Bringing knowledge back home

A multiple case study on how Swedish MNCs handle repatriation and knowledge transfer

Authors: Karl Emil Svensson
         Amalia Vinogradova
         Sakib Zaman

Supervisor: Lena Zander

Date: 2012-05-22
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how Swedish-based MNCs handle their repatriation process with a focus on knowledge transfer upon return. Moreover, the study reviewed whether a global mindset is present or not in the companies and if it is associated with how repatriates’ knowledge is utilized. The study was conducted through interviews with seven repatriates and six HR managers in six different MNCs. The findings show a lack of awareness about what the repatriates have learnt during their assignments, and that there are no routines in place for capturing the knowledge upon return. Also, it identifies a gap between the companies’ and the repatriates’ views about the goals of the assignment and the value of the overall international experience. Finally, the study suggests various improvements for companies on how to better utilize their resources and enhance their global mindset in order to create a sustainable competitive advantage.

Keywords: Repatriation, knowledge transfer, global mindset, MNC, international assignment.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Repatriation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.1</td>
<td>Definition and Purpose</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.2</td>
<td>Career and Satisfaction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.3</td>
<td>Suggestions from Literature</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Knowledge Transfer</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1</td>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2</td>
<td>Different Types of Knowledge</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3</td>
<td>Barriers for Knowledge Transfer</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Global Mindset</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1</td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2</td>
<td>Developing a Global Mindset</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Connecting Literature to our Research Question</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Method</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Selecting Samples</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Collecting Data</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Empirical Findings</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Repatriation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1</td>
<td>Purpose of International Assignments and Selection of Expatriates</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.2</td>
<td>Support during Expatriation Process and Repatriation Routines</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.3</td>
<td>Career and Repatriate Turnover</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1</td>
<td>Goals and Valuation of Knowledge</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2</td>
<td>Routines for Capturing Knowledge</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Global Mindset</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1</td>
<td>The View on Global Mindset</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Improvement Suggestions from Interviewees</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1</td>
<td>Short Term Assignments</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Repatriation</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.1</td>
<td>Purpose of International Assignments</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.2</td>
<td>Support during Expatriation Process and Repatriation Routines</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.3</td>
<td>Career and Repatriate Turnover</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.4</td>
<td>Improvement Suggestions from Respondents</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1</td>
<td>Goals and Valuation of Knowledge</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2</td>
<td>Routines for Capturing Knowledge</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Global Mindset</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1</td>
<td>The View on Global Mindset</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Practical Implications and Suggestions</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>References</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Introduction

Companies invest lots of money in training and developing the skills and knowledge of their employees. In the last decades it has become increasingly popular for Multinational Corporations (MNCs) to send managers and experts on overseas assignments. The objective is often to improve the international experience and expertise of the employee and to prepare him or her for future challenges of the global environment, in which MNCs find themselves.

Although substantial amounts of money are spent on expatriate assignments, it can be questioned whether MNCs get return on their investment (Sánchez Vidal, Sanz Valle & Barba Aragón, 2008). Literature shows us that repatriation, the re-entry back into one’s home country after finishing an overseas assignment, has received little attention in spite of the fact that the problems facing individuals and organizations upon return often exceed those experienced during the assignment (Kendall, 1981; Tung, 1988; Hyder & Lövblad, 2007; Collings, Doherty, Luethy & Osborn, 2011).

The problems regarding repatriation have been addressed for about 30 years, yet the same type of issues seems to be valid today. Thus, we find it highly interesting and important to investigate how MNCs can adjust their organizational practices to the repatriates’ expectations in order to better utilize the knowledge acquired by employees during their international assignments. The challenges include lack of a career plan for the individual, which may ultimately lead to repatriates leaving the company (Gomez-Mejía & Balkin, 1987), as well as problems with capturing the knowledge of the repatriate. However, these issues can be prevented by providing career opportunities that fit the individual’s career goals (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). This particular area of study has been somewhat neglected in the literature (Tung, 1988, 1998; Ashamalla, 1998).

Additionally, transferring knowledge implies that the organization is capable of recreating and maintaining a complex set of routines in a new setting (Szulanski, 2000). For MNCs to be able to succeed internationally they need people with a global mindset, who can observe and interpret the dynamic world and achieve organizational objectives across cultures (Gupta & Govindarajan,
2002; Lovvorn & Chen, 2011). These individuals are perceived to have the ability to transfer knowledge from one part of the organization to other subsidiaries worldwide and are an important source in order to build a sustainable competitive advantage (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1987).

The purpose of this study is to examine and scrutinize the repatriation practices of Swedish based MNCs, with a special focus on knowledge transfer. Additionally, since it is argued that individuals with a global mindset are a necessity in the transfer of knowledge (Argote & Ingram, 2000), we will investigate if a global mindset is present in these companies, and if that affects how the repatriates’ knowledge is utilized. This leads to the following research questions:

- How do Swedish MNCs handle the repatriation process and knowledge transfer upon return?
- Is there a presence of global mindset in these MNCs and if so, is it associated with the above?

We hope that this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges facing Swedish MNCs regarding these issues. We believe that the perspective of global mindset in combination with knowledge transfer upon repatriation is interesting for researchers, since it provides a new angle of looking upon this issue. Moreover, we see a value in looking at it from a Swedish perspective, since relatively few studies have been conducted on Swedish MNCs.

Additionally, considering the extensive resources in terms of time and money that are invested in expatriate assignments, MNCs should find it relevant and valuable to learn more about this topic. Furthermore, the follow-up process of repatriation deserves attention to make sure that the goals of the assignment, both those of the organization and those of the individual, are achieved and that the international knowledge gained is being utilized by the MNC.
2. Literature Review

This section introduces the three main theoretical areas of our study: Repatriation, Knowledge Transfer and Global Mindset, which are all essential for companies to be aware of in order to make the most of international assignments. These three areas are strongly interrelated, in the sense that globally minded individuals are believed to be a necessary resource for transferring knowledge across borders.

2.1 Repatriation

2.1.1 Definition and Purpose

An expatriate is an employee that is on an assignment in a foreign country. Most expatriates only stay in the foreign country for a certain period of time and eventually plan to return to their home country (WebFinance, 2012). Edström & Galbraith (1977) argue that companies have three general motives for initiating international transfers of managers: (1) to fill positions where there are no qualified local nationals, (2) to develop the international experience and expertise of the expatriate in order to be better prepared for future tasks, and (3) to coordinate and control its foreign operations. Whereas, from an individual’s perspective, the main reason for pursuing an international career is the prospects of advancement (Tung 1998; Suutari & Brewster 2003).

According to Evans, Pucik & Barsoux (2002) the expatriation process can be divided into four periods; (1) Recruitment and selection of candidates, (2) training and development, (3) the assignment period, and lastly (4) repatriation. While the selection and training processes have received attention among researchers, the career path of the individual upon return has often been neglected (Tung, 1988, 1998; Ashamalla, 1998).

Repatriation is seen as the most difficult phase in the entire process for both the organization and the individual. Often, the challenges of repatriation are not carefully considered since the perceived idea is that the employee is returning back “home”, and should thus face less problems than when going “abroad”. Companies are often unaware of the difficulties concerning repatriation, while the repatriates themselves are not expecting adjustment problems and are therefore not prepared for the challenges awaiting them (Sánchez Vidal et al. 2008, Collings et al. 2011). Finally, it is worth mentioning that international assignments can be a double-edged
sword since expatriates are often left to themselves while abroad and risk falling victim for the “out-of-sight, out-of-mind “syndrome (Stahl, Chua, Caliguri, Cerdin & Taniguchi, 2009).

2.1.2 Career and Satisfaction
Studies have shown that returning expatriates often find it difficult to readjust to life in the home country and are sometimes exposed to a reverse culture shock. The factors influencing the repatriate adjustment include loss of visibility in the organization, changes in the workplace, devaluation of the gained experience, loss of status and pay, the re-establishing of social networks and family adjustment including the effect that the expatriate assignment may have had on the partner’s career (Dowling, Festing & Engle, 2008).

Many repatriates will find that career expectations do not match with the jobs they are offered upon return, and that they are unable to use the skills and experience that they have acquired (Kendall, 1981; Tung, 1988; Black, 1992; ). Additionally, there seems to be a complete lack of debriefing of the assignment (Welch, 1994). Instead, the repatriation often leaves returning employees with a sense that their careers stagnate; for instance they may get less responsibility and status in their new role, the career possibilities are restricted and they have a feeling that their colleagues who have stayed at home have climbed the corporate ladder during their absence. This has led to high-potential employees refusing expatriate assignments since they are anxious that it will have a negative effect on their career development (Tung, 1988).

The overall satisfaction of the repatriate is argued to indicate the success of re-entry (Morgan, Nie & Young, 2004). Such success is directly influenced by the organizational and HR practices in the company; how the professional career of the worker is managed, the clarity in the company’s repatriation practices, and the degree of accuracy of the work expectations that employees generate before they are repatriated (Sánchez Vidal et al. 2008; Ashamalla, 1998).

A survey among American expatriate managers showed that only 35 % expressed satisfaction with their repatriation process (Gomez-Mejía & Balkin, 1987). Other research has shown that as many as 20-25 % of managers leave their company within a year after return (Stahl et al. 2009). Companies invest time and money into their expatriates, which makes it very important to retain them within the company, not only in order to reduce costs but also to increase the company’s competitiveness (Sánchez Vidal et al. 2008). Also, the handling of the repatriate upon return has
an influence on future expatriate assignments, where the treatment will either motivate or de-motivate others to follow suit and pursue international assignments of their own (Welch, 1994).

Another important issue regarding international assignments is whether the employees’ career objectives are consistent with the organizational goals. While organizations expect commitment, loyalty and performance from their employees, they are often unaware of what the employees want for themselves. The career of the individual has traditionally been looked upon as his or her own business, but since a career implies a two-way relationship, employees need to know what they will get in return for their sacrifice to the organization (Herriot, 1992).

International human resource management (IHRM) is about the worldwide management of human resources. Its purpose is to enable MNCs to be successful globally (Schuler, Budhwar & Florkowski, 2002). A recent focus of IHRM is talent management, which is about identifying, attracting, retaining, developing and utilizing employees in order to create; (1) sustainable competitive advantage through employee competence, (2) higher levels of focused innovation, (3) improved staff engagement and commitment, (4) lower loss rates of knowledge and experience, and (5) lower external resourcing costs (Sparrow, Brewster & Harris, 2004).

2.1.3 Suggestions from Literature

Shen & Hall (2009) suggest that organizations need to enhance the person-organization fit to increase repatriates’ desire to stay with the company. This is done through a greater job embeddedness, meaning that the stronger ties the employees have to their job, the organization and the people they work with, the bigger is the chance that they will remain in that job. The degree of job embeddedness has four dimensions; (1) the perceived cost of leaving the company, (2) the perceived link with the home organization and home community, (3) perceived individual-organizational fit as well as individual-environmental fit, and (4) perceived job-ability fit.

While several studies have found that a high degree of job embeddedness has positive implications for organizations, critiques of the concept point out that it may have negative effects on the individual’s career opportunities, since it may limit his or her opportunity to network with a diverse set of people outside one’s own firm or industry and make it harder to acquire new skills that are not firm-specific (Ng & Feldman, 2010). This argument addresses one of the key
challenges for MNCs, namely finding a way to close the gap between the needs of the organization and the ambitions of the individuals.

Suggestions of how companies can improve their practices in order to better comply with repatriates’ career concerns include; start with debriefing and reorientation programs that help to become reacquainted with the home office and the social environment during the early phase of the re-entry process, make sure that repatriates receive challenging tasks which allow them to utilize their newly acquired skills, agree in advance which position the employee will return to, appoint a mentor at the home office to look after the expatriate and his or her interests while he or she is abroad, link overseas assignments to long-term career plans, and give realistic job previews and retain the expatriate in the home country’s HR planning system (Kendall, 1981; Feldman & Thomas, 1992; Allen & Alvarez, 1998; Ashamalla, 1998).

When it comes to obtaining a higher level of job embeddedness, and in order to increase retention, organizations can adopt the following: (1) shorten the length of the overseas assignments to make the repatriation adjustment easier, (2) strengthen the link between the home and host organization, through developmental support throughout the expatriation and repatriation processes, (3) design a reassessment and career planning process to increase the perceived individual-organizational fit, and (4) make sure that the HR representatives who are in charge of expatriation have international experience themselves (Shen & Hall, 2009).

It has been suggested that the view upon repatriation needs to be revised; instead of seeing repatriation as the final stage of the expatriation assignment, it should be seen as the middle of the process. Thereby, it will be clear that returning back to the headquarters and one’s home country is an integrated part of a process that needs to continue even after the assignment has come to an end (Doherty, Brewster, Suutari & Dickmann, 2008). Thus, the process should not end with repatriation but go on and include career planning as well as learning and knowledge utilization when the expatriate returns.
2.2 Knowledge Transfer

2.2.1 Overview
Repatriation of expatriates offers the possibility for knowledge flows in a reverse direction, from local subsidiary to headquarters. However, the knowledge gained by expatriates abroad is by no means automatically transferred to the home organization upon return (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). This is consistent with Antal’s (2001) study which concludes that there is gap between what is learnt by the individual during an overseas assignment, and what is actually utilized by the organization. So what types of barriers exist and how should organizations become more efficient in utilizing the knowledge gained by the returning repatriates?

2.2.2 Different Types of Knowledge
To begin with, one has to recognize what type of knowledge that has been gained and if it is of actual use for the home organization. One must also address the fact that knowledge can be of varying forms, which leads to a diversity of problems during transfer. Lastly, knowledge transfer is an interplay between a sender and his or her receiving audience, which further increases the complexity of the transfer (Antal, 2001).

According to Antal (2001), there are five types of knowledge that expatriates can gain during their overseas assignments. These are categorized as knowledge about; (1) “what” (e.g. local consumer preferences), (2) “why” (e.g. the influence of cultural differences), (3) “how” (e.g. differing management practices), (4) “when” (e.g. knowledge about timing), and lastly (5) “who” (e.g. network of relationships that are created during the assignment). Another similar categorization is laid out by Oddou (2002), who suggests that expatriate knowledge contains; (1) cognitive knowledge (broader perspective), (2) relational (social networks), (3) attitudinal (tolerance for cultural differences), and (4) behavioral (intercultural and management skills).

These two somewhat differing categorizations portray the difficulties of assessing what value such knowledge might have in the home organization, as they are more or less tied to a specific context. In a similar line, Oddou, Osland & Blakeney (2009) argue that differentiating between context specific and general knowledge is the first crucial step in putting value on the knowledge gained abroad. In that respect, higher specificity knowledge would have less applicability and thus less value.
Lazarova & Tarique (2005) also argue that in addition to the above outlined specificity of knowledge, the tacitness and explicitness also play an integral part in valuing knowledge from the organization’s perspective. Tacit knowledge is argued to be of higher value for an organization due to it being hard to imitate by other companies (Subramaniam & Venkatraman, 2001). The intercultural knowledge that employees gain during their temporal job assignments to other countries is usually rare and hard to imitate. Thus, firms would benefit from fully using this knowledge, since it would help them to create and sustain a competitive advantage. Therefore, this type of knowledge can be a major source for companies, assuming it is utilized properly (Fink, Meierewert & Rohr, 2005).

However, higher tacitness of knowledge can at the same time be much harder to replicate within the company; Szulanski (2000) found that the depth of knowledge had a very significant effect on the difficulty of transferring knowledge, something that should have a negative impact on its value from the organization’s view.

Having described a viewpoint on the characteristics of knowledge gained by expatriates and how it might be valued by the organization, the next step will be to look closer at the process of transfer and how the parties involved are affecting it. Knowledge has lately been seen as the main resource for long-term competitive advantage of organizations, but when it comes to tacit knowledge it has often been neglected (Fink et al. 2005).

2.2.3 Barriers for Knowledge Transfer
Antal (2001) found that one of the main barriers to knowledge transfer is lack of initiation from the organization, and even a bit of disinterest. Such a lack of a clear goal within the organization on what to do with repatriates’ knowledge severely affects the transfer. Similarly, Szulanski’s (2000) study found that lack of motivation from the recipient significantly affected the ease for transfer. Furthermore, it is argued that organizations do not have the required knowledge or willingness to manage the whole expatriation process optimally; there seems to be a need for improved planning, regarding the employees' return as well as clearer goals (such as learning outcomes) for the assignment as a whole (Antal, 2001).

Lastly, the organizational culture and structure can pose as a significant barrier for the transfer of knowledge. Antal (2001) found that even though she studied companies that were large MNCs,
these lacked a global mindset and the repatriate managers where often looked upon with suspicion from their domestic peers. Additionally, headquarter politics also led to negative effects on repatriates’ willingness to share their knowledge. However, if the organizational structure consists of smaller sized work units and there is a higher concentration of expatriates among one’s peers, it will be easier to execute the transfer of knowledge (Antal, 2001).

On a more individual level, repatriates’ motivation is essential when it comes to knowledge transfer. Oddou et al. (2009), in their conceptual framework, state that repatriates’ career considerations and commitment to the work unit are the key factors affecting the motivation to transfer knowledge. In a similar mode, the study by Antal (2001) found that repatriates saw the dissemination for knowledge as an obvious responsibility. However, they were not always given the opportunity to share that knowledge. Besides, Oddou et al. (2009) argue that in addition to motivation, repatriates’ ability regarding their expertise, social networks, positional power and responsibilities are also of vital importance for their success in transferring knowledge.

Argote & Ingram (2000) argue that an organization contains five retention bins for knowledge: (1) individual members, (2) organizational structures, (3) organizational procedures and practices, (4) corporate culture, and (5) physical structure of the workplace. Their most important argument is that knowledge transfer leads to changes in these repositories and that the state of the repositories affects the process and outcomes of knowledge transfer.

Oddou et al.’s (2009) framework also stresses the importance of socialization, communication and development of mutual trust between the individual and the rest of the organization during the foreign assignment and upon return. Similarly, Antal (2001) states that the knowledge the individual has gained abroad will only have value for the home organization if it can be taken in by the receivers within the organization and adapted to fit the new context.

This adds additional factors to the barriers of repatriate knowledge transfer and leads one to believe that issues are not just concentrated to the repatriate and the handling of his or her return to the home organization. More focus needs to be put on the overall organization as well as its attitudes and practices that are geared towards utilization of “foreign” knowledge. After all, transferred knowledge from repatriates can, as argued above, enhance a firm’s competitiveness.
and be a useful source that is hard to copy, which can lead to a sustained competitive advantage (Downes & Thomas 1999; Fink et al. 2005).

2.3 Global Mindset

2.3.1 Definition

There are several definitions of what a global mindset means; Perlmutter (1969) for instance considers that MNCs should strive for geocentrism which means that everyone in the company works for worldwide objectives and not just home country objectives. This is in contrast to ethnocentrism which is home country-oriented, and polycentrism, meaning host country-oriented. Gupta & Govindarajan (2002) on the other hand believe that a global mindset is when a company can combine awareness of and openness to a diversity of cultures and markets with an ability to integrate across this diversity. This is in line with the conceptual review article by Levy, Beechler, Taylor & Boyacigiller (2007), in which they define global mindset by using three complementary characteristics; (1) an openness and awareness for multiple dimensions of meaning and action, (2) complex representation and articulation of cultural and strategic dynamics, and (3) ability to mediate and integrate ideas and actions from both the global and local environments.

A company’s ability to discover emerging opportunities and tackle its challenges depends on how intelligent it is on observing and interpreting our dynamic world (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2002). The benefits of a geocentric MNC include a more powerful company, better quality of products and services, worldwide utilization of best resources, improvement of local company management, a greater sense of commitment to worldwide objectives and more profit. However, obtaining a global mindset can be costly in terms of increased communication and travel expenses, educational costs as well as international headquarters bureaucracy. Associated risks contain personnel problems and the difficulties related to the re-entry of international executives. Still, the payoffs are believed to out-balance the risks and threats (Perlmutter, 1969).

2.3.2 Developing a Global Mindset

The key to achieve a global mindset is by seeing it as a journey that never ends. Since the world is dynamic, companies need to take into consideration that what is considered to be a global
mindset today might appear quite limited in relative terms in twenty years from now. Therefore, it is important to continuously strive for improvement by being curious about how the world works, be exposed to diversity and novelty, and try to develop an integrated view that connects different aspects of knowledge about cultures and markets (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2002).

According to Perlmutter’s geocentric view, companies should seek the best men regardless of nationality to solve their problems anywhere in the world. He sees top management’s inexperience in overseas markets as an internal obstacle, meaning that it is something that the MNC can influence, and believes that international assignments is a powerful tool to achieve a global mindset (Perlmutter, 1969). Gupta & Govindarajan (2002) state that multi-year expatriate assignments are the most intensive (and expensive) way to achieve a global mindset, since they allow employees to learn about other cultures and markets. Nummela, Saarenketo & Puimalainen (2004) confirm this in their study in which they find that managements’ international work experience is positively correlated to a global mindset, while international education does not have a similar effect.

Despite the value of foreign assignments, they have some limits that need to be taken into consideration. Although the assignments provide expatriates with familiarity of other cultures, not all expatriates are able to convert the experience into a broadened perspective and an enhanced set of skills. An ethnocentric expatriate may not be sufficiently open and flexible to accept the cultural differences they encounter and may end up rejecting the overseas experience as something negative. It is therefore suggested that possessing cultural intelligence, defined as how effectively one adapts to new cultural contexts, is a prerequisite for an expatriate to be able to reach a global mindset. The expatriate will thus only be able to transfer knowledge if he or she can recognize the different contextual signs experienced and put them relation to one another (Lovvorn & Chen, 2011).
2.4 Connecting Literature to our Research Question

The three different streams of literature that we have presented; repatriation, knowledge transfer and global mindset, seem to be highly interconnected. Firstly, repatriates’ satisfaction with the return to the company is ideal for their motivation to contribute and share their knowledge with the organization (Oddou et al. 2009), and the main barrier for knowledge transfer is argued to be lack of initiation from the organization (Antal, 2001).

Oddou et al. (2009) in their framework see global mindset as an influencing factor for the motivation to receive repatriate knowledge. According to theory, firms that are more geocentrically minded are expected to be much better in handling the repatriation process than their ethnocentric or polycentric counterparts, and should thus achieve higher success rates (Perlmutter, 1969).

Additionally, the repatriates’ knowledge should be much more valued and better utilized and become a reinforcing force towards further development of a global mindset within an organization that is already somewhat globally minded, as opposed to having very little effect in companies where such knowledge is treated with disinterest and suspicion (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2002).

Lastly, individuals who exhibit a global mindset are perceived as a critical factor when it comes to understanding and transferring cross border knowledge (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2002; Lovvorn & Chen, 2011). These individuals are argued to be an important source in building a sustainable competitive advantage (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1987). Thus, our research questions aim to examine these supposed relationships.
3. Method

This section aims to clarify the reasoning behind this study, and goes through the choice of study objects as well as our research strategy. These issues are discussed and motivated throughout the section, while, in the end the limitations of the study are listed.

3.1 Research design

The study is explanatory since the aim is to explore and explain the relationship between different variables (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009); the interplay between the repatriation process and knowledge transfer within Swedish MNCs. Additionally, we intend to examine whether these firms exhibit a global mindset and if so, how this is associated with the repatriation and knowledge transfer. As our study takes off from existing theories, we have chosen a deductive approach (Saunders et al. 2009).

We have adopted a multiple case study approach, since case studies are argued to be well suited for gaining a deep understanding of the context of the research. Furthermore, a multiple case study shows whether the findings of one case are also applicable to other cases, thereby increasing generalizability (Saunders et al. 2009).

We have chosen to use a qualitative data collection method in order to get a deeper understanding of our research question, which is in line with what Saunders et al. (2009) suggest. The study is cross-sectional as we want to see how these organizations operate in their current state, then compare and contrast their activities, and finally come up with suggestions for improvements based on our findings.

The responses for the study are presented in an anonymous way since we are dealing with company practices and policies. Furthermore, individual response bias is argued to be reduced as this enables the individuals to talk more freely without being concerned about reprisals connected to their answers. It also helps to increase the reliability of the study. However, we are aware that there is a risk of participant bias, which can for example take place, if interviewees say what they think their bosses want them to say during the interview. This is a particular problem in companies that have an authoritarian management style or when there is a threat to
employment insecurity. However, the anonymity factor reduces participant bias (Saunders et al. 2009).

We have used a semi-structured and flexible interview approach, since that extends the limit, scope and flexibility in the collection of data. This might reduce the reliability. However, Saunders et al. (2009) argue that when studying a complex and dynamic context, this is the best approach. Furthermore, the study intends to shed light on how the situation in these companies is today. Since this is something that is subject to future change, it does not seem feasible to replicate the study in the near future and expect the exact same results.

3.1 Selecting Samples
Selecting samples can be done in different ways; through interviews, observations or experiments (Arbnor & Bjerke, 1994). However, the ability to gain primary and secondary data will depend on how much access one has to an appropriate source, where the appropriateness depends on the research question and research design (Saunders et al. 2009).

In our case, we got access to our primary data by using some of the strategies that Saunders et al. (2009) recommends, such as developing new contacts, which was done through the annual business student fair Kontaktdagarna at Uppsala University. It is worth mentioning that this was a convenience sampling (Saunders et al. 2009), both due to the time constraints for this thesis, but also due to the fact that getting access to companies is highly restricted. We talked with business representatives at the fair about our thesis and they provided us with contact information to potential interviewees at each company.

In line with the recommendation of Saunders et al. (2009), we ensured that we were familiar with the organizations before initiating a contact and highlighted the possible benefits of our research question to the organizations. The companies first needed to fulfill our requirements; they had to be MNCs with Swedish expatriates, who had been on international assignments for a period of 1-5 years and who had returned to the Swedish office.

To get both the company and the employee perspectives for our research question, we interviewed HR managers and repatriates at each company. We chose HR managers who were responsible for the international assignments to be representatives of the companies. They were
expected to be knowledgeable and provide insights about our research topic. We succeeded in interviewing both HR and repatriates at 5 out of 6 companies (see Table 1). However, as for the repatriates this was a random sample based on the HR managers’ choices at each company, which contributes to a sample bias limitation.

**Table 1: Summary of interviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repatriates</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview type</td>
<td>Face-to-face &amp; phone</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview type</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length/hour</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our sample consisted of 13 interviews; 7 repatriates and 6 HR respondents, from 6 different companies and industries. Each of the companies had a range of 10-200 expatriates annually. Common places for international assignments were the U.S., Australia, the U.K., Eastern Europe, Middle East and South East Asia. All of the expatriates worked at a managerial level and their age span was between 30-65 years. Normally, the length of the employment at each company among our repatriate respondents ranged between 6.5-25 years. The length of the assignments ranged between 1-5 years. As for the HR respondents, they had a similar range of age as the repatriates’, and had worked at the company for 5-10 years.

### 3.2 Collecting Data

Interviews may allow researchers to develop a deeper rapport and a trusting relationship with respondents, which may lead to new data, insights and referrals as well as be of great use in case it is necessary to gain further information (Daniels & Cannice, 2004). We chose to structure our
interviews, so they would give us an in-depth view of the interplay between the variables repatriation, knowledge transfer and global mindset. As for the interview guide see Appendix.

To cast light on our research purpose we asked a set of questions connected to each of the three areas. This was done to enable the interviewees to answer what types of practices that are in place for the repatriation process and knowledge utilization as well as how successful these are. Additionally, we asked for their opinion about how internationally minded they perceive their organizations to be, in order to see if a global mindset is present. Furthermore, we also asked the interviewees for some personal information about their own experiences abroad, due to the fact that prevalent theory stresses the importance of such experiences when it comes to managing expatriates and their international assignments.

Prior to the interview we informed the participants about the expected length of the interview, and provided them with an interview guide with general themes and topics based on our literature framework and our research questions that were to be discussed. This way they would know what to expect and have a chance to prepare for the interview. Providing such guide is a way to demonstrate one’s credibility and knowledge within the research area (Saunders et al. 2009). The order of the topics in the guide was created with the funnel approach in mind and with the intention to seem logical to the participants. Besides, questions of more sensitive character were brought up a bit into the conversation, once a chance to build up a certain trust had been given. We followed the advice to use a language appropriate for the situation and without concepts that are too theoretical (Saunders et al. 2009).

When possible we prioritized to arrange face-to-face meetings with our respondents, since it provides the best opportunity to gain trust and confidence with the interviewees, which is essential for the willingness to share information (Saunders et al. 2009). We succeeded in meeting all of the HR managers face-to-face. However, due to geographical distance and a busy schedule for some of our repatriate respondents, we decided to compromise and make a few exceptions in order to get access to a sufficient number of repatriates. In these cases we conducted telephone interviews instead, since this method still offers the researchers a chance of creating some level of personal contact as well as asking follow-up questions in accordance with the semi-structured approach (Saunders et al. 2009).
We tried to conduct the interviews in the office of the participating MNCs when possible. The interviews were conducted in Swedish for the convenience of the respondents. Talking in their native language allows the interviewees to feel secure and comfortable in order to speak freely and share thoughts and opinions making the interview more than just a polite conversation (Kvale 1997; Saunders et al. 2009). When translating from Swedish to English there is a risk that certain responses are interpreted inadequately and that this may influence reliability. However, we dealt with the translation with extra caution and it is our perception that this has not affected the presentation and interpretation of the data in any significant way.

Following the guidelines suggested by Saunders et al. (2009), we started the meetings by explaining what our research was about and how we planned to make use of the interviews we conduct. We took advantage of being more than one researcher; one of us was the main interviewer focusing on covering all the topics listed in the question guide, while the others concentrated on taking notes and asking follow-up questions when needed. However, we tried to keep the discussion to be about our research goals and the themes we had shared with the participants in advance, to keep focus and in line with good research ethics (Saunders et al. 2009). During the interview we also strove to hold back our own thoughts and let the interviewee formulate answers in his or her own way. Although we had written a number of open-ended questions within each theme, these were not followed in a meticulous manner and the exact order and formulation depended on the answers of each respondent. When appropriate we asked probing questions to further explore responses significant to our research question.

Saunders et al. (2009) recommend to audio-record interviews as it allows the interviewer to concentrate on listening and asking questions during the interview. Also, it provides one with the possibility to re-listen to the interview. We asked for consent to audio-record due to ethical reasons. We explained to the interviewees that they would remain anonymous and that the recording was only done in order to better facilitate us in compiling our notes afterwards. Additionally, we informed participants about their right to not answer a question, if they did not wish to do so. This was done to reduce the risk of potential response bias. All interviewees except one agreed to be audio-recorded. The interviewee who did not agree said that being recorded made her feel uncomfortable, which we naturally respected. However, since we took
notes during the interview and compiled these immediate afterwards, we believe that the effects were negligible. Finally, we followed the advice to compile our notes and impressions of what was said, immediately after the interview (Saunders et al. 2009).

We transcribed all the 13 interviews after they were conducted with the help of our sound files (available for 12 of the interviews). It is also worth to mention that, as the process of the interviews went further, we as interviewers noticed that we had reached a certain level of saturation since the interviewees’ answers started to become quite similar and did not contribute with much new information anymore (Saunders et al. 2009).

3.3 Limitations
As all our respondents, HR managers and repatriates are Swedish; the conclusions of our study may not be applicable to other countries. Thus, the perspective of our study is Swedish and one cannot deny that certain country-specific cultural characteristics may play a role. The fact that we have decided to focus on large and well-established MNCs can also be seen as a limitation, since smaller and less established companies may have a different repatriation setup and face other challenges.

Another aspect is that our repatriates were chosen by the HR representatives. This may be another limitation, since the HR managers can be seen as organizational gatekeepers in a powerful position when it comes to which members of the staff we get access to (Saunders et al. 2009). Thus, there is a risk that our sample will generally have a more positive attitude towards the employer than one chosen randomly by us.

Additionally, it would have been interesting to have respondents who have actually left their companies and ask them to motivate their decision to leave. This might have given a different picture than the one the HR managers provided us with. The lack of this aspect may have a negative impact on the validity of the study. However, it was not possible to get a hold of these individuals due to time and access constraints. Despite these limitations, we believe that our results will provide an interesting insight to our research question.
4. Empirical Findings
This section goes through the empirical investigation of the three main areas of our study; Repatriation, Knowledge Transfer and Global Mindset. It explains the purpose of international assignments among the MNCs, the routines and practices for handling repatriation and knowledge transfer, as well as examines the presence of global mindset. Finally, the section goes through respondent’s suggestions for improvement regarding the companies’ processes in the studied areas.

4.1 Repatriation

4.1.1 Purpose of International Assignments and Selection of Expatriates
For the companies in our study, the main purpose of sending Swedish expatriates abroad is to fill a position in the host country’s office that requires specific knowledge or competence. A typical example is to build up a certain technical competence in the host country. Other common reasons for expatriate assignments include implementing the company’s corporate culture and structures in their new start-ups. It is thus seldom that employees are sent abroad with the main purpose to acquire knowledge and develop on a personal level. However, it does happen; two of the companies in our study also send expatriates abroad to develop them from a social and career perspective.

In general, the companies of our study select candidates for expatriation by identifying who has the required competence and the desired traits for the position. Top performance in the home office is an advantage and in some companies an employee must have worked in the company for some years to even be considered for an assignment abroad. Previous international experience is not required and knowing English is sufficient enough to be eligible.

For half of the repatriates the main reason to go on an international assignment was that they had been selected to fill a position in the host country, while the remaining half state personal development as their main motivation. The respondents did not perceive any conflicts between their own desires and the companies’ motives for sending them abroad; they see it as a mutual benefit. The expatriates believe that they were selected for the assignments based on their profiles’ relevance for the position. Some of them applied on their own initiative while others were contacted on the company’s initiative, e.g. by their managers.
4.1.2 Support during Expatriation Process and Repatriation Routines

The degree of support varies among the HR representatives’ responses; a few of them state that the company has regular contact with the expatriates and one company gives their expats surveys prior to departure, during stay and upon return. That company had also devised a communication scheme where they try to have the expatriates present at department meetings through telephone or video conferences instead. Other companies have contact only if it concerns the job itself or practical matters, and some have no contact at all. The general picture, as portrayed by the HR representatives, is that it is the individual’s responsibility to keep regular contact with the company during his or her assignment.

The HR respondents perceived the repatriation as the hardest part of the process for both the individual and the company, and that the existing guidelines and practices might not be enough to handle the issues facing repatriation. They believe that this has to do with the fact that it is easy to forget a person when he or she has been away for so long. Typically, the HR persons contacted the expatriate’s area manager six months prior to the end of their assignment and together they started with the planning of the repatriation process such as finding a new position for the expatriate and arranging other practicalities for their return.

Some of the repatriates were satisfied with the support they received from their company during their assignments, while others remained disappointed of the company’s overall handling of the process before and during the assignment. In other cases the repatriates were offered satisfying support before and during assignment, while the repatriation process did not have any support at all. One repatriate did not receive any support during the entire process of the expatriation and repatriation; it was his responsibility to find a new position upon return and there was no help to receive from the organization. According to the repatriates, they were given repatriation support through an informal ongoing dialogue rather than through a formalized process. Only one of the repatriates was given a possibility to share his experiences at the company upon repatriation, through debriefing and by writing an article on the company’s internal website, while for the rest sharing of their experiences was only done informally and on their own initiative.
4.1.3 Career and Repatriate Turnover

According to the HR managers, there are no guarantees that a position will be available for the repatriate upon return, but they do keep their employment in the organization. Some HR persons believe that it is the expatriate’s responsibility to stay in touch with the Swedish office to increase the chances of finding a position well in advance before return. Repatriate turnover does occur but is very rare according to the HR interviewees. Most often it is not the international assignment itself that has affected the turnover but rather the repatriates’ urge to advance in their careers, which in general occurs after they have worked 3-4 years and gained a lot of experience.

It is common that the repatriates have advanced in their careers. However, they are not convinced that this is because of their expatriate experience. It may have helped them to some extent but it has not been the determining factor for advancing. Instead, the expatriates have made use of their old networks at home or the ones that they have built up during their assignments. According to two of the repatriates, their current positions may be perceived as high status jobs on paper but in reality they do not differ that much from the positions they had before they went abroad. Only one of the respondents did not advance, but this was deliberately, due to his family situation. Still, he believes that the positions he was offered at that time were only offered to him due to his international experiences as an expatriate. One repatriate states that the retention rate among repatriates can be explained somewhat by the fact that someone who goes on an international assignment becomes more mobile; you have already left the safe home environment and thus a transition to a new company becomes a less distant idea.

4.2 Knowledge

4.2.1 Goals and Valuation of Knowledge

The companies in our study lack clear goals for utilizing the knowledge gained by repatriates. All of the HR respondents indicate that the only goal for repatriates is to perform their tasks for the foreign assignment. This is concerned with applying the individual’s specific knowledge to the unit he or she is assigned to. There are no formal routines in place for how to capture the knowledge gained, which is confirmed by the response of the repatriates. Nonetheless, all of the repatriates state that they believe that what they have learnt on their international assignments
has value for the company. Examples of learning outcomes mentioned by the repatriates include; a better understanding of the local culture and an increased network in the host country.

When asked if the company values their knowledge, one repatriate answers with a clear no, since he has never been approached about it. The rest of the repatriates respond that their companies do see their knowledge as valuable but that they believe it is valued in an indirect way; by offering new similar assignments, or contacting the individual when there is a new development in the country where the repatriate used to work.

The repatriates believe that other companies can also use their experiences and knowledge. One repatriate even claims that he would have more use of his new knowledge in other firms but that he has chosen to stay with his current company since he enjoys his work there. Other repatriates believe that their knowledge and insights retrieved from international assignments are valuable to the market in general and thus useful in any company.

4.2.2 Routines for Capturing Knowledge
With the exception of one company using a form of debriefing upon return, the companies have no formal routines and procedures in place for capturing and enabling knowledge transfer. One HR respondent states that such responsibility belongs to the repatriate’s manager at home and another mentions that since the repatriate starts working from day one upon returning ”there is no time for knowledge sharing”. All repatriates but one state that the only sharing they have done is informal, on their own initiative and often on an individual level. The exception is one repatriate who has attended an internal session with other repatriates and soon-to-be expatriates preparing for their future assignments. He also states that there seems to be a big interest for this among his peers.

As for encouraging employees to share what they have learnt, the answers are mixed. One HR manager states that they have different possibilities for sharing, depending on the routines of their department, whereas another declares that they have no routines for knowledge sharing but also say that they see a value in it and admits that they could become much better at this. A third HR person states that they encourage the repatriates to share their knowledge among colleagues, whereas a fourth one says that no such encouragement exists.
4.3 Global Mindset

4.3.1 The View on Global Mindset
We first asked our respondents about their international experience and whether they saw it as a prerequisite and/or an advantage in their current position. None of the six HR representatives have been expatriates and only two have been living abroad, one as the spouse of an expatriate and one as an exchange student for one semester. However, several of them point out that they have traveled a lot and have long experience of working with global issues. All of the HR managers refuse that international experience is required in their roles, but at the same time they admit that it would have been a benefit.

Naturally, all of the repatriates have been abroad but still they answer in the same way as the HR representatives; although not a necessity international experience is an advantage and they all believe that their international assignment has been useful for their current position. Several of them mention how their time abroad has enhanced the understanding of and interaction with colleagues and clients from the country in which they have worked.

All the HR representatives believe that their organization has an international profile, although two of them state that it differs among departments and business areas. One HR person says that his company is perhaps not so globally minded on an employee level since the company consists of many small acquired firms with a more local orientation, and expresses a desire to increase the international attitude among employees to a level equivalent to that of managers.

The repatriates agree on their companies being international but also indicate difficulties in being global even on a local level. They often mention that they have sales in many parts of the world, as a measure of how international the company is, while the aspect of a global attitude is not touched upon. One repatriate complains that some people sit in a bubble of their own and try to write routines, which they believe, will be applicable all over the world, which is not possible. Another one criticizes his company for wrongly thinking that the Swedish way of thinking will work anywhere in the world, while a third one complains that his company, although having Swedish values and corporate culture, is being too submissive towards American and German influences, which has led to an unclear company strategy.
All the HR representatives feel that their companies encourage employees to get international experience and that it is of value to the company if a person has worked abroad. Nonetheless, one HR person thinks that her company ought to have more expatriates in order to enhance the cultural and international understanding, while two others believe that these skills may as well be achieved by working in projects that involve people from different countries and cultures.

Several repatriates bring up the personal benefits of having lived abroad by statements such as “my time abroad has toughened me and enhanced my self-confidence”, “as a person my two years abroad would probably be equivalent to 10 years at home” and “going abroad was the best decision that we as a family have ever made, we have gotten new perspectives”. Four of the repatriates also mention their increased global network as one of the main benefits of their international assignment. It is much easier to call a colleague for his or her advice on certain matters once you have worked with them. In spite of saying that working on projects across national borders is a good way of enhancing the international understanding, none of the HR representatives mention an increased network as something valuable to the company.

Besides, the repatriates believe that the experience one gets as an expatriate is a competitive advantage, for instance if aiming for higher positions (if not even a requirement). Also, it enhances one’s understanding for other cultures by making one aware of the fact that the Swedish way is not necessarily the only and best one to handle all things in business life. In the same manner repatriates express a belief that their time abroad has helped them in their understanding of and interaction with, for instance American and Chinese colleagues. As one repatriate puts it; “The things that I have learned is not something that you can read in a book, you need to go and live there”.

4.4 Improvement Suggestions from Interviewees
Generally, the HR respondents believe that the repatriation process can improve. Some of the suggestions for improvement include: Better planning regarding where the repatriates is sent in order for them to get the right experience that the organization needs; make the area managers more involved in the repatriation process; build a pool of expatriates from which companies can choose who they need in order to enhance status of expatriates as well as their opportunity of career advancement; make clearer descriptions of what the expectations from an international
assignment is; make expatriates aware that there are no guarantees of a position awaiting them upon return and that the company may not be in the exact same state as when they left; have better and more frequent communication during assignments for instance by assigning mentors and expatriate coordinators.

When it comes to transferring the knowledge, all of the HR respondents agree that there is need for improvement. One HR respondent believes that more emphasis is needed on creating a formal way of letting repatriates tell their peers about their experiences, whereas another argues that more could be achieved by sending more junior staff, since senior staff is more costly to send on international assignments. A third correspondent suggests more cooperation between the business areas that send and receive the employees, whereas a fourth one calls for developing debriefing sessions. Finally, a fifth HR correspondent voices concerns regarding knowledge gained abroad and states that much of it may not be of any use outside its foreign context.

The repatriates also believe that their companies can improve their expatriation routines. The main suggestions include: Improve routines and structures regarding the formalities of the assignment such as establishing a written contract for all parties to know what to expect; language- and culture preparation courses should be held in the host country instead of in Sweden to optimize the learning effect; give more support to expatriates with complex assignments that involve restructuring or risk of sudden and unexpected organizational changes; have a better and more frequent dialogue between the expatriate and the home office during all stages of the expatriation process with the help of mentors or coaches; providing better information about available positions at the HQ; make personality tests before and after the assignment to see how you have changed as a person during the time abroad.

4.4.1 Short Term Assignments
Two of the HR representatives bring up the idea of making use of shorter assignments more often, since they believe that an expatriate can go through the same personal change during a shorter assignment and get the same learning effect. They are convinced that many expatriates may feel that the traditional length of expatriate assignments is too long a period to be abroad and therefore they think shorter assignments will become more common in the future.
Some repatriates believe that whether or not short term assignments will be a better alternative than the traditional longer ones, depends on the complexity of the assignment, its purpose, as well as the expatriate’s family situation. Other express concerns about short term assignments, such as difficulties with earning the required respect in order to appear trustworthy among one’s clients and colleagues, as establishing relationships and trust requires more time than 3-6 months. The assignment would rather be seen as an extended business trip. Also, if the assignment is complex to its nature and deals with restructuring, then shorter assignments will not be the best alternative. If, on the other hand, the purpose us to get an understanding or idea of how something works, then 6 months might work, but it will not give a person much to build upon for a future career. However, if the expatriate has a family that is prevented from traveling along, then shorter assignments might be preferred.
5. Analysis
This section analyzes the results gained from the empirical investigation based upon the three main areas of our theoretical framework; Repatriation, Knowledge Transfer and Global Mindset.

5.1 Repatriation

5.1.1 Purpose of International Assignments
In the late 1970’s Edström & Galbraith (1977) listed three motives for companies sending managers abroad: to fill positions with qualified workers, to control foreign operations and to better prepare employees for future tasks. In our study most of the companies are focusing on the first two reasons while the learning perspective is put in the background.

On the employee side, it seems that not only career advancement but also personal growth is an important aspect when deciding to go on an international assignment. Several repatriates mention that they have changed as persons and learned a lot during their time abroad. Even when the primary goal has been to transfer knowledge or expertise to the host country, the repatriates have often experienced a high degree of personal development. Nonetheless, most companies work as if the task has been completed once an expatriate assignment comes to an end, instead of seeing it as part of ongoing learning process that may prove highly beneficial for the company if optimized fully.

5.1.2 Support during Expatriation Process and Repatriation Routines
The degree of support and contact that the HR representatives have with the expatriates during their assignments and upon repatriation varies among the respondents, but what is common is that this is a neglected issue and the responsibility to stay in touch with the company falls on the expatriate instead, something which is in line with what the literature identifies. Therefore, we believe that the HR manager at home have very limited or no information regarding what the repatriate is doing and learning on his or her assignment.

The HR respondents perceive repatriation to be the hardest part of the process for both the individual and the company, in spite of the companies’ existing guidelines and practices, which is also in accordance with the literature. This could perhaps explain why the responsibility to stay in touch with the company and be in charge of one’s career falls on the repatriate, which also
was the case for one of the repatriate respondents, who had to find a new position upon return on his own, since there was no help to receive from the organization.

As mentioned in the literature section, the career of the individual has traditionally been looked upon as his or her own business, which also seems to be the case in our findings. Since expatriates are often left to themselves in this way while abroad they also risk falling victim for the “out-of-sight, out-of-mind “syndrome, according to the literature. Therefore, the companies ought to consider how to handle their current support and routines, since our findings show that it is not sufficient.

5.1.3 Career and Repatriate Turnover
The repatriates have advanced in their careers after their assignments and for one of the interviewees, the position he was offered upon return was offered to him only due to his international experience as an expatriate. However, international experience has not been the determining factor for the advancement of all of the respondents. Rather, it has been their old networks or those they have built up during their assignments. Still, all repatriates have to some extent made use of their experiences in their careers. This is a finding that is in contrast to the literature’s view, which is that many repatriates find that their career expectations do not match with the jobs they are offered upon return and that they are unable to use the skills and experience that they have acquired.

Another interesting finding is that even though many of the companies do not have any routines for debriefing, which is in accordance with repatriation literature, it does not affect the repatriates’ positive view about their international assignments. This contradicts to what literature suggests; that a lack of debriefing of assignments leads to high-potential employees refusing expatriate assignments, since they are anxious that it will have a negative effect on their career development. The respondents did not seem to have this problem and did not experience a negative effect on their careers upon return.

On the other hand, some of the expatriates expressed the view that it is up to the individual to make sure to let the home office know about one’s ambitions and take the initiative if one is interested in a certain position, suggesting that Herriot’s (1992) point that it is the individual who is in charge of his or her own career is still valid today. Some repatriates mention that this degree
of responsibility is in line with the corporate culture of their companies, which relates to Shen & Hall’s (2009) concern about companies making sure that the individuals’ goals are compatible with those of the organization.

When it comes to our findings about repatriate turnover, it does not seem to be as big of a problem as the literature describes. According to the HR representatives, turnover does occur in the companies but very rarely and is most often not due to the international assignment in itself but rather to the repatriates’ urge to advance in their careers after they have gained a lot of experience, or that they want to do something else that cannot be offered in the current company.

5.1.4 Improvement Suggestions from Respondents
Both repatriates and HR respondents believe that their company’s processes and routines can be improved, which shows an awareness of not fully utilizing the knowledge gained by the repatriates. However, when it comes to coming up with concrete suggestions for improving knowledge transfer the HR respondents fail to do so. It is rather the repatriates that have many suggestions for such improvements. This indicates that it may be a clear disadvantage for the HR managers not to have international work experience. The repatriates suggestions are similar to what the literature recommends, such as assigning mentors at the home office to look after the expatriate’s interests while he or she is abroad, have (better) debriefings upon repatriation, give realistic job previews, retain the expatriate in the home country’s HR planning system, but also have more cooperation between the business areas that send and receive the employees, give more and better support during and after the assignment and have more frequent communication with the home office.

The length of the overseas assignments is another issue discussed among the respondents. The literature suggests that organizations should shorten the length of the overseas assignments to make the repatriation adjustment easier. This view is not shared by the repatriates who are concerned about the difficulties to earn the required respect to become trustworthy among one’s clients and colleagues, since it takes long time to establish relationships. It also depends on how complex the assignment is. The HR respondents on the other hand favor shorter assignments
since they believe that the same learning effect can be achieved. This shows, once again that when you have not been in the same situation yourself it is very difficult to do get an understanding and do realistic judgments in this matter. This can explain why the views differ among the respondents in this issue. One way to decrease this gap could be to require international experience for the HR positions, as suggested by Shen & Hall (2009), or to make sure that those who already work with these issues get a chance to acquire international experience themselves, to obtain a better understanding for international assignments.

5.2 Knowledge

5.2.1 Goals and Valuation of Knowledge
Although the firms claim that they value international experience, the empirical findings clearly indicate that the companies in the study are still using their international assignments as a one way transfer process, to transfer knowledge from home country to host country. This is quite contrary to what the literature about internationalization suggests; knowledge is supposed to be seen as the most important factor in gaining a sustainable competitive advantage and that more importance should be put on also learning from the host country environments. One explanation for why the situation is the opposite in our findings can be derived from the fact that there is a lack of communication between the home country and the repatriate during the assignment. This leads to the home country not really knowing what the repatriate is learning in the host country, thus neglecting the fact that it might be knowledge that is also applicable in the home country.

The repatriates themselves saw their knowledge as usable at home and also suggested that it could be of use to other companies as well. This in line with what Oddou et al. (2009) suggest; companies need to be able to distinguish between context specific and general knowledge when assessing its value to the home organization. The repatriates have clearly acquired general knowledge in addition to context specific knowledge, but the companies in the study have no routines for understanding it.

5.2.2 Routines for Capturing Knowledge
Since the companies did not have any routines for valuing knowledge gained abroad it is not strange that they do not have any routines for knowledge sharing either. One company had a
formal debriefing but it was not clearly stated that it was for knowledge sharing purposes. The act of knowledge transfer is completely dependent on the repatriate himself. Many state that the only knowledge sharing they have been engaged in has taken place in an informal setting when working with their close colleagues. As Antal (2001) proposes, the main barrier to knowledge transfer is lack of initiation from the organization, which is almost nonexistent in the studied companies.

A few HR respondents stated that repatriates were encouraged to share their knowledge, but not how they were encouraged. The HR respondents stated that there was room for improvements in this aspect, but they could not really give any clear suggestions on what to improve. This brings us to the second point, which is that organizations lack the required knowledge or willingness to manage the whole expatriation process better (Antal, 2001). Since those in charge of handling the international assignments do not have any international experience, it is quite obvious that there is a lack of knowledge and understanding regarding this issue.

5.3 Global Mindset

5.3.1 The View on Global Mindset

More than 40 years has passed since Perlmutter (1969) advised companies to work for worldwide objectives. Although all of the companies in our study are MNCs with employees in several countries across the world, it is far from all of the HR representatives that demonstrate a global mindset. During our interviews we have encountered examples of views that are almost ethnocentric and this is quite surprising considering the global environment in which they compete.

Some repatriates mention the fact that international experience is a merit and sometimes even a prerequisite to get executive positions in the companies, suggesting that Perlmutter’s view about the importance of top management’s backgrounds has gotten foothold. Still, both HR managers and repatriates mention that the international attitude is not present on all levels of the company, indicating that there is still a far way to go for companies to obtain a global mindset. As Gupta & Govindarajan (2002) point out, what was a global mindset some decades ago may not be looked upon in the same way today, for example it is no longer sufficient that just top managers have a
global mindset and companies should therefore strive for the development of a global mindset on more levels of the company.

Many of the repatriates give comments that show signs of an enhanced global mindset, for instance when expressing the opinion that the Swedish way of handling things may not always be applicable all over the world. This understanding can be of great value to the organization, but its importance seems to be neglected and underestimated by the companies in our study. It may be explained partly by the fact that opposite to the recommendations of Shen & Hall (2009), most of the HR managers that we spoke to, have never lived abroad themselves. Often the people in charge of expatriation are chosen on their juridical expertise and knowledge within often complicated areas such as tax and compensation across borders. Although this might be of value to the companies, this focus on the legal and contractual matters, may lead to the issues related to company and individual development getting less attention.

Even though many of the HR representatives work in an international environment and feel comfortable doing so, there seems to be a lack of recognition of the extra dimension of living abroad. Expatriates are living out of their own cultural comfort zone even when the work day is over. This provides them with a different and more complex understanding of the host country’s norms and values. The fact that cultural intelligence is not acknowledged is perhaps also the reason that some of the HR managers are questioning whether the international assignments, especially the traditional lengthier ones, are worth the investment. Since the knowledge gained is not utilized, companies are not profiting as much from the repatriates as they could.

Another aspect are the expanded global networks, mentioned by several repatriates as a valuable asset and resource from which they can extract information and get advices that are of great help in their current position. Nonetheless, networks are not mentioned by any HR representatives, proposing that although they might recognize the value of networks, these are not given as much attention by companies as their appraisal by repatriates can justify. As Lovvorn & Chen (2011) point out, a foreign assignment may not automatically lead to an enhanced global mindset. It depends on the capability of the repatriate to adapt his or her knowledge to another cultural context. Still, the repatriate interviews that we have conducted reveal awareness about and reflections around cultural differences, which is currently not utilized to the extent it could be.
6. Conclusion
The purpose of this study was to examine Swedish based MNC’s handling of the repatriation process and the knowledge transfer of repatriates upon return. Additionally, we also wanted to examine the presence of a global mindset among these companies and its association with repatriation and knowledge transfer.

When it comes to repatriation we have found that the companies are unaware of what the individual is actually doing during the assignment, a result that most likely has to do with the lack of communication between the parties. There is no clear division of responsibility between HR and one’s home country manager regarding who is in charge of the repatriate, thus much of the responsibility for keeping in touch with the home organization and planning one’s career upon return falls entirely on the repatriate. Despite this, most of our repatriate respondents were able to find a position that matched their career expectations upon return, which gives the impression that the companies did not experience any problems with repatriate turnover.

Concerning the knowledge transfer within the companies, the purpose of international assignments is mainly to transfer knowledge to the host country. Therefore, there are no goals for the repatriate to acquire knowledge during the assignment. Furthermore, we found that there are no routines or practices in place for capturing the knowledge upon returning either. In spite of this, many of the repatriate’s state that they have learnt a lot during their assignments and that they believe that this knowledge is also valuable for the company. However, with the exception of one company, it is only shared informally with one’s colleagues.

As for global mindset among the companies, an interesting finding is that none of the HR respondents have any international work experience themselves. Although they are aware of the value of such experience, it is not perceived to be a prerequisite for their job. However, the empirical findings indicate that this leads to a lack of understanding about the entire expatriation process and how it should be handled when the assignment ends.

Despite the fact that all repatriates show an enhanced global mindset, it is not recognized by the HR managers who rather have a different perception of what is needed to achieve this. One example of such discrepancy is the belief that the same learning effect can be achieved with shorter assignments, a view not shared by the repatriates. Lastly, there seems to be a gap between
the company and the repatriates’ view about the goals of the assignment and the value of the overall international experience.

As for further research, we have identified some interesting suggestions which could give a better and deeper understanding to this topic. For instance it would be interesting to look further into those repatriates who have left their companies and investigate their reasons for leaving and to what degree the repatriation has affected this. It would also be interesting to conduct a quantitative study with a survey among a larger number of companies to see if the trend that we have identified is applicable in a larger scale. Finally, it would be of interest to follow a number of expatriates over a longer period of time from the last months of their international assignment and into the beginning of their repatriation in order to gain a deeper insight of the issues concerning repatriation and knowledge utilization while they take place.

6.1 Practical Implications and Suggestions
From this study’s findings we can see that there is room for improvement in the area of repatriation and especially within knowledge transfer, since companies today are not utilizing the repatriates’ knowledge in an optimal way. Moreover, since sending employees on international assignments is an additional cost, the companies could get a better return on their investment if they implemented formal policies and practices that would improve the repatriation and knowledge transfer process.

From the literature and from what the repatriates suggested, improvements can be made in several areas. Firstly, the companies can implement clear goals regarding learning outcomes for the repatriate (although this might not be the main aim of the international assignment), what he or she can expect to learn on the international assignment that might be of value for the company at home. This also signals that the company values such knowledge, which further motivates individuals to share their knowledge.

In addition to this, creating a regular link of communication between the HR at home and the host country where the individual is based, for instance through the appointment of a mentor, is important for several reasons; (1) it gives the company a better understanding of what the individual is doing and learning during the assignment, (2) it keeps the individual in touch with
changes in the home organization and, (3) it makes it easier for the company to prepare for the individual’s return. Moreover, implementing a mandatory debriefing session upon return is essential for getting a basic picture of what the employee has learnt, and whether he or she was satisfied with the assignment.

Further, we believe it is important for HR staff (those in charge of international assignments) at home to have international work experience themselves, since otherwise one cannot comprehend many of the aspects regarding the repatriation process and the value of the knowledge that the individual has gained.

Another good practice is to use repatriates for preparing other expatriates since it gives the repatriates the ability to share their knowledge with their peers but also make their peers better prepared for their own international assignments. Such involvement of employees is a way to start seeing and treating the expatriation period as part of a larger ongoing process that is integrated with the company’s learning goals as well as with the career perspective of the individual, which is in line with Doherty et al.’s (2008) suggestion. It would also provide an excellent opportunity for companies to become more aware of the enhanced cross cultural competence among employees with international experience and to work actively to utilize, and if possible, transfer these skills.

Both the employees and the companies would benefit from making it clear in advance what the purpose of the assignment is and what learning goals are expected to be achieved during the expatriation. Instead of letting the sharing of knowledge and global insights be the responsibility of the repatriate, with the risk of it remaining on an individual level, companies need to work actively with encouraging and rewarding international experience in order to let a global mindset and attitude permeate the corporate culture.

As Gupta and Govindarajan (2002) suggest, companies can adopt the following initiatives to increase global mindset within the organization: (1) Formal education such as language and cultural training, (2) the use of cross border teams and projects, (3) using different country locations for company meetings, and lastly (4) sending expatriates abroad.
Developing a global mindset will lead to a better understanding of the repatriation process and a better use of the gained knowledge. This will lead to a win-win situation; the repatriates’ experience will be valued which will most probably make them feel more appreciated and they can inspire other employees to go for expatriate assignments. The companies in their turn will utilize their resources more efficiently and develop a better understanding for what a global mindset is, which may prove to be a competitive advantage in a long-term perspective.
7. References


**Internet source:**

8. Appendix

Interview guide – Themes

Background
- Brief summary about current position, past work, education and international experience.

International mindset
- Company’s international profile and mindset towards its international environment.
- Mindset and its effects on routines and process regarding international assignments and international knowledge.
- The value of international experience.

Repatriation process
- How common it is with international assignments within the company, where people are sent, and also what the purpose is.
- Does the company work actively by sending out people or is it on the initiative of the individual.
- Routines for support and career planning upon return to Sweden.
- Issues faced regarding repatriation, and suggestions for improvement.

Knowledge
- Knowledge goals for the international assignment.
- The valuation of the employee’s international knowledge.
- Routines for capturing knowledge.
- Issues faced regarding knowledge transfer and suggestions for improvement.