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The Role of Expatriation in the Context of Managing Diversity in International Organizations

Die Rolle von Expatriation im Kontext von Managing Diversity in internationalen Organisationen

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Abstract (English)

Today's international organizations are characterized by a high level of diversity. Work teams consist of people with a variety of experiences, abilities, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Expatriates enhance this range of diversity. The paper at hand examines which role expatriates and the management of expatriation play in terms of managing an organization's diversity. For this purpose, a literature review has been conducted and the findings have been contrasted with the results of an exploratory survey in a multinational corporation.

In the academic discourse, expatriation management and diversity management have been separated areas so far. There are a few studies on expatriation which examine diversity-related aspects. In managing diversity literature a few studies could be identified which mention expatriation. But no study examines the intentional usage of expatriation as an instrument to actively manage diversity. When aligning these results with the empirical findings of the above mentioned survey, it becomes apparent that expatriates and human resource practitioners do not see diversity and expatriation as an integrated concept, too.

These results seem surprising since organizational learning, based on the variety of individual experiences, traits, and qualifications, is the basis of both expatriation and diversity management. The conceptualization of an integrated approach appears to be a promising task for further research.

Keywords: expatriation, diversity management, human resource management, organizational learning, international organization

Abstract (Deutsch)

Internationale Organisationen weisen heutzutage einen hohen Grad an Diversität auf. Arbeitsgruppen bestehen aus Menschen mit einer Vielfalt von Erfahrungen, Fähigkeiten, kulturellen und ethnischen Hintergründen. Expatriates erhöhen diese Vielfalt. Im vorliegenden Artikel wird daher die Rolle von Expatriates und des Managements von Expatriation im Zusammenhang mit dem Management von Diversity in der Organisation untersucht. Zu diesem Zweck wurde ein Literaturreview durchgeführt, dessen Ergebnisse mit den Ergebnissen einer explorativen Studie in einem multinationalen Unternehmen abgeglichen wurden.

Expatriation Management und Diversity Management sind im akademischen Diskurs bislang getrennte Gebiete. So werden nur in ein paar wenigen Studien zu Expatriation Aspekte genannt, die einen Bezug zum Diversity Management aufweisen. Auch in der Literatur über Diversity Management finden sich nur wenige Studien, in denen Expatriation thematisiert wird. Expatriation als bewusst eingesetztes Mittel zur aktiven Steuerung von Vielfalt wird jedoch in keiner Studie beschrieben. Gleicht man dies mit den Ergebnissen der erwähnten empirischen Untersuchung ab, wird deutlich, dass auch in der Unternehmenspraxis weder Expatriates noch Personaler Diversity und Expatriation als integriertes Konzept ansehen.

Diese Ergebnisse überraschen insofern, als dass organisationales Lernen, welches auf der Vielfalt von individuellen Erfahrungen, Eigenschaften und Qualifikationen beruht, die Grundlage für Expatriation Management wie auch Diversity Management ist. Diese beiden Ansätze konzeptionell miteinander zu verbinden, erweist sich somit als lohnenswertes Feld für weitere Forschung.

Stichworte: Expatriation, Diversity Management, Personalmanagement, organisationales Lernen, internationale Organisation

1. Introduction

International organizations are characterized by high levels of diversity. The drivers of diversity within organizations are manifold. Among others, Cox (1994:3) identified the development of population demographics and the increasing need for immigration in many industrial countries as a driver. 20 years later, OECD data distinctly show that international labor migration is a key source for many of these countries in the attempt to maintain their workforces (OECD 2015:22). On the other hand, intra-organizational circumstances foster diversity. More and more operations are organized in projects with multidisciplinary project teams (Larson / Gray 2014:3). And in international organizations, team members may belong to various parts of the organization, located in different countries. These arrangements vary from virtual team work via electronic media over the involvement of short-term business trips on a mutual basis up to assignments of members from other locations for the entire duration of the project (PwC 2012:12).

Indeed, these cross-border assignments are a frequently used instrument in international organizations. In the terminology of international human resource management, this phenomenon is known as 'expatriation' and employees who are sent abroad are called expatriates or in short 'expats' (Luthans / Doh 2009:469). That terminology is not without problems since it remains in the ethnocentric tradition of international human resource management: Employees are expatriated, which means that they are sent abroad – from the headquarters' perspective. But today's international organizations need managers and experts who are not "limited to managing relationships between headquarters and a single foreign subsidiary" (Adler/Bartholomew 1992:53). International assignments are no one-way processes nowadays, they happen between all the different entities and in different ways, as the PwC report "Talent mobility 2020 and beyond" reveals (PwC 2012:11f.). Nevertheless, the term 'expatriate' is so common that it is used in the following text, too.

So far, it is evident that expatriates raise the level of cultural diversity in the work teams they join. It is simply a consequence of their presence. But do expatriates actually contribute to diversity beyond this passive role? Which role does expatriation play when it comes to systematically managing diversity in an international organization?

2. Research design

In the attempt to shed some light on the role of expatriation in the context of

managing diversity, a two-tier research strategy has been applied. On the one hand, a literature review has been carried out to investigate how the phenomenon of expatriation is discussed in diversity management literature and – vice versa – in which way aspects of managing diversity are addressed in the scientific discussion about expatriate management. On the other hand, findings of an empirical study (Scheible 2015) have been used.

3. The literature review

3.1. Methodology of the literature review

A systematic literature review has been conducted. By filling the entry masks of the relevant databases with 'diversity management' AND 'expatriation' (and related terms), only a few hits could be identified. The analysis of these hits led to the inclusion of 13 journal articles. Nevertheless, it is worth having a closer look at both spheres, the diversity management discourse and the expatriate management discourse, as well as their overlaps.

3.2. Findings from the literature review

3.2.1. Aspects of diversity in the context of expatriate management

Authors started to describe expatriation, its reasons and its outcomes as early as in the 1970s (e.g., Edstrom / Galbraith 1977). The reasons most often mentioned for the application of expatriation are allocation and coordination between headquarters and international subsidiaries, the transfer of technological and managerial know-how, the implementation of strategies, organizational development, and the aim to influence the corporate culture (Edstrom / Galbraith 1977, Hocking / Brown / Harzing 2007, Perlmutter 1969, Selmer 1995). Expatriates implement elements of the headquarters' base of knowledge by establishing routines and processes in the subsidiaries abroad and training their colleagues there.

All these aims have in common that expatriation is first of all used in the attempt to achieve unification in form of a unified worldwide strategy, the application of the same technology in all plants at home and abroad, the development of a cadre of junior managers across national boundaries, etc. This is in line with traditional managerial concepts of achieving economies of scale and improving efficiency by increasing the size of an operating unit. At first, diversification seems to be contradictory to these concepts. On the other hand, a few studies on expatriation have addressed aspects of managing diversity in recent years.

Kooskora and Bekker (2007) focused on gender diversity and asked why the number of female expatriates was significantly lower than the number of male expats. But they did not go beyond the examination of the phenomenon. Expatriation has not been put in the context of managing gender inequality in international organizations, yet. The same is true for an article by Scullion and Brewster (2001), in which informal barriers for women in international management such as prejudices and a lack of networking facilities (Scullion / Brewster 2001:353) are mentioned, but both spheres – managing expatriation and managing diversity – are not interlinked. McEvoy and Buller (2013:216) stated that "today's dual-career couple environment" might be a problem when it comes to getting potential expatriates to accept foreign assignments, but again, a constructive management of dual-career issues is not addressed any further.

Besides those diversity-related aspects of managing expatriation, another direction of studies has appeared in the field of expatriation management: the examination of the effectiveness of expatriated and repatriated managers. Bolino (2007:819f.) found that there is a body of studies which suggest that managers with expatriate experience are more effective at managing multinational corporations (MNCs) than those without such an experience. Experiences gained in subsidiaries abroad have an impact on expatriates' behavior over

the long run (Auh / Menguc 2005:257, Saka-Helmhout 2007:305). So, the aim of improving leadership performance can be addressed by diversifying the group of top managers by means of a targeted expatriate management. The management team undergoes a development towards a culturally diverse group of people who bring in their international experiences for the benefit of the organization (Doherty / Dickmann 2009:311).

What may speak against this concept of managing diversity by means of expatriation is the fact that many expats leave their organizations within a short period of time after their return. Research has found that one out of four expat managers quits his/her job within one year of repatriation (van der Heijden / van Eugen / Paauwe 2009:831). This is usually seen as a failure of expatriate management. But McEvoy and Buller (2013:219) reply: "[I]t could be considered a success if the repatriate transfers useful explicit and tacit knowledge gained back to the parent company even if the individual eventually takes his/her new skills and knowledge to another organization that perhaps values it more highly." In return, managers with expat experience from other organizations can be attracted so that the intended range of experiences in the management team can be developed. However, Harvey and Moeller (2009) see some limitations of this concept since "[t]here may be a maximum number/percentage of 'outsiders' and/or foreigners that will be acceptable in the organization" (Harvey / Moeller 2009:278).

With the focus on effectiveness in global context, expatriate management leaves the ethnocentric attitude. International assignments are no longer one-way transfers of concepts and know-how; they become an instrument for organization development on a mutual basis, characterized by a high level of integration and strong ties between all the locations of the organization (Bartlett / Ghoshal 2002:72ff.). But Bartlett and Ghoshal also stated that: "[Management] must be able to balance the diversity of perspectives and capabilities within the organization and ensure that no single management group dominates others" (Bartlett / Ghoshal 2002:76). If the right balance of beliefs and competencies is established, the institutional context allows for changes towards favorable practices and routines (Saka-Helmhout 2007:295).

3.2.2. Aspects of expatriation in the context of diversity management

Today's diversity management approaches first of all base on the assumption that organizations can create a competitive advantage by using manifold knowledge and experiences of different people in the organization in a synergetic and effective way (Cox 1994, Gardenswartz / Rowe 2008). The arguments that properly managed heterogeneity can lead to enhanced creativity and innovation, to a higher level of employees' commitment, and consequently to a higher performance of the organization (Bassett-Jones 2005, Ely / Thomas 2001) are largely accepted today – in organization development as well as in human resource management. In fact, this business case argument has widely replaced the former rationale of managing diversity for moral reasons such as avoiding discrimination (Tatli 2011:242). Nevertheless, aspects like legitimacy and fairness still play an important role – especially when it comes to legal requirements under the various anti-discrimination acts in an increasing number of countries these days (Nishii / Özbilgin 2007:1883).

When asking which role expatriation plays in this context, little can be found. Nishii and Özbilgin (2007) have developed a conceptual framework for global diversity management. One element of the framework is the development of global competencies under which international assignments are listed as an instrument for "systematic talent development" (Nishii / Özbilgin 2007:1887). It is acknowledged that international assignments are a highly effective means of developing global competence, but considering the costs of these assignments, it is stated that the instrument should be applied only se-

lectively (Nishii / Özbilgin 2007:1888). Apart from this, the article does not discuss international assignments any further.

One study that combines diversity management and expatriation was conducted by Lauring (2013). The author examined how far diversity management standards of a MNC's headquarters are conflicting with the expatriation realities in its oversea subsidiaries. So, in this study expatriation is not considered as a tool of diversity management but as an instrument of international human resource management which makes the application of diversity policies challenging. In the examined case, Scandinavian expats filled executive positions in a Saudi subsidiary of a Scandinavian MNC. The author describes the study as an extreme case since he identified a lot of conflicts between the corporate diversity management strategy and the legal and social realities in the subsidiary company (Lauring 2013:212). Interesting when examining the role of expatriation in the context of managing diversity is the finding that expatriate managers have little incentive to commit to the headquarters' diversity policies as long as the evaluation of their success is mainly based on the financial performance of the subsidiary they manage (Lauring 2013:217f.).

As a conclusion of this part of the literature review, it can be stated that challenges of an international roll-out of diversity management have been discussed in a few articles. But no study examines the intentional usage of expatriation as an instrument to actively manage diversity and implement diversity management policies across the subsidiaries abroad.

4. An exploratory empirical study

The findings from the literature review are remarkable. International organizations make use of international assignments – some more, some less. Thus, there is a need for managing expatriates. The same is true for managing diversity. Not every organization has got an all-embracing diversity management approach, but at least, organizations have to meet the relevant legal requirements. Both spheres deal with managing knowledge, enabling people with specific characteristics and experiences to enter new environments in which their abilities can be used productively. So, why is there no systematic research on how to integrate both management activities? And if there is no research, does this mean that practitioners do not try to combine both fields?

In the attempt to shed some light on these questions, a first exploratory study has been conducted and its findings shall be briefly summarized here (for a more comprehensive presentation cf. Scheible 2015).

4.1. Methodology of the empirical study

In an international mechanical engineering company both current expatriates and human resource (HR) managers have been interviewed with the purpose to evaluate whether the foundation of expatriation management in a comprehensive diversity management approach is thinkable and implementable. The examined organization with its 100+ years of history is headquartered in Germany and internationalized early. The past decades have been characterized by a multitude of international acquisitions, joint-ventures, mergers, and demergers. Today, the company has got around 22,000 employees worldwide. Besides Germany, main production plants are located in Brazil, China, France, India, Italy, the UK, and the USA. Expatriates have been assigned whenever a technical demand occurred. Policies concerning the management of such international assignments have been in place, but a strategic approach of expatriate management in order to develop employees and the organization has been missing. Aspects of managing diversity have been addressed in order to meet legal requirements and corporate governance concerns, but no integrated diversity management approach has been developed.

Cohort	Numer of respondents						
	Australian subsidiary	Chinese subsidiary	Czech subsidiary	French subsidiary	British subsidiary	US subsidiary	Total
Expatriates	1	3	2	3	2	3	14
HR managers	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Total	2	4	3	4	3	4	20

Tab. 1:   Conducted interviews

The data were gathered in semi-structured interviews with 14 expatriates and six HR managers of the company. The interviewees were located in six subsidiaries of the company in Australia, China, Czech Republic, France, the UK, and the USA. Their distribution is shown in Table 1. 13 expats held executive positions, one was a project member.

All interviews were conducted via telephone. The questions covered aspects of the expatriation process and its management, the role of expatriation in the light of cooperation and communication across various sites, perception and appreciation of colleagues in subsidiaries, and the interrelation between expatriation and human resource development. After transcribing, structuring, and comparatively analyzing the interview records, the results were cross-checked by one of the HR managers working in the central HR department at the German headquarters.

4.2. Findings from the empirical study

Expatriates as well as HR managers described expatriation as an important means for international cooperation and organization development. Aspects like the development of a global identification with the company, becoming acquainted with colleagues from the other sites, sharing experiences and passing on knowledge were most often mentioned. It is an interesting finding in this context that cooperation significantly improved in most cases, simply by having the exchange with expats on

a face-to-face basis. On the other hand, one expat described a situation where misunderstandings based on cultural differences led to unfavorable circumstances. When applying evidence from the field of diversity management to this instance, it can be concluded that forming a productive team, consisting of people with diverse backgrounds, requires facilitation (Gardenswartz and Rowe 2008). In many cases, expats may be able to assume the role of being facilitators. But if differences between the expat and other team members cause trouble, a third party is needed.

When asked about their role as facilitators of international cooperation and communication within the company, the number one topic among respondents was language. Most of both expats as well as HR managers expressed the opinion that improving the command of English as a lingua franca in all parts of the enterprise may help to form a unified global entity and a strong corporate culture. A German expat in France called it "a real team", a Czech HR manager wanted to develop "a common international identity". In order to achieve this goal, he suggested: "Send more employees from the [company]'s sites worldwide to [location of headquarters] so that these people get the chance to get to know the headquarters."

Additionally, several interviewees requested the provision of enhanced communication facilities. From those aspects can be concluded that for the majority of interviewees standardization is the clue to effectiveness in international cooperation. Appreciation of differences among and within the dif-

ferent subunits of the organization was to a large extent out of the respondents' awareness. For example, it was mentioned in some interviews that international meetings are held in German or French sometimes – if all participants agree. However, this was not seen as a resource but as a 'disturbance' of an all-embracing company communication in English.

On the other hand, individual reports delivered a few hints that differences do matter when it comes to expatriation. One expatriate reported for example that due to his special position of being an expat, changes in the subsidiary he was stationed at could be implemented more effectively. This shows that advantages stemming from a variety of individual employees are implicitly recognized.

Among HR managers, the belief that expatriation positively influences the organization's development was widely spread. All respondents out of this cohort wanted to foster international assignments and further develop instruments for doing so in a structured manner. On the other hand, this approach faces some constraints when executives in subsidiaries fear to lose talent – an aspect that can be found in the statement of a UK-based expat who mentioned that "the different organizations don't want to lose their good people".

5.   Discussion and conclusions

The literature review has shown that the diversity of an organization's staff has been addressed when it comes to expatriation. Especially the dimensions 'gender' and 'nationality/ethnicity' (cf. Gardenswartz / Rowe 2008:33) are discussed. But no attempt to integrate both expatriation and the management of diversity could be detected. A comparison of various articles has revealed a state of disruption. On the one hand, the multitude of possibilities for international assignments is acknowledged and the need to actively support employees who are underrepresented in the group of expatriates is seen as well as the positive

contributions of a culturally diverse top management team. On the other hand, the discussions about these topics often remain in the ethnocentric tradition of the expatriation management concept, e.g., when questions like 'how many foreigners may be accepted by the staff' (Harvey / Moeller 2009) are discussed. Modern diversity management approaches could clearly deliver their contribution when answering these kinds of questions. Developing trust, eliminating dominance, and directly addressing and openly discussing issues based on different cultural backgrounds may help to overcome these acceptance problems (Thomas / Ely 1996:13).

From a theoretical point of view it can be said that the idea of organizational learning, based on the variety of individual experiences, traits, and qualifications, is the basis of both concepts – the systematic assignment of expats to foreign subsidiaries as well as the purposeful management of diversity. The similarity of the underlying paradigms has been growing with the increasing shift from fairness and legitimacy aspects towards performance and innovation issues in managing diversity ('the business case argument'; cf. Tatli 2011). Bartlett and Ghoshal (2002) addressed this link in their seminal book 'Managing Across Borders' when they mentioned that the right balance of perspectives and capabilities must be found in the organization (Bartlett / Ghoshal 2002:76). However, this aspect of their concept has resonated neither with expatriation literature nor with managing diversity literature.

But what about the praxis? Which role does expatriation play in the context of managing diversity in an international organization? The study at hand can only deliver first hints. The exploratory research design is not suitable for a comprehensive answer of this question. Nevertheless, the findings allow the conclusion that expats not only increase the diversity of work teams in subsidiaries (this can be interpreted as a passive role); they also play an active part when facilitating the cooperation of employees across different sites. In the study,

neither expatriates nor international HR practitioners saw expatriation practice in this light. They did not have the intention to exploit the diversity of their organization as effectively as possible. A majority in both cohorts regarded differences and variations more like an obstacle for effective cooperation within work teams and across work units.

This result may be biased due to the fact that the examined organization is a highly engineering driven company in which the assumption that intense standardization leads to optimal outcomes is popular. Nevertheless, it is surprising since the respondents were experienced in situations of shifted contexts and feelings of otherness. For those who are engaged in diversity management, such a low level of appreciating diversity and its benefits among expats and HR practitioners must be disappointing. However, the analysis of the respondents' narratives has shown that expats put themselves into the role of an enabler or change agent (sometimes unconsciously). They saw positive effects of their otherness, but also limitations of their effectiveness when they felt not accepted by colleagues. Providing support in such a situation could be the domain of local HR managers in subsidiaries. By applying established instruments of diversity management, expatriate effectiveness might be increased – an assumption that requires further research.

The fact that this link is not seen in HR practice, suggests that the two spheres must be interlinked on a conceptual basis. Embedding expatriation in an organization's diversity management approach – as Nishii and Özbilgin (2007) sketched it in their 'conceptual framework of global diversity management' – can be seen as an important step in order to increase the management's awareness of the potential contributions of expatriation to exploiting the intended benefits of workforce diversity.

As mentioned before, this study bases on a literature review and a first exploratory survey can merely be a starting point. The conceptualization of an integrated approach should be accompanied by intense empirical research. A

higher number of different perspectives may deliver a more complete picture of the expectations towards the role of expats in managing diversity. But very few studies have systematically combined different perspectives so far. The perspective of local HR managers in subsidiaries like in the study at hand is widely neglected in research as well as the perspective of so called third country nationals (McEvoy / Buller 2013:214). But especially these 'transpatriates' (Adler / Bartholomew 1992:54) are said to rapidly increase in number (cf. PwC 2012).

The implementation of the suggested integrated approach is challenging in many ways. But two difficulties seem to be especially critical: The scarcity of resources in HR departments and the weak incentives of expats to commit to and actively support their organization's diversity management policies due to current compensation packages. As the empirical survey has shown, local HR practitioners are more than busy with all the issues of operative expatriation management. As long as these day-to-day concerns are not fully mastered, the conceptualization of an expatriate policy, embedded in the overall diversity philosophy of a company, remains difficult (Scheible 2015:351). And concerning the incentives, Lauring (2013:217f.) found that compensation mainly bases on the financial performance of the subsidiary which is managed by the expatriate. This requires new concepts, too. So, measures are needed which display successes at developing high-performance teams based on diversity. What is more, expats do not necessarily need to have operative management responsibilities. If decisions about international assignments were based on the individual contribution an assignee could make to the team in the foreign subsidiary, the role of expats would surely change. They would no longer be considered representatives of the headquarters who are expected to align the foreigners with the central doctrine but they would be regarded as teammates who are appreciated for their special abilities and who vice versa appreciate the abilities of the other team members on site.

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