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A Study of the Effects of Repatriate Management on Knowledge Dissemination and Knowledge Sharing Behavior in International Businesses

Yi-Chou WANG¹, Jau-Shyong WANG², Hao-Te LU³

Abstract

Under the globalization era, enterprises are facing dynamic business environments and developing towards global enterprises. In order to pursue global integration and corporate sustainable management, a lot of multinational corporations regard expatriation as a tool to train managers' leadership, expecting to develop and cultivate such managers' knowledge of international economic environment and transnational management through expatriation. Good repatriate management presents positive effects on corporate knowledge sharing, but it is easily ignored. Consequently, this study intends to discuss the effect of repatriate management on knowledge dissemination and knowledge sharing behavior in international businesses. With convenience sampling, total 380 copies of questionnaire are distributed to the expatriates, who have completed overseas expatriation and returned the country, aiming at Chinese enterprises ranked in global 500 enterprises announced by the confidential research of Financial Times with higher degree of internationalization. Total 262 valid copies are retrieved, with the retrieval rate 69%. The research results conclude that 1. repatriate management presents positive relations with knowledge dissemination, 2. knowledge dissemination shows positive relations with knowledge sharing behavior, and 3. repatriate management reveals positive relations with knowledge sharing behavior. Based on the analysis results, suggestions are eventually proposed in this study, expecting to assist domestic international businesses in the repatriate management.

Keywords: international businesses, repatriate management, knowledge dissemination, knowledge sharing behavior.

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Introduction

The enhancement of global trade in past years has domestic enterprises rapidly develop towards internationalization. After joining in WTO, the competition of low-price products from other countries and the incentives of adequate labor and rich resources in Southeast Asia and Mainland China accelerate domestic enterprises establishing branches overseas and looking for new opportunities. Expatriation has therefore become common, and expatriates could learn and grasp international business administration information and knowledge because of the contact with international markets. For an organization, such expatriates would become irreplaceable learning role after the repatriation, as repatriates could enhance the knowledge exchange between the parent company and the subsidiaries. A lot of companies therefore regard repatriates as the primary human capital investment (Aydogdu & Asikgil, 2011). Organizations would expect the repatriates bringing back knowledge and technology learned internationally to enhance the organizational effectiveness. However, how do repatriates successfully transfer and share such knowledge? Repatriation is easily ignored in the issue of global tasks, because most enterprises regard the return of expatriates as the end of expatriation that the successive human resource planning is rarely arranged or repatriates are regarded as general employees. Nonetheless, research revealed the positive effect of good repatriate management, such as the planning and development of repatriation, the preparation and training before repatriation, and the incentive compensation, work assignment, and evaluation of repatriation, on knowledge sharing. Unfortunately, repatriate management is easily ignored by enterprises. In fact, it costs a lot to cultivate, maintain, and expatriate a talent with international experiences. When an enterprise could well manage repatriates' whole-hearted feedback of the overseas knowledge, technology, and experiences to the organization, the enterprise would present better international viewpoint and international management capability. As a result, it becomes critical to correctly and completely transfer a repatriate's learned knowledge to the organization or the parent company. However, there has not been research applying knowledge sharing to repatriates. This study therefore attempts to discuss the effect of repatriate management on knowledge dissemination and knowledge sharing behavior in international businesses.

Literature and Hypothesis

Repatriate management

Froese & Peltokorpi (2013) regarded repatriation as the transition period after expatriates completing the expatriation tasks and returning to the parent company from overseas subsidiaries. Bouckenoghe, De Clercq, & Deprez (2014) defined repatriation as the program of expatriates returning the parent company after completing overseas tasks. Salleh, Hashim, & Abdullah (2013) pointed out repatriation as the end and expatriation as the beginning of overseas expatriation that repatriation and expatriation were not two separated stages. Glaso *et al.* (2011) indicated that it was necessary to study the engagement of enterprises and expatriates in the repatriation preparation in order to understand repatriate management. Story *et al.* (2014) mentioned that repatriates' turnover intention showing that the company would lose their professional knowledge and important business opportunities and relationship, for which the cost could hardly be calculated (Berlanga, Figuera, & Perez-Escoda, 2016). For this reason, repatriate management could not be ignored in order to successfully retain repatriates. Aydogdu & Asikgil (2011) proposed three stages for overseas expatriates executing international tasks, including recruitment and training of overseas expatriates, overseas expatriation, and repatriation of overseas expatriates. In order to have good adaptation and performance of repatriates, a company should treat the repatriates as they were expatriated by offering proper support and solving possible problems to reduce the trouble after the repatriation (Conner, 2015).

Referring to Pitesa & Thau (2012), Preparation and Training is applied in this study to train repatriates of skills required for domestic posts so as to rapidly get into the job, Support and Assistance of the parent company could help expatriates solve repatriation problems and offer relevant repatriation information for repatriates understanding the conditions of the parent company, and a proper Reward System is provided for repatriates (Chiang and Shyu, 2016). The three dimensions are used for measuring repatriate management in this study.

Knowledge dissemination

Cave (2014) indicated that different researchers would have distinct terms to explain the meaning and idea of knowledge dissemination, e.g. knowledge transfer, knowledge sharing, and information sharing. Gupta (2013) pointed out the generation of "knowledge gap" when an organization perceived the decreasing organizational competitiveness or the lack of certain knowledge; in this case, it was necessary to transfer new knowledge. Bailey and Dragoni (2013) proposed the behaviors of transfer and absorption in knowledge sharing. Transfer referred to knowledge suppliers delivering knowledge to knowledge acceptors, and

absorption referred to knowledge acceptors absorbing and digesting knowledge that knowledge sharing, without knowledge absorption, would not be successful. Efficient knowledge sharing required the common effort between both parties, meaning that efficient knowledge sharing relied not only on the absorption ability of knowledge acceptors, but a lot part on the attitudes and behavior of knowledge suppliers, especially when sharing knowledge across specific fields (Lovvorn & Chen, 2011). Cox, Khan, & Armani (2013) proposed five stages of acquisition, communication, application, acceptance, and assimilation for knowledge transfer and emphasized the dynamic occurrence of knowledge transfer, as the goal was achieved by constantly dynamic learning behavior. Knowledge sharing across different fields, such as across organizations, across systems, and across societies, presents the emergence of challenge, as the difficulty of knowledge transfer would be enhanced when knowledge sharing across distinct knowledge fields and both ends of knowledge transfer not showing similar, same, or overlapped knowledge (Santosh & Muthiah, 2012).

Referring to Ramalu *et al.* (2012), knowledge dissemination is divided into the dimensions of dissemination capability and dissemination intention. The capability explained the factors in knowledge disseminators not being able to transfer the knowledge possibly because they were lack of abilities, knowledge transfer skills, and inadequate language abilities (Lin & Wu, 2016). The intention was the state of psychological and behavioral consistence, i.e. behaving same ideas when presenting certain psychological intention. In this case, when an organizational member showed knowledge dissemination intention and others asked him/her some questions, he/she would teach them without retention and even actively told others what he/she knew with various types. It was the state of psychological and behavioral consistence.

Knowledge sharing behavior

Holtz & Harold (2013) divided knowledge into knowledge gift and knowledge collection. Cave, Chung, & Choi (2013) mentioned that knowledge management should focus on knowledge sharing, as successful knowledge sharing could enhance the sharing of intellectual capital and important resources. Knowledge sharing could be a process, activity, or behavior. Rau *et al.* (2013) regarded knowledge sharing behavior as individuals and groups transferring or spreading knowledge to others. Beasley & Jason (2015) pointed out knowledge sharing as the delivery of organizational members acquiring knowledge from others. Primary knowledge sharing, exceeding traditional HR practice, covered culture, program adjustment, and perceived support. Wright *et al.* used the complete term of “personnel management practice” to explain an organization accelerating and encouraging knowledge sharing with relevant practice (Sreeleakha & Mohan Raj, 2014). In the research on knowledge sharing from the aspect of transaction cost,

Evans (2012), from individual points of view, measured the strength of knowledge sharing intention presented by personal behavior and judged the presentation of knowledge sharing behavior from others' understanding of personal knowledge, technology, or experiences. As a consequence, organizational members with higher sharing intention would present the knowledge sharing behavior and receive distinct perception from the colleagues. Stoverink (2013) argued the distinct knowledge sharing motivation between knowledge possessors and demanders. Knowledge demanders would work hard to absorb knowledge in order to solve work problems, enhance operation autonomy, and satisfy personal achievement. Knowledge possessors, on the other hand, expected to be affirmed the working abilities or acquire better promotion by knowledge sharing, and others expected to acquire reciprocal rewards by knowledge sharing. Referring to McEvoy & Buller (2013), knowledge sharing behavior is defined in this study as the behavior of knowledge possessors (repatriates) specifically delivering personal work experiences, technology, and opinions to others (employees in the parent company).

Relationship between repatriate management and knowledge dissemination

Thomas & D'Netto (2011) mentioned dissemination behavior from the viewpoint of social psychology that personnel management practice should be effective and could accelerate and encourage knowledge dissemination, contained work design, employees, training and development, performance evaluation, salary, culture, and technology, could accelerate and encourage the psychological factor in knowledge sharing, and could train employees through management practice, e.g. cross-training or team-based training (Bouckenooghe, De Clercq, & Deprez, 2014), to present sufficient capability for knowledge sharing. Accordingly, an enterprise should have favorable human resource management practice to facilitate employee knowledge transfer. Similarly, applying such an idea to repatriate management, an enterprise should have favorable repatriate management practice to help repatriates. When the repatriates perceive the good repatriation system and training of the company, they would disseminate the experiences and knowledge learned in the expatriation. Besides, good repatriate management practice could have repatriates present better trust in the company and enhance the intention to disseminate the experiences and knowledge learned in the expatriation (Conner, 2015). As a result, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study.

Hypothesis 1: Repatriate management presents positive relations with knowledge dissemination.

Relationship between knowledge dissemination and knowledge sharing

In the research on knowledge sharing of Internet communities, Ramalu *et al.* (2012) found out the effects of individuals, groups, and organizations on knowledge dissemination. Factors in knowledge sharing behavior included knowledge sharing intention and personal restriction, such as professional ability, computer ability, and time pressure, in which knowledge dissemination appeared the most critical effect. Bailey and Dragoni (2013) and Cave (2014) also proposed that individuals might resist knowledge sharing as knowledge disseminators did not have the ability of knowledge transfer, rather than not being willing to disseminate knowledge. Cox, Khan, & Armani (2013) proposed the factors of employee motivation and behavior in the knowledge sharing in successful knowledge dissemination in international companies. The above results revealed the higher knowledge dissemination, the higher knowledge sharing behavior. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study.

Hypothesis 2: Knowledge dissemination shows positive relations with knowledge sharing.

Relationship between repatriate management and knowledge sharing

Wang (2014) mentioned that a company, when expecting certain degree of identity and engagement of the repatriates, had to offer proper support for the repatriates as in expatriation and solve possible problems to reduce the trouble and concentrate on the job performance after the repatriation. Knowledge sharing is not necessarily equal to organizational citizenship behavior, but presents voluntary characteristics. Trust is the first step of interpersonal interaction as well as the key in knowledge sharing. In this case, repatriates or organizational members, when trusting the environment, would engage more in knowledge sharing behavior good for the organization (Cave, Chung, & Choi, 2013). Repatriate management could create a reliable social situation for people believing that they would acquire better rewards for current knowledge sharing behavior (Stoverink, 2013) as well as enhance employee intention to share important information with others (Sreeleakha & Mohan Raj, 2014). Good repatriate management could have the communication between expatriates and employees in the company become smoother to further create the working atmosphere good for exchanging knowledge and technology and allow expatriates being more willing to propose opinions and exchange with others (Mc Evoy & Buller, 2013). As a result, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study.

Hypothesis 3: Repatriate management reveals positive relations with knowledge sharing behavior.

Methodology

Research subject and sampling data

The repatriates of international businesses are researched in this study. With convenience sampling, aiming at Chinese enterprises ranked in global 500 enterprises announced by the confidential research of Financial Times, with higher degree of internationalization are requested for repatriates and then sent the questionnaire for the survey. Total 380 copies of questionnaire are distributed, and 262 valid copies are retrieved, with the retrieval rate 69%. The collected data are analyzed with SPSS, and Factor Analysis, Reliability Analysis, Regression Analysis, and Structural Equation Modeling are applied to test the hypotheses.

Analysis method

Regression Analysis is applied to understand the relationship between repatriate management and knowledge dissemination; and, Structural Equation Modeling is further utilized for analyzing the effect of knowledge dissemination on knowledge sharing behavior of repatriates.

Findings

Reliability and validity analysis

In this study, repatriate management is extracted, with Factor Analysis, three factors of Preparation and Training (eigenvalue=2.134, $\alpha=0.85$), Support and Assistance (eigenvalue=1.736, $\alpha=0.82$), and Reward System (eigenvalue=1.384, $\alpha=0.87$). The accumulative covariance explained achieves 81.392%.

Knowledge dissemination is extracted, with Factor Analysis, two factors of Dissemination Capability (eigenvalue=2.371, $\alpha=0.83$) and Dissemination Intention (eigenvalue=2.016, $\alpha=0.80$). The accumulative covariance explained reaches 83.662%.

With Factor Analysis, knowledge sharing behavior (eigenvalue=3.166, $\alpha=0.88$) reveals the accumulative covariance explained 86.951%.

Correlation analysis of repatriate management and knowledge dissemination

To test H1, the analysis results, *Table 1*, reveal significant effects of preparation and training ($t=2.413^{**}$), support and assistance ($t=1.837^*$), and reward system ($t=1.753^*$) on dissemination capability and remarkable effects of preparation and training ($t=1.619^*$), support and assistance ($t=1.912^*$), and reward system ($t=2.234^{**}$) on dissemination intention. H1 therefore is supported.

Table 1. Analysis of repatriate management and knowledge dissemination

| Dependent variable→ Independent variable↓ | Knowledge dissemination | | | |
|--|--------------------------|---------|-------------------------|---------|
| | Dissemination capability | | Dissemination intention | |
| Repatriate management | Beta | t | Beta | t |
| Preparation and training | 0.231 | 2.413** | 0.153 | 1.619* |
| Support and assistance | 0.175 | 1.837* | 0.181 | 1.912* |
| Reward system | 0.163 | 1.753* | 0.217 | 2.234** |
| F | 24.528 | | 37.462 | |
| Significance | 0.000*** | | 0.000*** | |
| R2 | 0.256 | | 0.334 | |
| Adjusted R2 | 0.022 | | 0.030 | |

Note: * stands for $p<0.05$, ** for $p<0.01$, *** for $p<0.001$.

Data source: Self-organized in this study

Correlation analysis of repatriate management, knowledge sharing behavior, and knowledge dissemination

(1) Correlation analysis of repatriate management and knowledge sharing behavior

To test H3, the analysis results, *Table 2*, present notable effects of preparation and training ($t=1.548^*$), support and assistance ($t=1.662^*$), and reward system ($t=2.073^{**}$) on knowledge sharing behavior that H3 is supported.

(2) Correlation analysis of knowledge dissemination and knowledge sharing behavior

To test H2, the analysis results, *Table 2*, reveal significant effects of dissemination capability ($t=1.839^*$) and dissemination intention ($t=2.372^{**}$) on knowledge sharing behavior that H2 is supported.

Table 2. Analysis of repatriate management, knowledge dissemination and knowledge sharing behavior

| Dependent variable → | Knowledge sharing behavior | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|---------|----------|---------|
| | Independent variable ↓ | | | |
| Repatriate management | Beta | t | Beta | t |
| Preparation and training | 0.143 | 1.548* | | |
| Support and assistance | 0.152 | 1.662* | | |
| Reward system | 0.195 | 2.073** | | |
| Knowledge dissemination | | | | |
| Dissemination capability | | | 0.173 | 1.839* |
| Dissemination intention | | | 0.228 | 2.372** |
| F | 19.577 | | 26.394 | |
| Significance | 0.000*** | | 0.000*** | |
| R2 | 0.188 | | 0.243 | |
| Adjusted R2 | 0.016 | | 0.022 | |

Note: * stands for $p<0.05$, ** for $p<0.01$, *** for $p<0.001$.

Data source: Self-organized in this study

LISREL evaluation indicator

The research data are organized in *Table 3*. The preliminary goodness-of-fit, internal goodness-of-fit, and overall model fit are explained as below.

From *Table 3*, the factors of repatriate management (preparation and training, support and assistance, reward system) appear remarkable explanation on repatriate management ($t>1.96$, $p<0.05$); the factors of knowledge dissemination (dissemination capability, dissemination intention) present notable explanation on knowledge dissemination ($t>1.96$, $p<0.05$); and, the explanation of knowledge sharing behavior achieves the significance ($t>1.96$, $p<0.05$). Apparently, the research model shows favorable preliminary goodness-of-fit.

In terms of internal goodness-of-fit, repatriate management appears positively significant correlations with knowledge dissemination (0.813, $p<0.01$), knowledge dissemination presents positively remarkable correlations with knowledge sharing

behavior (0.822, $p < 0.01$), and repatriate management reveals positively notable correlations with knowledge sharing behavior (0.857, $p < 0.01$) that H1, H2, and H3 are supported.

In regard to overall model fit, χ^2/Df shows 1.715, lower than the standard 3, and RMR appears 0.007, revealing the proper standard of χ^2/DF and RMR. Furthermore, the chi-square value is sensitive to sample size that it is not suitable for directly judging the fit. However, GFI=0.966 and AGFI=0.924 are higher than the standard 0.9 (the closer GFI and AGFI to 1, the better model fit) that this model presents better goodness-of-fit.

Table 3. Overall linear structure model analysis

| Evaluation item | Parameter/evaluation standard | | Result | t |
|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------|--------|---------|
| Preliminary goodness-of-fit | Repatriate management | Preparation and training | 0.733 | 6.99** |
| | | Support and assistance | 0.752 | 8.91** |
| | | Reward system | 0.788 | 10.68** |
| | Knowledge dissemination | Dissemination capability | 0.811 | 13.44** |
| | | Dissemination intention | 0.802 | 11.27** |
| | Knowledge sharing behavior | | 0.865 | 18.45** |
| Internal goodness-of-fit | Repatriate management → knowledge dissemination | | 0.813 | 21.46** |
| | Knowledge dissemination → knowledge sharing behavior | | 0.822 | 25.62** |
| | Repatriate management → knowledge sharing behavior | | 0.857 | 31.44** |
| Overall model fit | X2/Df | | 1.715 | |
| | GFI | | 0.966 | |
| | AGFI | | 0.924 | |
| | RMR | | 0.007 | |

Note: * stands for $p < 0.05$, ** for $p < 0.01$, *** for $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Hypothesis test

| Research hypothesis | Correlation | Empirical result | P | Result |
|---------------------|-------------|------------------|--------|-----------|
| H 1 | + | 0.813 | P<0.01 | Supported |
| H 2 | + | 0.822 | P<0.01 | Supported |
| H 3 | + | 0.857 | P<0.01 | Supported |

Conclusion

The research results reveal the positive effect of repatriate management on knowledge dissemination, as repatriate management could create the climate suitable for knowledge dissemination to further influence the knowledge dissemination of repatriates. To successfully retain repatriates in international businesses, repatriate management cannot be ignored; otherwise, the company would lose the professional knowledge, important business opportunities and relationship of repatriates, which are important costs for international businesses. Knowledge dissemination presents notably positive relations with knowledge sharing behavior. It is further analyzed that repatriates with higher knowledge dissemination intention would show more knowledge sharing behavior. It is also discovered that some repatriates might be able to disseminate knowledge, but do not have the knowledge dissemination intention. For this reason, knowledge dissemination capability does not reveal high relations with knowledge sharing behavior. It is realized that organizational knowledge dissemination in international businesses requires the employee intention, and international businesses should pay attention to appealing employees' motivation and incentives of intention. In the internationalization era, repatriates are the important asset of international businesses, which need to establish repatriate management measures, such as knowledge dissemination mechanisms, incentives, or proper systems conforming to repatriate requirements, to induce the knowledge dissemination intention and capability so as to achieve the knowledge sharing behavior. As a result, the working atmosphere suitable for employees in international businesses should present mutual trust among employees, team cooperation, and good communication of ideas and value. An international business with such working environment could have the employees generate favorable interaction and emotional exchange. Employees getting well along with each other in international businesses could cohere with the centripetal force.

Recommendations

Aiming at above research results, the following suggestions are proposed in this study.

1. To reinforce the design of future planning: The content and management of repatriation measures in international businesses would change with the trend and environment. The future planning of repatriates is the long-term human resource management, which combines with employees' career planning, that it is not easily affected by the trend. In addition to short-term compensation and job arrangement to retain repatriates, international businesses should consider long-term planning and development for repatriates engaging in the job.
2. Application of recruitment tool: Properly applying recruitment tools to select expatriates with the sharing feature allows international businesses expecting the better knowledge sharing behavior. In this case, recruitment tools play a critical role in finding out candidates with the sharing feature. Personality tests and interviews could be utilized for the selection.
3. To provide relevant information and training: International businesses should thoroughly provide expatriates with information related to domestic situations and the parent company so as not to disconnect to domestic conditions. Meanwhile, sufficient time for expatriates preparing for the repatriation is necessary. A buffer period after the repatriation should be offered in order to adjust to various changes. Relevant training of the knowledge and skills required for the job after the repatriation should also be provided, and consultation and enquiry about work and life should be lasted for a year after the repatriation.

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