interesting study could be done to attempt to quantify the return on investment of an international assignment. In order to do this, it may take a longer term approach to data acquisition. With all the complexities surrounding the range of perceived benefits, the task of quantifying return on investment is likely very difficult. However, the discussion of "buy vs grow" is a common challenge for corporations and sporting clubs alike. Any insight that can be provided, especially to the sporting world would doubtless be valuable.

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