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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2023

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Balancing home unit visibility and integration in host unit: understanding differences in repatriation adjustment processes

Hammad Ul Haq and Jiyoung Shin

Faculty of Economics and Business, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Hyo Eun Cho

Korea University Business School, Korea University, Seoul, Republic of Korea, and

Sophie Junge

Faculty of Economics and Business, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine the question of whether the repatriation adjustment process varies with different combinations of duration and purpose of international assignments.

Design/methodology/approach – A multiple-case study within one company was conducted based on in-depth interview data.

Findings – The authors find that learning-driven international assignments are more beneficial for career growth and receive better organizational support, as assignees are able to maintain regular communication (visibility) with the home unit. On the other hand, those on demand-driven, long-duration international assignments need to have a closer connection (integration) with employees in the host unit and find it challenging to maintain high visibility in the home unit simultaneously.

Originality/value – The authors contribute to existing research by highlighting that demand-driven assignees on longer assignments face greater challenges upon returning home. In addition, expatriates on short-term assignments face drastically fewer challenges than expatriates on longer assignments.

Keywords Repatriation, Repatriation process, Met expectations theory, Type of expatriates, Duration of expatriates, International assignments

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Repatriation refers to the process by which an individual's time abroad will end with the return of the employees to their countries of origin (Baruch *et al.*, 2016; Gaio Santos and Martins, 2021; Sussman, 2001). As the number of repatriations increases and the complexity of adjustment difficulties grows, it is becoming more important to understand the antecedents associated with the repatriation adjustment process. In the domain of International Business and International Human Resource Management (IHRM), scholars

Multinational Business Review
Vol. 31 No. 4, 2023
pp. 477-495
© Emerald Publishing Limited
1525-383X
DOI 10.1108/MBR-12-2022-0208

and practitioners alike pay attention to issues relating to the repatriation adjustment process (Chiang *et al.*, 2018; Gaio Santos and Martins, 2021; Knocke and Schuster, 2017; Lee *et al.*, 2023). Until recently, the main focus of repatriation studies has been on various factors that could influence the repatriation adjustment process. These include certain human resource practices of MNEs, the characteristics of the international assignment and the individuals' personalities and behaviors. Factors such as self-efficacy, openness, religion, spouse and family in repatriation, career-related expectations of the repatriates before the re-entry, duration of assignments, re-training programs from the firm after the re-entry and gender differences in repatriation adjustment (Andreason and Kinneer, 2005; Kierner and Suutari, 2018; Szkudlarek, 2010; Tharenou, 2008; van der Velde *et al.*, 2005).

While this prior work takes important steps toward uncovering significant factors that influence the repatriation adjustment process, it is still in a nascent state. Although long-term assignments have received considerable attention within the IHRM literature (Osman-Gani and Hyder, 2008; Pattie *et al.*, 2010; Reiche, 2012; Starr, 2009; Suutari and Brewster, 2003), the repatriation of short-term assignments has not been as extensively researched, often being treated as a trivial issue or non-issue. Recent research suggests a growing use of short-term assignments, considering that short-term assignments are a supplement to long-term assignments (Chiang *et al.*, 2018; Kang *et al.*, 2017; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012; Starr, 2009). Managing short-term assignments is also argued to be complex and challenging because repatriates on short-term assignments tend to have comparable expectations of upward career mobility and frustration at the end of the assignment, which is often associated with a long-term assignment (Collings and Isichei, 2018). Yet, repatriation adjustment in this context has been underresearched (Chiang *et al.*, 2018; Collings *et al.*, 2007; Kang *et al.*, 2017; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012). In line with MNEs' interests in using short-term assignments as supplements to long-term assignments, it is necessary to investigate the issues of the repatriation adjustment process considering both long-term and short-term assignments (Collings and Isichei, 2018; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012).

In addition, the literature highlights that firms are required to consider the duration and purpose of international assignments if they are to be successful in repatriation adjustment. Past research has primarily centered on the effect of duration, with limited attention paid to the impact of the purpose of international assignments on the repatriation process. Both the duration and purpose of international assignments have an impact on the repatriation adjustment process. For example, it has been argued that when the time spent abroad increases, repatriates are likely to become familiar with the host country and the culture of foreign subsidiaries, making it more difficult for them to adjust back to their home country (Black, 1992; Black and Gregersen, 1997; Gregersen and Stroh, 1997). Meanwhile, it is assumed that when the parent companies are unaware of the purposes of international assignments and the work-related demands of the repatriation process, repatriates are likely to feel dissatisfied and leave the firms upon their return to the home unit. Given that analyses of the impacts of the duration and purposes of international assignments have largely been conducted independently, our understanding of their interactive effects and the implications for the repatriation adjustment process is limited. This is a significant limitation, as prior research suggests that both the duration and purpose of international assignments are important factors in explaining differences in repatriation concerns and satisfaction with organizational support; these repatriate perceptions *vis-à-vis* the company also vary across repatriates. Consequently, we attempt to investigate how the duration and purpose of international assignments jointly impact the repatriation adjustment process. We adopt a multiple case study approach to examine the differences in repatriation experiences of different types of repatriates based on various combinations of duration and purpose of an international assignment.

This study contributes to the literature in two aspects. First, this research explores the issues of the repatriation adjustment process in the context of both short-term and long-term international assignments, assuming that short-term assignments also entail problems traditionally related to long-term assignments. In so doing, this study sheds light on the repatriation issues of MNEs, providing significant HR implications in terms of specific policies for both short-term and long-term assignees. Second, unlike prior research, which investigated bivariate relationships between the duration and purpose of assignments and the repatriation adjustment process, we integrate the two facets of international assignments and elevate current work to a more holistic level by examining the nature of their interactive effects. Such an approach allows a better understanding of the impacts of the duration and purpose of assignments on the repatriation adjustment process, thereby helping the firms choose the optimal practices to apply in managing the repatriation process.

Overall, we address the following research question in this study:

RQ1. How does the repatriation adjustment process vary depending on the joint impact of duration and purpose of the international assignment?

Theoretical background
Met expectations theory
The central claim of the met expectations theory is that employees are satisfied and motivated to continue doing a job when their actual experiences of working at an organization are in line with their expectations. On the other hand, if the actual experiences are below expectations, the employees have a higher propensity to leave the organization (Cox *et al.*, 2013; Porter and Steers, 1973; Suutari *et al.*, 2018). Wanous (1980) states that companies should create realistic expectations for employees during the hiring process (i.e. in the job advertisements, interviews and orientation phase) to find the actual work environment in line with their expectations. Irving and Montes (2009) find that employees are satisfied when their expectations are met but argue that companies should not seek to exceed expectations, as that is negatively associated with employee satisfaction.

The met expectations theory has also been applied to the repatriation adjustment process (Black, 1992; Chiang *et al.*, 2018; Szkudlarek, 2010). Expatriates formulate expectations of the repatriation process during their international assignment, especially toward the end of their time abroad. These expectations are then matched against their actual experiences upon returning home. Based on the met expectations theory, expatriates are satisfied when their actual repatriation experience aligns with their expectations (Paik *et al.*, 2002; Stroh *et al.*, 1998). Upon return, unfulfilled expatriate expectations can create problems for the organization, as the repatriates are likely to be demotivated or leave the job (Bolino, 2007; Breitenmoser and Bader, 2021; Ren *et al.*, 2013; Welch, 2003). It is thus the responsibility of the company to ensure that organizational and individual expectations are aligned with reality to alleviate expatriate disappointment and increase repatriation effectiveness (Black, 1992; Breitenmoser and Bader, 2021; Paik *et al.*, 2002; Stahl *et al.*, 2002).

Research on repatriation has mainly focused solely on how the duration of the international assignment shapes the expectations and reality of the repatriation adjustment process. Specifically, long-term international assignments have been studied as they are commonly associated with unmet expectations (Andreason and Kinneer, 2005; Chiang *et al.*, 2018; Ren *et al.*, 2013). In this study, we provide a more holistic understanding by examining both the duration and purpose of the international assignment to understand how these two factors jointly shape the expectations and actual experiences of the repatriates upon return.

The following sub-section will cover the four categories of expatriates (or international assignments), and it will then review the research on the repatriation adjustment process. Finally, we will present two propositions and analyze the collected data to understand variations in the expectations and actual experiences of the four different types of expatriates.

Purpose of international assignments

In the process of increasing globalization and internationalization of companies, international job mobility is becoming more important (Bonache, 2005). Companies are increasingly moving toward globally integrated operations while pressures for local adaptation arise, consequently leading to an increased demand for a culturally sophisticated workforce and experienced business leaders (Ando, 2021). Hence, international assignments require special skills and capabilities, motivating many companies to follow a careful selection process to identify qualified individuals (Tung, 1988). International mobility demands competencies that allow expatriates to deal with challenges arising from working with different nationalities, who may approach work in very different ways (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, the selection is based not only on aspects such as technical ability, job performance and managerial skills but also on aspects such as cross-cultural adjustment ability, including cultural flexibility and cultural intelligence, language ability, and emotional stability (Chew, 2004).

Edström and Galbraith (1977) were the first authors to explain the transfer of international managers. They claim that companies transfer employees to foreign positions for three primary reasons: transfer of technical and managerial skills, management development and organizational development. Employees may be sent to fill a position if qualified local employees are not available or cannot be easily trained. In addition, expatriates are sent or go on international assignments on their own to get international exposure and develop skills to take over responsibilities later to further the global reach of a company (Harzing, 2001). Elaborating on the work of Edström and Galbraith (1977) and Pucik (1992), they differentiate between two primary objectives for expatriation: demand-driven and learning-driven. Traditional assignments were usually demand-driven, meaning they followed purposes such as exercising control, achieving knowledge transfer or fixing a specific problem in the host country. Learning-driven assignments have a different focus, such as contributing to individual or organizational development (Scullion and Collings, 2006). In addition, international assignments can be distinguished based on duration into long-term and short-term international assignments. Long-term international assignments are those that normally exceed 12 months, while short-term assignments last between 1 and 12 months (Meyskens *et al.*, 2009; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012).

Evans *et al.* (2002) developed a framework for a type of expatriate based on the combination of duration and purpose of the international assignment. They categorized four different types of international assignments: corporate agency, problem solving, competence development and career enhancement. International assignments have typically been longer in duration and frequently driven by control or knowledge transfer objectives (i.e. having a corporate agency role). Employees of the parent company were sent abroad to complete tasks related to operations and/or oversight of the foreign entity (Evans *et al.*, 2002). On the other hand, when a specific problem in the foreign entity is the driving force behind the demand for an assignment, the assignment typically takes less time to complete. These expatriates perform a *problem-solving* role (Evans *et al.*, 2002; Scullion and Collings, 2006). In addition, learning-driven long-term assignments are frequently conducted for managers to develop "global coordination capabilities" and focus on *competence development* (Evans *et al.*, 2002, p. 119). Lastly, according to Evans *et al.* (2002), an increasingly used type of

assignment is the short-term learning assignment. Young, high-potential employees use international assignments for personal and *career enhancement*. The demand for this type of assignment is rapidly increasing (Pereira *et al.*, 2017).

Repatriation adjustment process
Repatriation can be defined as "the transition from the foreign country back into the home country and organization" (Andreason and Kinneer, 2005, p. 109). Chiang *et al.* (2018) provide a more comprehensive definition, saying that repatriation is:

> The final phase of a prolonged international assignment occurs when the international assignee (repatriate) returns home to his or her parent or initiating organization together with an accompanying family member, if any (192).

Returning and readjusting to home is as difficult an adjustment as expatriates face in foreign countries, and it also affects employees' (dis)satisfaction after returning to their home organizations and countries (Black *et al.*, 1992). Gregersen and Stroh (1997) explain that repatriation adjustment problems frequently arise from the anxiety and uncertainty the employees experience upon their return. The uncertainty mainly stems from a perceived mismatch between expectations and the realities of the readjustment process (Arman, 2009). Repatriates face psychological stress when returning home, which is commonly known as reverse cultural shock: the "psychological, physical, and emotional symptoms of feeling like foreigners in their own country; developing coping strategies; dealing with change and readjusting" (Hurn, 1999, p. 227). Hence, the home unit should provide appropriate support to the repatriates to reduce the reverse cultural shock. For example, an organization may provide support to the repatriate to settle back into the work environment and personal life (O'Sullivan, 2002). The home unit should always prepare and make the necessary arrangements in advance for the return of the repatriates. Ideally, these preparations should address both work-related concerns (i.e. finding a suitable job) and personal matters (i.e. help with finding temporary accommodation) (Suutari and Brewster, 2003).

Black and Gregersen (1991) identified three distinct facets of repatriation adjustments: adjustment to work, adjustment to interacting with home nationals, and adjustment to the general environment and culture. Similarly, Arman (2009) developed three main repatriation adjustment dimensions: work adjustment, socio-cultural adjustment and psychological adjustment. Howard (1974) was one of the first authors to address problems related to the repatriation adjustment process and classify them as executive/company problems and expatriate family problems. Irrespective of the labels, the main repatriation adjustment problems relate to settling back into the work environment and organization at home. Expatriates, especially those on long duration international assignments, often face an "out-of-sight, out-of-mind syndrome," which refers to the lack of attention paid to assignees abroad by the home organization. It often seems to surprise companies when expatriates who have been gone for a couple of years finally return (Andreason and Kinneer, 2005; Harvey, 1982). Organizations start searching for a suitable position for assignees too late and often have to place repatriates in a "holding pattern" (Feldman and Thomas, 1992; Harvey, 1982). Employees frequently accept international assignments because they wish to advance their careers (Black *et al.*, 1992; Cho *et al.*, 2013; Tung, 1988). Consequently, being placed in a "holding pattern" upon return is one of the most frustrating experiences for expatriates, which is exacerbated when realizing that colleagues at home were able to advance their careers (Andreason and Kinneer, 2005; Harvey, 1982; Paik *et al.*, 2002).

Job uncertainty adds to financial problems, as normally repatriates are unable to earn the same salary upon return as they were earning before leaving or during the course of the

international assignment. An international assignment usually includes a higher stipend for the overseas service, as well as housing, education and other special allowances, such as flights to the home country. This reduction in income, frequently paired with increased living expenses in the home country upon return, may present an additional burden (Harvey, 1982; Howard, 1974). Repatriates are also faced with numerous family-related problems (Paik *et al.*, 2002). Partners who gave up a job in their home country may face difficulties restarting their careers (Hammer *et al.*, 1998; Harvey, 1982; Kierner and Suutari, 2018). Furthermore, children might face challenges upon return, especially in relation to their education. Whereas younger children are generally very adaptable, teenagers face more challenges in the readjustment process (Andreason and Kinneer, 2005; Howard, 1974). Overall, this means that returning home means giving up personal and economic advantages (Andreason and Kinneer, 2005).

Propositions
In the literature on repatriation, several authors have recognized that expatriates on long-term assignments may be more likely to perceive unmet expectations than those on short-term assignments as, first, they may experience a lack of sufficient communication with their home unit because of the "out-of-sight, out-of-mind" phenomenon (Allen and Alvarez, 1998; Tung, 1988). This causes long-term expatriates to be dissatisfied with the support received from the home unit. Second, long-term assignees may perceive a lack of opportunities for career advancement after their return. This is partly due to a loss of social capital and infrequent contact with key people in the home unit. The situation can lead home units to find it more difficult to prepare a defined role or an appropriate position for long-term assignees when returning to their home (Black *et al.*, 1992). However, short-term expatriates are free from "out-of-sight, out-of-mind" issues and often engage in more frequent communication with the home unit. This allows the home unit to understand what short-term assignees demand and be aware of their concerns based on their regular communication with the home unit. As a result, short-term expatriates may be satisfied with organizational support. Moreover, replacements for the short-term expatriates are rarely hired, and thus, there is an open position waiting for the returnee (Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005). This often helps short-term expatriates shape realistic expectations about career advancements after their return, thereby reducing the likelihood that short-term assignees are dissatisfied upon return:

> *P1.* The expectations of expatriates on short-term assignments are more likely to be met than those on long-term assignments.

Learning-driven expatriates are motivated by their personal objectives rather than assigned business tasks, as they are not addressing problems or fulfilling tasks assigned by their organizations in host countries (Evans *et al.*, 2002). In contrast, demand-driven expatriates are assigned to go abroad based on task-related goals imposed by their headquarters, which makes them expect more support from their organization. As demand-driven expatriates are often sent to fill specific positions in host units or for problem-solving, they may expect the head unit to provide necessary resources and support them both professionally and in their personal and family issues (Kumarika Perera *et al.*, 2017; Yan *et al.*, 2002). However, the home unit, often considering the assignees as filling a slot in the host market, is less likely to allocate valued resources and support, hence showing lower commitment to demand-driven assignments (Kumarika Perera *et al.*, 2017; Yan *et al.*, 2002). Meanwhile, in the case of demand-driven expatriates, they may not initiate contact with home units due to being too

embedded in the host market, and home units may not be proactive in communicating as well, despite the fact that these expatriates are performing tasks allocated by the company. This lack of communication often leads to a limited understanding of the concerns and expectations of demand-driven assignees, resulting in unmet expectations during the repatriation process. Furthermore, although demand-driven assignees tend to expect career advancement to some extent, there is a possibility that assignees' experiences and skills are perceived to be obsolete or irrelevant by the end of their international assignments, leading to a high probability of them not having a job when they return (Harvey, 1982; Stahl *et al.*, 2009). Taken together, this leads to dissatisfaction in relation to organizational support and the allocation of resources for career advancement by the home unit:

> *P2.* The expectations of expatriates on learning-driven assignments are more likely to be met than those on demand-driven assignments.

Method
Research approach
A qualitative research approach has been adopted for this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic, which has not been sufficiently examined so far in existing research (Doz, 2011; Yin, 2014). In addition, we adopt a multiple case study research design because it is more aligned with our research question. We need at least one case study from each of the four different types of expatriates to examine their repatriation adjustment process based on the purpose and time they spent on the international assignment. Eisenhardt and Greabner (2007) argue that the multiple case study design is often considered more compelling, leading to more theoretically generalizable and reliable results and providing more robust evidence for theory building as compared to a single case study research design.

Empirical context
We adopt a problem-driven approach to the study. This strategy starts with a specific issue that an organization is experiencing, then identifies the underlying causes of the issue and finally develops solutions to encourage organizational learning and managerial implications (Markusen, 2015; Saunders *et al.*, 2009). Well-executed problem-driven research not only provides valuable insights to the organization but also makes a contribution to the existing research on the topic by offering novel insights (van der Velde *et al.*, 2005).

We conducted our data collection at a large European subsidiary (hereafter referred to as Alpha) of XYZ Limited, a reputable global financial services company. XYZ Limited is present in roughly 60 countries and has employees slightly in excess of 160,000. The corporate headquarter of XYZ Limited is located in another European country in very close proximity to Alpha in terms of geographic, cultural and economic distance. Alpha is an autonomous and well-established subsidiary with a central role in knowledge sharing and strategy formulation within XYZ Limited; thus, many expatriates are sent to foreign units (as third-country nationals) and the headquarters (as inpatriates). Alpha has around 10,000 employees and is one of the biggest financial service providers in the country.

Alpha reached out to one of our team's authors to ask for help with the repatriates' adjustment process. Alpha sends numerous high-potential employees on international assignments. However, upon return, the expatriates struggle with successfully adjusting back to the home environment. The core problem at Alpha with regards to the readjustment

process of repatriates is briefly summed up by the human resource manager as follows: "The company invests a lot [in the repatriation process], and then the perception of the program is not so positive." The repatriates are unsatisfied and unwilling to positively contribute to the development of the company as desired, for example, by sharing knowledge and experiences from their time abroad (Edwards and Ferner, 2004). The negative experiences of returning expatriates have also deterred prospective expatriates from considering international assignments. The senior management at Alpha has made numerous changes, such as in the assignment policies, but unfortunately, the difficulties still persist.

Selection of cases

Case selection relies on theoretical sampling (or purposeful sampling) and is defined as "sampling on the basis of emerging concepts, with the aim being to explore the dimensional range or varied conditions along which the properties of concepts vary" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 73). We selected only those repatriates as case studies who were employed at Alpha prior to the international assignment and had returned to Alpha after spending some time abroad. In addition, we selected cases in line with the 2 × 2 matrix (Table 1) for types of expatriates developed by Evans *et al.* (2002). A total of eight different repatriates as case studies were selected for the study, which are almost evenly spread across the four types of expatriate assignments. There is only one case for competence development; this might be a reflection of the general trend that expatriates pursuing international assignments for learning purposes will only prefer shorter assignments, and thus, it is uncommon to go for a longer duration.

The definitions for assignment duration and assignment purpose are developed by combining existing research with the practices at the company. International assignments based on duration can be divided into short and long-term assignments. Alpha defines short-term assignments to range between 3 and 12 months, whereas long-term assignments have a duration greater than 12 months and can last up to 5 years (Suutari *et al.*, 2013; Tahvanainen *et al.*, 2005). The purpose of international assignments can be categorized as either demand-driven or learning-driven (Evans *et al.*, 2002). Demand-driven assignments relate to the traditional role of expatriates in multinational companies to help control and coordinate foreign units (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Harzing, 2001). In addition, expatriates can be sent to foreign units to address certain problems, such as assisting in the implementation of company specific routines and practices. On the contrary, learning-driven assignments relate to the learning and career growth opportunities for individual expatriates, primarily via learning new skills and leadership traits and gaining international experience (Jokinen *et al.*, 2008).

Duration	Purpose	
	Demand-driven	Learning-driven
Long-term	Corporate agency	Competence development
	Expatriate: A and B	*Expatriate: C*
Short-term	Problem solving	Career enhancement
	Expatriate: D, E, and F	*Expatriate: G and H*
Source: Table by author		

Table 1.
Type of expatriates and selection of case studies

Data collection

The data was mainly collected through semi-structured interviews. This interview technique allows for questions to be adjusted according to what is learned during the data collection, and respondents' answers affect which questions are subsequently asked (Patton, 2002). The interview data was combined with company policy documents on international assignments, which helped with triangulation of data sources as we could verify the information received from the interviews with the company documents. We conducted a total of ten interviews at two levels: a human resource manager at Alpha and repatriates that were selected as case studies in line with the 2 × 2 matrix. We did one interview each with the eight different repatriates, and two interviews were conducted with human resource managers at Alpha. We interviewed the human resources manager to get an understanding of the policies for international assignments at the company. In addition, we specifically wanted to find out whether the company provides the same support to all returning expatriates or if they tailor their policies based on the nature of the expatriation assignment.

We prepared two interview guides: one for the repatriates and the other for the human resources manager. The interview guide for the repatriates consisted of open-ended questions, which were complemented with probing questions during the interview to allow the respondents to give extensive answers and for us to get a detailed account of their experiences during the repatriation adjustment process (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). The interview questions varied depending on the narrative of the respondents, but in general, we asked the respondents about:

- background demographic information (e.g. time in the company, previous functional experience, education);
- nature of the international assignment and a reflection on their time abroad; and
- experiences of the repatriation adjustment process and the support provided by the organization for them to settle back in the home unit.

Eight interviews were conducted face-to-face, while two interviews were done through Skype only because a face-to-face interview was not possible. The average duration of the interviews is approximately 40 min. All the interviews were conducted in the language in which the respondents were comfortable answering the questions, i.e. either their native language or English, but all the interviews were transcribed and translated to English in the end. This decision was taken to ensure that the respondents could answer all the questions freely without being curtailed by their linguistic abilities. All the interviews were recorded, and notes were taken of key points mentioned by the respondents (Patton, 2002). We also assured the respondents that no personal or company-level information would be provided to any person not affiliated with the research project; hence, we anonymized the names of the respondents and the company to comply with the agreed privacy terms. A privacy assurance can give the respondents the freedom to narrate their experiences instead of giving socially desirable answers.

Data analysis and findings

The data was analyzed using a combination of within-case and cross-case analysis techniques suggested by Eisenhardt (1989). We focused our analysis at the group level: each of the four types of expatriates in the 2 × 2 matrix can be labeled as a group. For example, we did the within-group analysis by comparing the three case studies of repatriates (D, E and F) who were on a problem-solving international assignment, and then these case studies as a whole were compared against the other three groups (through comparison across

groups). The comparison was done on two main themes, which we were able to identify by coding the interview responses about the repatriation process. The themes relate to:

- the availability of jobs upon returning and satisfaction levels with the job situation; and
- the support provided by the organization in ensuring the smooth repatriation process, relating to both the work and personal lives of the repatriates.

We compared the expectations, actual job roles and company support provided to the expatriates upon return to the home unit across the four types of expatriates. The within-group and cross-group analyses led to the emergence of four main findings, which are presented and discussed below in more detail in the following sub-sections.

Short-term expatriates: satisfied with support from the home unit

In general, the short-term expatriates felt that their expectations were met (or exceeded) in terms of the support they received when arriving back to the home unit. This was the case for expatriates with both problem-solving and career-enhancing assignments. This is possible due to their regular communication with their mentors and/or human resources employees at Alpha. The short-term expatriates at Alpha are mandated to maintain regular contact with the home entity; it is necessary to be in contact with each other at least once every six weeks. As expressed by Expatriate G, "every six weeks, I arranged a call with my mentor (in the home unit); we planned this already before going to keep in contact." This regular communication helps the expatriates communicate their achievements and concerns about the international assignment (Vora and Kostova, 2020). In addition, convey the expectations of the repatriation adjustment process in a clear way to the home unit. Consequently, the home unit is well informed and in a position to make appropriate arrangements for their return.

In addition, the short-term expatriates were satisfied as they had the possibility to return to their former job position, which is held vacant during their absence as a company policy. All the short-term expatriates that we interviewed faced no issues with being able to retain their old positions. As a result, when the short-term expatriates returned, the company had met their expectations in terms of job security. Expatriate F referred to the short-term international assignment as a long vacation and stated that "there wasn't a great expatriation or reintegration; I simply continued where I left off." Expatriate E expressed a similar viewpoint that the availability of the former position in the home entity and the duration of the international assignment helped ease the adjustment process: "It was a seamless repatriation because I simply returned to my old role."

Short-term expatriates: desire for job-related change upon return?

An immediate job-related change upon return is very unlikely for short-term expatriates, as a job position is awaiting them. However, because this is the only reason expatriates pursue international assignments, they only want it for career enhancement. This is aptly illustrated by expatriate G:

> I have already been with the company for quite some time, about six or seven years, and in the current role for three years, and I felt like making a change.

Expatriate G was slightly disappointed that the international assignment did not lead to a challenging job role, if not a leadership position. Similarly, expatriate H returned to the old job but felt that a change was necessary at some point after the completion of the international assignment and explained: "If it was up to me, this change should have already

happened earlier, but the change that is available now (i.e. after the international assignment) did not exist earlier".

In contrast, the expatriates with problem-solving assignments were satisfied with returning to their old jobs and expressed no desire for immediate career advancement in the home unit. The expatriates with problem-solving assignments did not necessarily view international assignments as opportunities for career advancement. They were primarily focused on tackling a specific problem assigned to them in a foreign unit and accomplishing it in the short time frame available to them (normally 3–6 months). Expatriates E and F did not get any promotion upon returning, but said that the international assignment experience "did not trigger any desire for job-related change" (Expatriate E). In addition, expatriate D is the only short-term expatriate who got a promotion soon after returning from the international assignment, but he or she openly stated that there were no expectations or desires for a job-related change based on the international experience gained during the time abroad.

The human resource manager emphasized that Alpha views the international assignments as an opportunity for the expatriates to advance their careers in the long run, as it enables the expatriates to "round off the CV". The company wants to make it clear that no immediate career growth is guaranteed upon return; this is done by ensuring short-term expatriates have the same job position they had prior to going abroad for the international assignment. This clarity helps shape realistic expectations about job roles for all short-term expatriates. Hence, on the whole, the expectations of the job role were met by the company for all the short-term expatriates. The expatriates with a career enhancement purpose were hoping that the company could potentially exceed their expectations by offering them more challenging job roles shortly after returning.

Long-term expatriates: unsatisfied with support from the home unit
The long-term expatriates were generally dissatisfied with the support they received from the home unit, as the company support they received was below their expectations. The level of dissatisfaction was higher among those on corporate agency assignments in relation to the career enhancement assignments. All long-term expatriates had hoped for more intense company support upon return than what they actually received. Even though expatriate C experienced a smoother repatriation compared to expatriates A and B, his or her desire for additional support aligned with the expectations of further assistance expressed by corporate agency expatriates. Both expatriates A and C, for instance, expected more company support in finding a new home, as this was the most stressful aspect of repatriation: "[t]he most scary thing I remember was that when I came home, I didn't have a home" (Expatriate A). Expatriate C hoped that he or she would receive the same level of company support during repatriation as that provided during expatriation.

Unlike the short-term expatriates, who had been contacted every six weeks, the company policy made it obligatory for the long-term expatriates to stay in contact with the home unit at least once every six months. As a result, these expatriates had very little official contact with the home unit. Instead, the long-term expatriates mainly had to rely on private connections with the home unit to help with the repatriation process. For instance, expatriate A had to rely on the support of a previous manager during the repatriation process when official assistance was found missing. Expatriate B highlighted the importance of his or her personal network in providing assistance in the process of settling down when returning home, but at the same time emphasized that personal networks have their limitations and official support is necessary for the adjustment process, especially within the organization: "I had a pretty good [personal] network [. . .], but then the problems

began." [. . .] and then everything collapsed; I did not know the right people anymore" (Expatriate B).

The human resource manager at Alpha alluded to the classic "out of sight and out of mind" phenomenon being observed among long-term expatriates: "Depending on how long an expatriate stays abroad, it can happen that the expatriate fades from memory and you forget them." To counter this, the long-term expatriates tried on their own initiative to maintain visibility in addition to any mandatory official contact they had with the home unit. This is aptly exemplified by this quote from expatriate B:

> I was coming back regularly for events for [my career development program], which I was part of in the past, so I tried to be there [in the home unit].

The lack of visibility in the home unit can have negative consequences for the expatriates, especially when there is limited communication just prior to the end of the international assignment, as then expatriates are unable to convey their experiences and inform the home unit about their demands (or expectations) to support the adjustment process when they return home.

Long-term expatriation: hurdle or facilitator for career advancement?
The expatriates on corporate agency international assignments faced job insecurity upon return. Both expatriates on corporate agency assignments had no suitable position upon return available for them, so they ended up on temporary projects. Expatriate A stated that "I had fairly low expectations about what would happen with me" in the home unit but was dejected at not being offered any permanent job, which he or she hoped for, implying that even the low level of expectations about job status was not met. Consequently, both had considered leaving the company and actively searched for job opportunities outside the company, but they ultimately stayed on as a suitable job offer was made to them (i.e. roughly six months after their return). Nonetheless, this time period of waiting for a proper position was frustrating for both expatriates: "This half year, until the position was found, was not easy" (Expatriate B).

The expatriates on corporate agency assignments did not consider career advancement as their main expectation from the international assignment, especially in the short term. Despite this, they were disappointed when they felt that the international assignment actually had negative consequences and, in fact, impeded their personal careers. The following quotation is a good example of this:

> Even though it [career advancement] wasn't my primary goal, it was all very disappointing. It was a disadvantage to my career. I think I could have used the three years in [the home unit] differently and would probably have gone much further career-wise. I am very convinced about that (Expatriate B).

Among the three long-term expatriates, only expatriate C was able to get a permanent job shortly after returning. Expatriate C was extremely satisfied (i.e. expectations of a job-related change upon return were exceeded) with the opportunity to advance his or her career based on the international experience and described it as "very exciting; it was the first time that I was leading a team. I wasn't a manager before [the international assignment]". Consequently, in terms of career development, the purpose of the international assignment for long-term expatriates seems to matter a great deal. Competence development assignments appear to be more likely to result in career advancement than corporate agency assignments.

Conclusion

This study makes three important contributions. First, we contribute to existing research by highlighting the differences in the repatriation process based on the purpose of the international assignment. We observe that learning-driven assignments are more beneficial to career advancement than demand-driven assignments. In addition, demand-driven expatriates have lower expectations for organizational support and job-related change upon return to their home country but still find the actual experiences to be below their relatively low level of expectations. Hence, second, in terms of the met expectations theory and the joint impact of duration and purpose of international assignment, we find that corporate agency assignees have greater problems with reintegration upon return to the home country as compared to competence development assignees. These assignees confront increased job insecurity, demand additional repatriation support and perceive the international assignment as a hindrance to their career growth. It seems that the combination of a demand-driven purpose and a long-term international assignment leads to unanticipated difficulties upon return.

Overall, we find that problem-solving and career enhancement assignees' expectations are likely to be met in terms of organizational support and career advancement. However, corporate agency assignees' expectations tend to be unmet in terms of organizational support and job status after their return, while competence development assignees' expectations appear to be unfulfilled only in relation to organizational support. The reason for this discrepancy is that demand-driven assignees are more involved in the host market and the home unit is less engaged with them, which makes repatriation more difficult. We formulate the following propositions based on these findings:

P3. Expatriates on corporate agency assignments will perceive that their actual experiences of organizational support and job availability do not meet their expectations.

P4. Expatriates on problem-solving assignments will perceive that their actual experiences of organizational support and job availability meet their expectations.

P5. Expectations on competence development assignments will perceive that the actual experiences of organizational support are not met, while expectations for job availability are met.

P6. Expectations for career enhancement assignments will be met if the actual experience of organizational support and job availability meets their expectations.

These propositions present a challenging balancing act for the expatriates: the deeper the integration (or stronger the ties) in the host unit, the more detached (or less visible) they become with respect to their home unit, especially for longer international assignments. Demand-driven international assignments are initiated to exercise control, promote knowledge transfer, or fix a problem in a host country. So, to successfully execute their tasks, a stronger integration in the host unit is necessary, as they have to work closely with employees in the local unit (Pucik, 1992). A deeper integration in the host unit comes at the cost of maintaining visibility in the home unit, as expatriates find it challenging to manage both of these social networks. Lower visibility in the home unit and stronger integration in the host unit help explain why demand-driven expatriates have lower levels of expectations of organizational support and job-related change as compared to learning-driven expatriates. In addition, limited visibility in the home unit leads to lower levels of awareness and preparation by the home unit to accommodate and support the repatriation process in

line with their demands and expectations, which then creates challenges or hurdles in the readjustment process (Andreason and Kinneer, 2005; Harvey, 1982).

On the other hand, the task requirements of learning-driven assignments do not require strong integration in the host unit and are thus able to maintain higher visibility in the home unit (Evans *et al.*, 2002). Learning-driven expatriates are in continuous contact with the home entity and can regularly communicate the specific skills and competencies that they learn during the international assignment (Scullion and Collings, 2006). Consequently, the learning-driven assignees feel that the home unit is sufficiently informed about their experiences during the international assignment and is well prepared to provide the necessary support to facilitate their return to the home unit (Gregersen and Black, 1996; Hurn, 1999; Lazarova and Caligiuri, 2001). Higher visibility for learning-driven assignees scales up their level of expectations for organizational support and job-related change upon return. The desire for job-related change upon return among career enhancement expatriates, who travel abroad for a brief period but have close ties to the home unit that raise their expectations for career advancement, is an excellent illustration of this.

Finally, our third contribution based on our findings is that there are insignificant readjustment issues with short-term assignments. Therefore, this study provides further support for the arguments that short-term assignments are relatively unproblematic, as discussed by most of the existing research, finding very limited support for recent claims that short-term international assignments can also create repatriation adjustment challenges, mainly in the form of having expectations similar to expatriates on long-term international assignments (Chiang *et al.*, 2018; Collings *et al.*, 2007; Starr and Currie, 2009). Furthermore, Starr (2009) found that short-term repatriates desire a career change when returning from an international assignment. We find that this is partially true, as this desire for a career change is only present in learning-driven short-term assignees but not among demand-driven short-term assignees.

The findings of our study have important practical implications. The main insight is that companies should tailor their repatriation readjustment process for the individual demands of repatriates, which are based on both the duration and purpose of the international assignment. Companies should not adopt a "one size fits all" policy or only consider the duration of international assignments, which is normally done, but also take into account the assignment purpose, especially giving special attention to expatriates on demand-driven assignments. Additionally, companies need to keep in mind that demand-driven assignments have to integrate within the host unit to effectively perform their assigned tasks and are unable to maintain visibility in the home unit as it is possible for learning-driven expatriates. Therefore, the concerned human resource departments need to be proactive and create opportunities for them to remain in contact with the home unit and share their demands and experiences, which are necessary to adequately prepare for their return to the home unit. This is essential because demand-driven expatriates are more likely to leave the company if they experience high levels of job insecurity and the organization's support falls short of their expectations.

We propose future research to further investigate our central contribution that the purpose of expatriation plays a central role in shaping the repatriation process. Given our use of a multiple case study approach within a single company, it raises the question of whether the results would be applicable to companies in other industries. Future research can focus on doing similar studies in other contexts or collecting relevant quantitative data to obtain more empirically generalizable findings. A limitation of this research is that the findings might be influenced by specific personality traits of expatriates, as previous studies argued. For example, Selmer (2001) suggested that age and being married have a positive

impact on the work adjustment of expatriates. Thus, the ambition and career expectations of the individual employees may help explain the findings on career enhancement and the desire for job-related change upon return. Therefore, research in this direction is recommended. Furthermore, research on the desire for job-related change upon completion of short-term assignments is advised. Starr (2009) initially discovered this phenomenon, and our study partially supports these findings. We only observed this phenomenon in learning-driven assignees; more research could increase our understanding of this phenomenon and extend the current literature on repatriation from short-term assignments.

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Corresponding author
Jiyoung Shin can be contacted at: j.shin@rug.nl