Expatriation and careers in global organisations

How can we understand expatriate employees' experience of international assignment in the context of globalisation?

Jakob Armö
Abstract

A common practice in multi-national enterprises is to staff important managerial roles in overseas operations with personnel from the company’s country of origin: expatriate managers. Homecoming expatriates often experience that the competence they have acquired abroad is not recognized when returning home. The purpose of this thesis is to explore how expatriates experience that international assignments affect their careers. The theoretical framework used includes sociological theories from neo-Marxist theory, Bourdieuan career theory and expectancy theory.

This thesis uses qualitative methodology and a phenomenological approach to investigate the purpose and the research questions. The empirical part of the thesis has been conducted in two phases where five international mobility managers have been interviewed in the first phase. In the second phase interviews where held at a multi-national Swedish headquartered company where five interviews were conducted.

The results indicate that there is a discrepancy between how company representatives (managers) and employees consider international assignments and expatriation in relation to employee careers. There seems to be a lack of clear understanding of the impact of expatriation on employee careers and also of the career value of an international assignment for an employee.

Keywords:

International Assignments, Expatriation, International careers, Career wobble.
Table of contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1
  Problem discussion .......................................................................................... 2
  Purpose ............................................................................................................. 3
  Definitions ....................................................................................................... 3
  Research question ......................................................................................... 4
  Thesis outline ................................................................................................. 4
Theoretical framework ....................................................................................... 5
  The new worker ............................................................................................. 5
  Career capital .................................................................................................. 6
  Expectancy theory .......................................................................................... 7
  International assignments effect on careers ................................................. 8
Methodology ....................................................................................................... 9
  Methodological considerations ......................................................................... 9
  Phenomenological approach .......................................................................... 10
    Bracketing out researcher bias ...................................................................... 10
Execution ........................................................................................................... 11
  Pre-study and main study .............................................................................. 11
    Part one ......................................................................................................... 11
    Part two ........................................................................................................ 12
    Choice of informants .................................................................................. 13
Data collection .................................................................................................. 14
  Qualitative interviews .................................................................................... 14
Ethics .................................................................................................................. 14
Analysis ............................................................................................................. 15
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Validity</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part one: international mobility</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expatriation in a global market</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The international mobility department</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The international mobility department’s view</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part two: Employee careers and expatriation</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expatriates are aware of their career capital</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High expectations</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes and tensions among the new workers</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal connections in the home organisation</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International business is driven by capitalism</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The expatriation cycle</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The global mindset is developed abroad but there is no clear plan how to utilise it</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The infamous career wobble</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding discussion</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Future research</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix I: Description of case study company</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

We are living in a global context and companies expand all over the world. Expatriation is a phenomenon that stems out of the wider phenomena of globalisation. The world is said to be more global with the implication that people and money in general are moving around the globe more frequently than before. When companies become multi-national companies (MNC: s) and expands to new areas of the world, establishing themselves in foreign countries, the significance of questions regarding expatriation becomes more important to discuss (Hill, Cronk and Wickramasekera 2011). Globalization as a term is often regarded as something abstract at a high level of abstraction. Expatriation of employees to work in overseas locations is something very concrete and a direct product of the globalization process on the higher level of abstraction (Hill, Cronk and Wickramasekera 2011).

A common practice in multi-national enterprises is to staff important managerial roles in overseas operations with personnel from the company’s country of origin. These persons are called expatriate managers (Hill, Cronk and Wickramasekera 2011). These practices are currently very common in multi-national enterprises (Tharenou and Harvey 2006). To expatriate a manager is very expensive (Krell 2005). Expatriation serves several purposes for MNC:s. Expatriation is typically used to support foreign operations within the same company. Expatriation may also be used for human resource development and organisation development purposes. Expatriates might be sent abroad to develop talents or with the purpose of strengthening the flow of cultural knowledge between offices in different countries within the MNC (Dickmann, Brewster and Sparrow 2008).

The purpose of expatriation used to be of task specific character: the expatriate was needed to do a certain task in the overseas location, for example establish a new filial or support a newly started foreign operation. Today expatriation is used for a wider range of purposes. Organisations have recognized the need of information exchange between local offices and the HQ and the possibility to develop potential talents through expatriation missions abroad (Dickmann, Brewster and Sparrow 2008). With the advent of new forms of expatriation purposes and missions, new problems arise. Some scholars have pointed out the need to understand underlying
motivations in individuals that are accepting expatriation contracts. Others have argued that the research on careers for international assignments candidates needs to be studied further (Dickmann, Brewster and Sparrow 2008; Mayrhofer et al 2007).

Problem discussion

Prevalent problems in expatriation discussions are often related to the return of the employee to his or her home country after finishing his or her placement abroad, also called repatriation (Hill, Cronk and Wickramasekera 2011; Doherty et al. 2008; Cerdin 2008). Problems that may arise for a homecoming expatriate may be of the same kind as for an outgoing expatriate, it is sometimes referred to as a reversed cultural shock (Doherty et al. 2008). Among other problems such as cultural re-adoption repatriates often experience that that the competence they have acquired abroad is not recognized when returning home. They often feel overlooked by the organisation and some experience a “career wobble” (Doherty and Dickmann 2008 p257). These phenomena’s are often not dealt with by the organisation and some repatriates quit their job shortly upon returning to their home country. They might also feel dissatisfied with their career development upon their homecoming and feel that their work abroad is not rewarding them in terms of career advancement in their organisation at home. When a repatriate choose to leave the organisation, valuable knowledge is lost and it is in the organisations interest to try to keep repatriates and develop their talent even further within the organisation (Doherty and Dickmann 2008).

A great deal of research has been conducted on the topic of expatriation in general and various sub-fields to expatriation. Most of this literature, however, is of empirical-descriptive character and there is a lack of theoretical grounding in the field (Black and Mendenhall 1990). There is also a lack of qualitative research aimed at exploring underlying motives and motivation for expatriation. It could be argued that many studies have a methodological problem. Many research articles in the field more or less ambiguously focus on factors which are said to be relevant from a pragmatic perspective, and then examine the correlation between these. Employees’ motives and beliefs are not examined enough and there is a compelling need for understanding actors’ motivations to undertake international assignments (Doherty and Dickmann 2008 p255). Cerdin (2008) has a pithy conclusion about expatriation research:
intrinsic motivation is crucial for good performance during international assignments and the impact of career motivation in international assignments is yet to be discovered.

Some researchers have pointed out that the research has drawn little attention from commercial firms (Black and Mendenhall 1990; Shen and Lang 2009) and that this may be due to the lack of theoretical grounding in the previous research (Shen and Lang 2009). This might not be very strange considering the methodology used by researchers in this field of study. This thesis means that it is important to seek validity for the research results as a whole, and not just focus on reliability for statistical results from quantitative data sets. This thesis aims to fill a gap in the relatively unexplored field in the research field by focusing on actors’ motivations and beliefs related to expatriation and careers.

**Purpose**

The purpose for this thesis is to explore how expatriates experience that international assignments affect their careers. What view does the organisation have on careers for their staff sent on international assignments? Is there a discrepancy between the two views?

**Definitions**

There are many definitions of what a career is. This thesis adopts the assumptions about careers used by Mayrhofer et al (2007): careers are located at the “intersection of societal history and individual biography” (Grandjean 1981 p1057) and represents actors’ movement through a social structure over time (Becker and Strauss 1956 p253), they link micro- and macro-frames of references (Schein 1978) that traditionally have been regarded as indissoluble (Barley 1989; Gunz 1989; Hughes 1937).

This thesis focuses on employees’ professional careers. A professional career is in this thesis the journey the employee undertakes in his or her working life. The professional career is excluding private activities and focusing on salaried positions in an employee’s working life. As pointed out by Hughes (1937) career theory (on the theory level of abstraction) needs to incorporate both subjective and objective dimensions of careers. This thesis focus mainly on the subjective
dimension of careers, how individual employees apprehend their careers and how this is related to the organisational regime they are working under.

**Research question**

From the problem discussion and the purpose the research question can be summarised to: How can we understand expatriate employees’ experience of international assignment in the context of globalisation? The thesis seeks to explain the apparent discrepancy between the employee’s positive career expectation and the reception of transnational work.

**Thesis outline**

The thesis departs in the section theory and previous research where an outlook of theories and previous empirical studies in the field is undertaken. In this section it is explained what a career is and what issues previous research have discussed. The theoretical point of departure is then summarised. Thereafter follows the section methodology which explains the thesis’ methodological choices and considerations including ethical considerations in social sciences research. In the subsequent section the thesis results is accounted for. The result section presents the empirical evidence obtained during the study. The results are presented and analysed thematically based on the study's theoretic approach: in conclusion, the study's results and its implications. The discussion section concludes with an account of some issues that emerged during the conduction of this study and finally there are suggestions presented of ideas for future research.
Theoretical framework

The aim and research questions are investigated through several theories that aim to explain the situation of the expatriate employee (neo-Marxist theory), career as fields (Bourdieuian career theory) and expectations on career and the expatriation process (expectancy theory).

The new worker

The neo-Marxist perspective on labour sets the stage for understanding who the employees are that are being subject to such dramatic changes in working conditions as overseas expatriation can be seen as.

Marx’ theories have given rise to a debate on proletarianization of the professionals among academic scholars, especially among “sociologists of the professions and theorists of class structure” (Derber 1983 p309). Some argue that the salaried professionals (white collar employees) are the new working class in the post-industrial society (Derber 1983). From Marx’ theory Derber (1983) states that the white collar worker lacks control in two senses since he is forced to sell his labour to capitalists: first control over the process of his labour and second of the usage of the product and hence the theories earlier developed by Marx is applicable to the modern white collar worker. Derber states “Ideological proletarianization creates a type of worker whose integrity is threatened less by the expropriation of his skill than his values or sense of purpose. It reduces the domain of freedom and creativity to problems of technique; it thus creates workers… who act as technicians of functionaries.” (Derber 1983 p316).

Derber argues that salaried professionals needs to adopt the organisation’s goals as their own which would make them alienated in Marxist terms. According to Derber professionals try to minimise disparities between their interest and organisational interest and perceive their institutions (organisations) as committed to their own psychological purpose with their career: “The investment of initial trust in the organisation, normally a psychological condition of accepting employment within it, leads... to a routine acceptance and growing identification with
organisation ends. Their own survival and career development dependent on such identification, many professionals slowly emerge as a new caste of ‘organisation man,’…” (Derber 1983 p330).

**Career capital**

Mayrhofer et al (2007) proposes that Bourdieu’s theory of habitus can be used as a powerful tool to understand international careers. Bourdieu’s terms habitus, capital and field can give guidance to how international careers can be understood. Careers unfold within a pattern set of practices that constitutes a network of positions. Individual employees make their moves in a social context that could be seen as career fields: “Owning a specific portfolio of field-relevant capital, individuals try to maintain or improve their place in the given and unfolding network of work-related positions.” (Mayrhofer et al 2007 p92). Bourdieu’s notion of habitus would in the career context mean that the actor thinks and acts according to the rules of the field: climbing hierarchical ladders, increasing reputation, achieving expert status etc.

Capital is an integral part in Bourdieu’s theory of habitus (Crossley 2001). Individuals possess both a specific habitus and what Bourdieu calls capital. More specifically four kinds of capital: economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986). This gives meaning in the context: “In a similar way, different types of career habitus are to a greater or lesser extent suitable for different career fields… Career habitus is the deeply internalized, usually unconscious incorporation of the social environment; career capitals, although linked to the individual, are more easily to recognise externally. The interplay between career capitals and career habitus in a specific career field, populated by other individual and collective actors, contributes the emerging career patterns.” (Mayrhofer et al 2007 p95).

Bourdieu (1986) describes symbolic capital as a particular social field’s rules that specify which combination of the three basic forms of capital that will be authorised as symbolic capital, thus becoming socially recognised as legitimate. In the career context symbolic capital is interpreted in the term career capital: the particular sort of capital valued within a career field (Mayrhofer et al 2007). Theoretically an international assignment could be seen as symbolic capital among managers if this is something that is regarded as something of high value for a good manager.
The importance of career capital in relation to international assignment is in how the career capital concept can be used to understand expectations and effect on motivation for international assignments (Mayrhofer et al 2007). The employee and the employer are normally both aware of the fact that the employee has a professional career by working for the employer. Optimally there should be an exchange between the two parties about career progress and potential outcome of performing well in a certain work position (Cerdin 2008; Mayrhofer et al 2007). In this way both the employee and the employer can satisfy their needs from this relationship. Career capital could as a concept be used to understand how the employee is developing and performing when pursuing a professional career (Mayrhofer et al 2007). There are optimally a few outspoken or implicit facts that both parties are aware of, for example good management performance normally leads to higher career capital: An experience of a managerial position with good results which both parties consider valuable. Similar it may be that international assignments experience is perceived as something favourable that enhances the employee’s career capital.

**Expectancy theory**

Expectancy theory stems from theory streams in both psychology and sociology. It states in essence that people value the result of what they give and they get from the result of what others get from the same equation (Vroom 1964; Lawler 1981; Merton and Kitt 1950). The very essence of careers is affected by expectancy in that good behaviour is promoted and that one could enhance the chances of career opportunities by acting as expected by the organisation: doing a good job. Career management has as a purpose to motivate employees to do a good job. This is often based on motivation theories of various kinds. The purpose of career management is to promote good work which is rewarded so that employees are encouraged to work even better. The individual does something good that leads to a career reward that leads to a continuation of good behaviour or even increases the "good" behaviour (le Grand 2003). This simple explanation is clear but not entirely unproblematic. An effort is not necessarily a concrete event that can be measured or clearly observed. A good work can be a complicated pattern of events usually with multiple interacting actors. As work has become more of a team play it can be difficult to deduce the individual’s contributions to the group. There is a problem in deriving the labour input to be rewarded. It can also be difficult to know what an (contextual) appropriate reward is: what
management believes to be a reward needs not to be perceived as such by the employee. (le Grand 2003).

Expectancy theory is in essence the perception of the relationship between what the individual experiences from the results of his or her actions versus similar results by a reference group, which is not always obvious to the employer. Redman and Wilkinson (2001 p106) also points out that: "While money [or other career rewards] has only limited power to motivate, it does have the probability to demotivate employees if they are dissatisfied with the amount they receive or the way in which this amount is determined ."

**International assignments effect on careers**

Employees often believe that international assignments have a positive impact on their career. They believe that international assignments make it easier to advance in organisational hierarchies and make it easier to get promoted or to get a better remuneration. One common assumption is that the employee’s international assignment develops a *global mindset* in the individual which is seen as an acquired competence that enhances the employee’s understanding of the global organisation and hence his or her organisational competence (Doherty et al. 2008; Scullion and Linehan 2005).

Some researchers have pointed out that this might be a misconception, and that the opposite in reality might be true (Doherty and Dickmann 2008). A returning employee (repatriate) may face several career related obstacles upon his or her return to the home country organisation: there might be a lack of suitable job positions for the repatriate and a lack of career clarity. The expatriate might also have missed career opportunities in the home organisation while abroad and risk facing a situation where former colleagues have outperformed him or her while he or she was working abroad. These career obstacles to an employee who is accepting an international assignment is not always communicated from the organisation to the employee and might come as an unpleasant surprise upon repatriation (Doherty and Dickman 2008).
Methodology

This section starts with an account of the methodological considerations made in this thesis and their implications for the study. The phenomenological point of departure is then discussed where the researcher bias is accounted for. The execution of the study is then described to show how the study was conducted. Thereafter follows an account of ethics and validity.

Methodological considerations

This thesis explores how expatriates experience that international assignments affect their careers. It focuses on how individual employees apprehend their careers and how this is related to the organisational regime they are working under. Previous research has embraced a quantitative research orientation but this thesis will take a qualitative approach to the topic.

Qualitative method in general and interviews in particular can be a fruitful method to discover information about underlying values and thoughts that may not be embraced when filling out a quantitative questionnaire (Aspers 2007; Silverman 2006). By conducting qualitative research this thesis aims to bring more knowledge of the underlying motivation in actors of an organisation. The thesis focuses on the employee-side with both present candidates for expatriation as well as repatriates. The thesis further tries to shed some light on the managerial thoughts concerning expatriation and employee careers displayed by managerial representatives in the organisation.

As previously mentioned the main focus is subjective career aspects, how the employees subjectively conceive of their careers, which makes interviews suitable (Silverman 2006; Peräkylä 2005). Silverman (2006) writes that a researcher must take precaution and not use interviews out of routine but consider possible alternatives and Aspers (2007) states that a researcher must be aware of his or her limitations, both personal and external. Limitations such as time and fiscal resources excludes some other possible methods that might have given fruitful data: an observation study in the work place at both the overseas and home location was thought of but discarded due to lack of monetary resources hence the final choice of solely conducting
interviews. Interviews further give the researcher a possibility to dig deeper into the informants’ stories and opinions than would be possible with statistic or observational methods.

**Phenomenological approach**

This thesis adopts a phenomenological approach to explore actors’ perception of expatriation and careers and their underlying beliefs and motivations in relation to this topic. Phenomenological approaches are often used to describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept (Creswell 2007). The focus is to explore what different individuals’ experiences have in common to come down to the concepts “universal essence” (Creswell 2007 p58). The researcher bracket’s out his or her own personal experience and try to look at the empiry collected from a perspective outside his or her own understanding of the concept and extract the essence of the experience (Creswell 2007; Aspers 2001).

**Bracketing out researcher bias**

This section will bracket out the researcher’s previous experience with the topic and the field as described by Creswell (2007):

*I have as the author of this thesis tried to reflect on my own experience and describes it here. I have not had a corporate career yet and I have no personal experience of expatriation in the corporate sense. I have only had minor employment periods in my life and have spent my time at university which can be seen as a kind of career, however not a corporate career. What I do have experienced that comes close to expatriation is a period of exchange studies in Perth, Australia. It can be said that this in some aspects is similar to an international assignment in a company. I strived hard for achieving good results in school and applied for exchange studies. I then prepared myself and arranged with all the details around moving to my host university. I represented my home university as an exchange student at the host university, studied there for one semester and then returned home. I had little help from the university to settle the details around my studies overseas and managed most practical issues myself. I had however a contact person at my home university as well as a contact person at the host university. I returned to my assigned study program when I returned back to Sweden.*
Execution

Pre-study and main study

A pre-study as defined by Aspers (2001; 2007) is a small study preparing the researcher for the main study. The extent of the pre-study in this thesis makes it a little bit different from the Asperian pre-study. It is more suitable to name it part one of two field works. This first part was as extensive, in terms of collected empirical material as the main empirical study and hence the phases of the empirical field works will be called part one and part two. However, in methodological terms, the proceeding in the empirical study was similar to the pre-study and main study as explained by Aspers (2001; 2007). The first empirical part was conducted with certain knowledge about the field, and this knowledge expanded, quite naturally with the first empirical study which affected the proceeding to the part two of the empirical study which follows the research methodology when conducting a pre-study which leads to the main study in the Asperian field work methodology. To simplify: the methodology follows the qualitative research method with a pre-study and a main study with the exception that the pre-study is here as extensive as the main study and they are hence called part one and part two.

Part one

The first empirical part for this thesis was conducted on a broad basis with informants from five Swedish multi-national companies headquartered in Stockholm. The five informants were management representatives within human resources management (HRM). The chosen informants were working in the companies’ international mobility (expatriation) departments and in charge of the expatriation process at their respective company. The informants were found on the professional social network LinkedIn (LinkedIn 2011) and were chosen on a modified snowball procedure. Within the LinkedIn network there are sub-networks for different professions. The first two informants were found when searching for people who had mentioned in LinkedIn that they were working within the field of international mobility. Two more were then found in the first three informants’ LinkedIn sub-networks. One informant was found by a referral from one of the informants found in the LinkedIn search procedure.

The purpose of first empirical part was to gain some initial contact and access to the research field as recommended by Aspers (2007). The first part also focus on the company side of
expatriation: what is the company perspective on expatriation, which questions are most important to the company and what do the companies choose to emphasize in the expatriation process? Another purpose was to conduct an initial empirical test of the theoretical assumptions in the academic literature reviewed to see what relevance that could be assigned to different topics in the expatriation research field. Some practical limitations were also discovered and taken into account, for example where potential informants were working and how to gain access to relevant employees for conducting interviews. From the information given in the first empirical part the research focus was narrowed down to only embrace careers in relation to expatriation and international assignments.

Part two

After the first part a case study method was chosen as the primary source of data. In the first part the focus was on how companies view the expatriation process and for the second part it was decided to focus on only one company when searching for the expatriate employee’s view on the topic. Creswell (2007) advocates the case study when the researcher can gain access to several informants within an organisation and it is meaningful to interview several informants that have common pre-requisites. Companies have different international mobility policies and have organised the work around international assignments in different ways. Some companies outsource all the work related to international assignments (i.e. pre-departure training, overseas assistance et cetera). A company was chosen that has centred the human resources related to international mobility in its headquarter in the Stockholm area. The company was chosen after an interview with its manager of international mobility. This choice was taken on both practical and theoretical grounds: practical to be able to gain access to a wide range of informants and theoretical in the sense that only employees with the same organisational background working under the same conditions were to be interviewed. It can be interesting to compare narratives from informants with different pre-conditions for their international assignments career experience but it was for this thesis chosen to be more relevant to be able to compare narratives developed under common conditions and organisational restraints due to the relatively small number of informants in the main study.
Choice of informants

The purpose with the thesis is to reveal underlying motivations and intrinsic career motivation and thoughts around possibilities and restraints regarding career and international assignments hence it is sensible to recognise different kinds of international assignments and their different phases. Therefore a heterogeneous stratum of informants was selected. The company has mainly three kinds of expatriate assignment contracts: short-term, long-term and an international talent development programme, ITDP. The purpose of the first two is to perform a mission abroad whereas the ITDP seeks to give talented employees international experience within the organisation to develop their skills needed in the organisation. The selected stratum included employees with experience on long-term contracts and ITDP-contracts. It included employees who had already done a contract abroad, who had undertaken ITDP, who was to go on a long term contract and who was to go on an ITDP contract. In addition two management representatives were selected, one HR-manager and the manager of international mobility (international assignments), in total five informants were selected and all were subsequently interviewed.

The manager of international mobility can be seen as a gatekeeper (Aspers 2007; Silverman 2005) who restricts the access to the organisation. The researcher requested to interview a selection of candidates as described above and the mentioned manager assigned the task of selecting informants to one of her subordinates. There is a risk of a biased selection when using a gatekeeper, however given the restraints for the thesis there were few alternatives. In such a research task, among other topics trying to reveal employees’ conception of the organisation as a either good or bad employer there might be a risk that the gatekeeper tries to limit the selection to favourable employees which impacts on the credibility of the study. In this case this was of course a risk that was taken into consideration but regarded as a minor risk. A more serious consequence of this choice of a case study is that the most unsatisfied or disgruntled employees probably are out of reach: it is most likely so that they have already quitted their job and continued elsewhere. With this consequence in mind, and to try to compensate for the loss of “data extremes”, the selection is constituted by representatives for the whole expatriate cycle: an aspiring expatriate, a soon to be expatriate, a repatriate et cetera.
Data collection

Qualitative interviews

Five informants have been interviewed. They all work in the same company but they work in different departments. They have got the opportunity to choose time and place for the interview. All the interviews have been conducted in the informants’ respective work place. All the interviews have been conducted in a professional but friendly manner and all the interviews have gone smoothly without disruptions. Ethical concerns have been discussed with each informant before the interview and none have had any objections to their participation in the study.

When conducting qualitative research a central topic is how to record the collected material. For this study it was chosen not to use an audio recorder but to write down notes during the interview. Audio recording is favoured by many researchers but it might create a false sense of being “scientific” in the collection of data. The researcher is risking missing out on sensible information that is conceived of being sensitive by the informant and hence some information might be missed out on when using an audio recorder. The topic for the interviews was regarded as possibly somewhat sensitive to some informants and the decision was to only take notes during the interviews. The interviewer took notes on a laptop during the interviews and went through the notes directly after the interviews were finished.

The interviews did not follow a written guide but were individually adapted to each informant. The stratum of interviewees were heterogeneous and a generic set of question would be insufficient therefore this choice was made. The interviewees have all been given the opportunity to give feedback on the questions towards the end of each interview as well as they all have had the opportunity to convey answers to questions they thought were missing. Finally all informants have been given the opportunity to get the interview notes e-mailed to them, however none has requested that.

Ethics

When considering methodology there are many aspects to take into account. The most important aspect should in all qualitative studies be ethical considerations (Aspers 2007). This study has
followed the ethical guidelines developed by the Swedish council of research (Vetenskapsrådet 2011). In addition to the ethical guidelines the researcher has strived to show a professional and respectful attitude towards the informants and showed respect for their integrity. This focus on ethics and respect is not solely taken out of regulative constraints such as the ethical guidelines, but is also regarded by the researcher as something that might increase the reliability of the results.

**Analysis**

The notes from the interviews have been read and edited after each interview. The interviews have been conducted during a period of two months with time between each interview. Some academic scholar’s means that it is important to get time in-between interviews to reflect on the empiry collected (i.e. Aspers 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Each interview was carefully read and analysed after each interview. Aspers (2007) points out that the analysis of empiric material is a process were the first analytical phase starts already when the first interview starts, where the researcher continuously reflects on the empiry during the collection phase.

After all empirical material was collected an analysis was conducted. The material was read through and was structured and mapped down. It resulted in the coding into themes that was done. The coding was done manually without computer aid using colours, one colour for each theme. The coding procedure is analogue with the method Aspers’ calls “the margin method” (Aspers 2007 p172). The coded themes were then analysed more deeply and were interpreted from the theoretical framework for the thesis. The theoretical framework covered much of the analysis but parts of the empiry that was dissonant with the theoretical framework were reinterpreted in a similar way as Aspers calls “reciprocity between theory and empiry” (Aspers 2007).

All interviewees have contributed with about as much material for the analysis. In the section result none of the informants is overrepresented. People do of course express themselves more or less concise but this is not reflected in the results section in favour of a particular informant. None of the informants has however been cited more often than the others. Personal integrity and confidentiality are watchwords in this research and terms or expressions that can be traced to a specific informant have been exchanged to generic expressions.
Validity

There is no standard view on validation within qualitative research. There are different validation strategies used (Creswell 2007; Silverman 2005). Silverman points out that it is important to produce credible results within qualitative research (Silverman 2005). This thesis can be said to take a pragmatic view on credibility: the thesis is de facto validated through two major validation strategies mentioned by Creswell (2007). The first is a solid description of the research process as written in the method section. The second is that the thesis has gone through continuous examination by the tutor, which could be said to be a form of peer-review.

This thesis has 10 informants out of which only one informant has extensive personal experience of the whole expatriation cycle. Other informants have some personal experience from expatriation and other informants are working in expatriation management. This should be taken into consideration when reading the results and analysis. It is likely that information saturation is not reached in this empirical study regarding the topic of personal expatriate experience. This is a limitation in this empirical study and the results from the empirical study must be interpreted with great caution. There is no reason to believe that the information collected would be untrue but the material is not to be utilised to compose general explanations about the phenomenon examined.
Results

In this section the results from part one and part two of the empirical study are presented: first, part one with the company perspective is accounted for, then part two where mainly the employee perspective is described.

Part one: international mobility

Expatriation in a global market

Why is employees expatriated? This section starts with the findings about companies’ view on expatriation from the interviews made with international mobility managers in this study.

The company representatives interviewed for this thesis are expressing coherent motives and explanations about why there is expatriation. They say that expatriation supports their companies’ global effort to conduct business in the global market. It is independent of industry, there seems to be a global pressure on Swedish large cap companies to grow their international market revenue and they need a presence in the markets they are established in as well as they need to send out people to establish the companies in new markets. The informants say that the main reason to expatriate employees is to support the company operations in other countries. Companies send their employees to existing offices to transfer knowledge from the head quarter or parent organisation and they send their employees to start up new offices when entering new markets (countries). These contracts are completely employer driven: the employer has a commercial interest in having their home country employees present overseas to expand the company’s business. One manager says:

*To create opportunities for international deals is very important to us.*

There are also other reasons for expatriation. Some informants have mentioned that they believe that the company is perceived as a more attractive employer if it can offer job assignments in other countries. Another reason is to offer international assignment for educational purposes. Some means that it is enhancing employees’ competence to send them for an international
assignment. Short-term international assignment is a way to internally develop talents in the workforce. One company in the first part of the study makes personal career plans for their employees where an international assignment could be one major part of a career plan. The problem some informants stresses is that it is hard to maintain a good balance between communicated opportunities for employees and actual opportunities. The employees who might be most eager to pursue international assignments are often young and do not have the required competence for most international assignments and the expatriate contracts for educational purposes of employee development are expensive and relatively uncommon.

A general opinion among the interviewed managers in the first part of the study expresses the need for mobility within the organisation, even across borders. The sticking point is that the companies are unwilling to pay for relocating employees unless there is a direct need for it. A couple of informants believe that they will work more with self-initiated expatriation in the future. One informant says that her company actively researches how the company can expatriate employees without having to pay for a conventional expatriate contract through self-initiated expatriation: where an employee volunteers to move to another country to take on a specific task on behalf of the company.

**The international mobility department**

All companies in this study had a similar organisational structure in the expatriation department. Typically there is a department at the company headquarters which is in charge of the process when the company has decided to expatriate an employee. This department is typically called international mobility department and is normally subordinated the human resources department. Managers at other departments are in charge of deciding about who and when someone should be expatriated. The international mobility department then steps in to manage the expatriation process. It can be argued that the international mobility department is the company’s agent in the expatriation process which undertakes action in the expatriation process on behalf of the company. However the international mobility department sometimes merely serves as a service function towards other departments with no real influence over the process.

International mobility representatives interviewed in part one of the empirical studies said that they saw themselves as a supporting function to the responsible manager in the expatriation process. They typically work with the expatriation package, the whole deal around an
expatriation contract: compensation and benefit packages; housing benefits and additional expatriation benefits. They also work with practical issues such as supporting the employee to acquire a visa or arrange with practical matters.

**The international mobility department’s view**

The expatriation process is quite complex with many matters to consider: the employee is after all leaving his or her roots and familiar environment to undertake a mission abroad for the company. The company, through its agent the international mobility department, is however normally only considering practical issues like contracts and housing standards. The cost is always central, where the company try to minimise the associated costs of an expatriation contract. Surprisingly many managers at the international mobility departments have a background in law, and the discourse among the interviewed international mobility representatives is very technical: the focus is on how to write a good contract and how to make the process as cheap and effortless to the company as possible. Less value is placed on how to prepare the expatriates for something that might transform their lives forever: or as one manager says about cultural preparation:

“We don’t need to give them any cultural preparation. Our company culture is the same everywhere in the world so we don’t think they'll be exposed to so much of a different culture abroad”.

The international mobility department does not normally consider expatriate careers in particular. The responsibility for covering the career aspect: “what might happen with your career” is in the hands of the local manager who choose to expatriate an employee. There is no system covering this, but conducted at the individual department manager’s discretion. Some international mobility managers expressed a discomfort with this and thought that it would be better if they were given a greater scope of responsibilities from the company:

“There’s too much of taxes and costs and making efficient contracts. The soft core values are underestimated. [...] I’d like to work more with people in this area, now it’s all about looking up tax regulations in a country and making an efficient expatriate [employment] contract.”

An opinion some respondents had was that it is difficult to value international assignments effect on an employee’s competence and hence potential effects on careers:

“How should we value the experience? Shall we say, ok very good you’ve learned a lot during your time abroad and promote all repatriates? Then everyone at home will be disgruntled”
To some extent there might be a lack of understanding for personal growth and competence enhancement that may be the direct result of an international assignment and that the competence acquired may not be anticipated:

“Some people start to believe that they’re bigger and stronger than they actually are when they’ve been an expatriate manager. It’s like being a big fish in a small bowl. And when they return they’ve boosted their self-image and feels mistreated when we take them down to earth again here in the home organisation”

Part two: Employee careers and expatriation

In part two of the research a case study was conducted. A Swedish large-cap company was chosen and five employees were interviewed. The interviewed persons somewhat cover the expatriation cycle as well as management position involved in the expatriation cycle. The interviewed informants were an aspiring expatriate, a preparing (soon to leave) expatriate, a returned expatriate (repatriate) the expatriation manager and the HR-manager. The results from their view on expatriation and career are here presented in themes.

Expatriates are aware of their career capital

The respondents in this study’s second part who are employed and either has been expatriated or is going to be expatriated are very aware of their professional career but they listen to their personal spirit. They want to advance in hierarchy but choose to prioritise personal goals such as an adventure as an expatriate before climbing the corporate ladder the fastest way possible. They do not expect that a foreign assignment will help them a lot in career progress but believe that the experience will increase their value to the employer.

Who goes on to international assignments? From the respondents in this study’s second part who are employed and either have been expatriated or are going to be expatriated it is mostly the personal drive towards pursuing an international assignment that matters but also the company perceived potential in the candidate. The respondents in this study’s second part give voice for the view that it is individuals who pursue a career who are selected for expatriation. However the respondents says that this is not a compulsory step in climbing the organisational hierarchy ladder and hence the need for the spirit in candidates: the outspoken willingness to go abroad to
serve the company as an expatriate. Some respondents who are employed and either has been expatriated or is going to be expatriated says that promising high achieving employees choose not to accept a foreign assignment offer with the argument that it will have a negative impact on the career (i.e. slow the hierarchical climbing).

One informant who has worked for the company for almost five years and is about to leave on an expatriation contract said:

> From [yy] (in the HR-department) has it been like “You’ll take half a step up [on the corporate ladder]” and from management it’s said to be a good career move to go abroad […] I don’t go abroad to get a better position when I get back again. I go abroad for the adventure and to work for [case study Company] where everything’s happening.

**Global mindset**

The concept of a global mindset was introduced in the theoretical section and it is related to by several informants: employees experience it as the company invests in them and value them accordingly. Typically this is perceived as something that raises their internal value in the company and makes the employee more worth to the company. This also gives a sense of security in the expatriation process:

> “If [company] invests ex number of millions [crows] in me I expect that [company] wants to utilise that investment when I return again.”
>
> “The best way of utilising me after I return would be to give me a job that lets me use my acquired [international] skills.

**High expectations**

An international assignment is quite a life changing event. The interviewed employees have high expectations that the company will cover everything and support the employee with anything that might come up in relation to this. Employees expect the company to fix everything prior to the assignment for instance moving house and language training. They expect a great deal of support during their assignment: assistance with getting local permits, help with school placement et cetera. Upon their repatriation they expect the company to assist them with the process of moving back again. The patience with inconsistencies from what has been “said” or “promised” is generally low, however some small mistakes are overlooked but still subject to a raised distrust.
"I was close to decline the [expatriation] offer ... I went to [country] for a preparation trip ... First and foremost it was all about the housing conditions: they gave me an apartment but I said that I must have alternatives [housing] to look at... They [HR-department] have a bad conception on what it's like there. They should know better, we've sent people there for so many years”.

Attitudes and tensions among the new workers

The typical expatriation cycle wants to go, preparing to go, going, returning. A finding in this research is that the expatriation cycle is a development process for an individual. There seems to be a change in attitude along with the expatriation cycle.

This thesis has found that there is a clear difference in attitude along the expatriation cycle: the attitude towards foreign assignments and the company in general is different in employees at different parts of the expatriation cycle. The want-to-go employee is much more optimistic in his or her attitude and has strong belief in the company. To the contrary the employee who has returned from a foreign assignment is more uncertain about the company and the trust in the company is affected negatively. The interview transcripts were coded with red for negative or sceptical comments about the company and blue was used to code positive or optimistic comments. The change from blue to red when reading through the interviews was quite significant. However this in itself is not a statistic measure but should be regarded as a qualitative measure observed in the coding process.

One employee who is about to leave on an expatriate contract said:

"It [expatriation] has given me a positive image; you can see that they [the expatriates] are well out there... [Company] is a good company, they take care of me even when abroad, and they look after the individual.”

And one expatriate who have experience of the expatriation process said:

[Company] has burned one of their core values and that is respect for the individual. [Company] doesn’t respect my family.

One returned expatriate said:

"[Company] doesn’t really care about the people. They just want people to go out and work for the company.”
**Personal connections in the home organisation**

The responsibility for the expatriation process is formally in the hands of the HR- and international mobility departments. However this thesis has found that the role of the local manager should not be underestimated. The local manager sometimes select who to promote for expatriation and in the case study in part two the local managers were important to some while unimportant to others but still mentioned as an important part in the process. One informant said that he pursued an international assignment to escape from his local manager. Another informant who was about to leave on a foreign assignment mentioned his local manager as crucial to him since he was the only one in the company that the informant could really trust:

“If [xx in HR-department] where in charge of my re-employment I would be seriously worried. I really trust [yy] and I know that he will support me when I’ll return from [country]”.

What really is expressed is that expatriates stresses that it is important for an expatriate to have a good network with people they trust in the home organisation. Sometimes it is their local manager and sometimes it is someone else who has some influence in the home organisation. The interviews have revealed that there is a plan from the company for expatriates and their careers, but expatriates rarely rely on that this plan works. They hence feel that it is important to have a good relationship to their local manager or a network with trusted persons within the home organisation. One informant expresses his view on this:

*In the end it’s all about you. I don’t believe in structure or career plans. In the end it boils down to the individual, the ones who want something will be successful. The ones who make a good career have done something and it has been seen. [...] Myself, I’ve networked a lot in the company [...] and when I returned from my [expatriate] contract I had plenty to choose from.*
Analysis

The analysis is divided into three themes based on the theoretical framework. The themes relate the results to the theoretical themes in the theoretical framework.

**International business is driven by capitalism**

Expatriation is driven by the employer’s need to conduct international business. There is a clear discrepancy between how the company describes expatriation and its purpose and the employees’ description and their motivation to undertake an expatriation contract. At a surface level there seems to be a quite good understanding between the employer-employee views: the contract to go abroad is to conduct business for the company and this in turn will be fruitful for the employee and his or her career outlook. Ultimately when push comes to shove individual interests in employees are superseded by the capitalist interests in the employer.

Derber (1983) argues one common strategy employees use is to take the company goals as one’s own. It can be that the employee agrees to go working abroad for the company to strengthen the company’s international business since the employee identifies himself (or herself) as a business person that is driven by business challenges. At the same time most of the respondents underlying motivations is to take on expatriate contracts to realise personal goals about adventures and discovering the world. There is a clear discrepancy between how the company representatives and the employees are talking about expatriation. The company management representatives are more or less solely business focused whereas the employees are focused on soft core values such as seeking adventure or personal growth.

Derber (1983) also argues that proletarianization today is about expropriation of value or sense of purpose. This can be seen in the career planning upon homecoming. As one respondent stated, when the employee goes out it is to fill a vacant important position for the company’s international business but when returning it is not sure that there is a suitable job for the employee to return to.
The international mobility managers interviewed all acknowledge that the rules of the game are basic capitalistic principles and that their work is to get the expatriation costs down and increase organisational efficiency. However there are signs that some international mobility managers are in discomfort with this. At least one of the informants in part one of the studies express an ambivalent view: there is too much focus on money and contracts and too little focus on human values. Interpreted from the neo-Marxist perspective this is a way of giving voice to the discrepancy between corporate capitalistic goals and a view on human capital as an inviolable asset.

The results in this thesis support the neo-Marxist approach to white collar working conditions. Global capital is to some extent superseding human capital. The employer-employee relationship is at the surface favourable to both parties but under scrutiny this relationship is never to the employee’s favour. This is expressed in the statements about hardships expatriates’ experiences both abroad and upon returning to their home organisation. There is evidence that even corporate core values such as putting respect for the individual first are superseded by company management in the expatriation process. Respondents have indicated that there is a discrepancy between the normally conveyed picture, officially stated values et cetera and the actual proceedings in the expatriation administration. The main focus of capitalistic mechanisms is to produce profit and in the end it is these mechanisms that overrule the more qualitative human values and beliefs. It is however unclear how the organisational mechanisms work together to create this situation.

**The expatriation cycle**

A finding in this research is that the expatriation cycle is a development process for an individual. However it is unclear if this finding is applicable to other conditions than the case study sample and it is not possible to draw general conclusions from this finding. An initial enthusiasm with compassionate work and a drive to deliver takes the employee upwards in the company hierarchy. This in turn opens the door to being selected for foreign assignments, such as serving as an expatriate for the company. The employee then goes on and undertake the foreign assignment, during the foreign assignment the spirit and reality meet, the expatriate returns after the assignment is done and have a another view on expatriation, in some cases almost delusion. This can be seen as how the value or sense of purpose is captured. It might be to
exaggerate to describe it as alienation but this phenomenon could be likened to alienation as
described by Derber (1983).

The expatriation attitude cycle which is based on the interviews with three case study informants
who are in the expatriation cycle could also be explained as how the employee is experiencing an
awakening in the company goal as its own delusion. The interpretation can also be less harsh
since the sample of respondents is limited and it is difficult to draw certain conclusions from it.
Alternatively it could be said that the discrepancies between company and individual goals are
revealed slowly during the process and that initial expectations were wrong. Another way of
interpreting these findings is to refer to expectancy theory: initial high expectations in employees
are not met by the company. In principle may be caused by either the employee having
unrealistic expectations or the company conveying unrealistic promises. In reality there is a
floating scale between the two and this thesis has not revealed where the truth lies in-between the
two outlines. The sample of respondents is small and there might be other explanations to be
made from a more comprehensive empirical study.

This problem may also relate to the lack of clarity about the career value of international
assignments: employers who were interviewed in this empirical study where uncertain as how to
assess the value of the skills and knowledge an employee generally is acquiring abroad. It might
be that employers still need to convey the essence of this increased career capital before the
employee accepts an international assignment. There might be misunderstandings in this process.
The employee might have problems estimating the career value and impact of the international
assignment. The employee might just refer to the costs the company will have in the expatriation
contract and deduct that the raised cost is a direct investment in the employee’s career. At the
same time the employer might only consider the higher cost as a budget post or in business terms
“a higher variable cost”. This interpretation also relates to the next topic of career capital, further
described in the subsequent paragraph.
The global mindset is developed abroad but there is no clear plan how to utilise it

Most of the respondents in this study’s second part who are employed and either have been expatriated or are going to be expatriated were aware of their competence development or expected competence development during international assignments. They were anticipating a more positive career outlook from their international assignment. However it is not suitable to say that expatriation is meant to develop career capital. The respondents in this study give voice for the view that international assignments can be used to develop talents within the organisation. This is sometimes the outspoken purpose with an international assignment. However it is not even in these particular cases where career development or the global mindset development is in focus proper to say that the organisation is fully aware of how this talent is supposed to be capitalised on in terms of careers. Hence international assignments cannot be seen as a move to develop career fields. Nor do employees in general pursue career capital leverage by accepting international assignments. Increases in career capital, or enhanced career outlook is rather a by-product of the choice to accept an expatriation contract than a driving motivator. It could be stated though that employees identifies that the company invest in them in fiscal terms. They hence feel a greater comfort with the risks involved since they believe that the company would act rational in capitalistic terms and try to utilise the investment in them in terms of giving them a good career outlook.

There are inconsistencies about what constitutes career capital in the international assignments area and uncertainty from organisations on how to interpret experience from international assignments in a career context. There are plans and procedures made by the organisation for careers in relation to international assignments. However the impression from the respondents in this empirical study is that there seems to be no clear common understanding of what international experience is worth to the organisation.

Mayrhofer et al (2007) tries to theorise on careers from Bourdieu’s (1986) term symbolic capital. The authors means that career capital is “the particular sort of capital valued within a career field” (Mayrhofer et al 2007 p94). In the context of the case study company and to some extent the interviewed international mobility managers, there seems to be a consideration of career
capital in the expatriation process and an acknowledgement of its existence. However there
seems to be uncertainty among these respondents about how to interpret actual international
experience and how to translate that into valuation strategies. It could be argued that this is a
general problem the respondents might have with all kind of experiences: that there is a general
uncertainty about how to interpret and translate work related experienced into something that
could be accounted for in career planning. To make an attempt at taking a stand: from the
empirical material in this study there seems to be greater uncertainty around international
management experience’s value in a professional career than conventional career events such as
promotion progress in the home organisation.

There is also some distrust among the respondents in this study’s second part who are employed
and either have been expatriated or are going to be expatriated towards the official career
planning which results in the employees relying on their personal connections rather than the
agreed upon process structure. This falls outside the scope of the theoretical framework used in
this thesis but could be related to bureaucracy studies by Alwin Gouldner (1964): that if people
within a bureaucratic system feels limited or feel distrust they will find ways around the system
to get their will through.

The infamous career wobble

In a great deal of the research on the topic of repatriation in expatriate management literature the
notion of a career wobble is mentioned. It is a phenomenon described as an unexpected career
difficulty upon repatriation often related to lack of comprehensive planning of the employee’s
return to the home organisation.

The description of the career wobble, an effect on careers by international assignments by
Doherty and Dickmann (2008) is acknowledged by the respondent in this study’s second part
who is employed has been expatriated. Doherty and Dickmann’s research pointed out that there
are uncertainties about the effects on individual careers by international assignment and that
there is a general notion of international assignments as something that enhances one’s career
outlook. The results in this thesis points in the same direction: in general international
assignments seems to be something positive in general but does not automatically bring the
positive effects on an employee’s career. There have been several accounts among informants in
this study who raises the topic of uncertainty. There seems to be as if the company in general have an idea of how the expatriation should be managed but that the process is subject to inconsistencies and inaccurate measures. At the same time as one repatriate said that the company is really good at expatriate management, concerns were expressed in the next sentence that there are these and these obstacles when going through the expatriation process and the only way to be sure to be treated right is to know a lot of people in the company and work with your personal network. The company process is supposed to capture and utilise abroad acquired knowledge but this is more by chance than precision if it really happens.

The expatriation process must be better at formally facilitating abroad acquired knowledge. The company needs also to be better at communicating the outlook to the individual employee. There seems to be expatriate contracts that do not lead to a greater career outlook for the individual and in these cases this must be communicated to avoid misunderstandings, employee concerns and ultimately disillusioned repatriate employees.

However, in the majority of the expatriation cases in the case study organisation there is a career enhancement potential. But there needs to be a better utilisation of acquired knowledge. Today the company has a career plan for an employee about to be expatriated but the company needs to improve some points: the human resources balance sheet need to be updated. What is the particular gain for the company that this employee has been doing this expatriate mission? What have the company’s investment in the employee in terms of money and time resulted in and how do we best utilise this upon repatriation?
Concluding discussion

This thesis departed in the discussion on globalisation and international assignments for employees in multi-national companies. International assignments were described as a by-product of the more abstract notion of globalisation. The study sought to understand how employees and employers consider international assignments. From the theory and results in this thesis it seems likely that globalisation has had an impact on companies: they now need to have a more internationally experienced work force. Globalisation has forced companies to develop new ways to develop international talent and the international assignments have become more diverse. This insight stems from interviews with international mobility managers in the first part of the empirical study but this study would conclude that it seems likely that this is true rather than to generalise from qualitative empirical material which is problematic.

The empirical study in this thesis sought to understand how this work force development is perceived by employees and employers. The results show that there are sometimes tensions between company motives for international assignments and employee motives for international assignments. This thesis has observed that globalisation is a driver for international assignment through the interviews in part one of the empirical study. The empirical study conducted has contributed to the understandings about motives on the individual level but did not seek to explain how globalisation changes international assignments. The validity of these results is however in doubt given the relatively limited extent of interviews with employees with extensive personal experience with the whole expatriation cycle. It could be stated however that the results from interviews with the international assignments managers indicate that globalisation and international assignments seems to go hand in hand. It would be interesting to discover if and how organisations re-organise their human resources competence to meet new demand due to globalisation. However, this falls outside of the scope of this thesis which mainly has focused on individual motives in relation to international assignments.

Previous research says that corporations have difficulties in facilitating the career process for their employees in connection with international assignments (Cerdin 2008; Doherty and Dickmann 2008). This might be true but it seems that there are more nuances to the picture than
the one described in previous research. While previous research has been quantitative and inclined to answer questions like “What does expatriates say?” this thesis has had the ambition to get down to the narratives and answer “Why do they say that?” This thesis’ investigation of the research question has shed light on the employee-employer relation in international assignments. In regards to the empirical material the employer representative side is overrepresented and the results in this thesis should be interpreted with that in consideration.

This thesis has investigated underlying motivation in employees for undertaking international assignments. The results confirm to some extent the findings in previous research and broaden the understanding for the individual motivation for undertaking international assignments. This finding may however be of uncertain value to the research field due to the fact that there was only one respondent who was representative of the category of employees with extensive personal experience of the whole expatriation cycle. This thesis has found that there is a discrepancy between how the company describes expatriation and its purpose and the employees’ description and their motivation to undertake an expatriation contract. Ultimately, individual interests in employees are superseded by the capitalist interests in the employer at the particular case study company.

This study has shed light on intrinsic motivators such as seeking adventure and cultural challenges among employees who are going on an international assignment or who have been on an international assignment. It has found some evidence for the career wobble problem described in previous research adding some personal narratives to the problem description. This finding is however based on only one respondent’s personal story and may not be interpreted as a generalised result. Previous research has pointed out the need for understanding intrinsic motivation in relation to expatriation and this thesis has found a clash between intrinsic motivation in employees and the employer demand on cost efficiency and capitalistic interests. This thesis has in the results from the first part of the empirical study found that there are inconsistencies about what constitutes career capital in the international assignments area and uncertainty from organisations on how to interpret experience from international assignments in a career context. There are plans and procedures made by the organisation for careers in relation to international assignments. However there seems to be no clear common understanding of what international experience is worth to the organisation. The results in this thesis suggest that employers should be better aware of how to communicate what it really means to an employee to
undertake an international assignment. Employers should also improve their assessment of the career value of international assignments.

This thesis has found that careers within a large corporation is quite complex and that this topic in itself would require research outside the scope of this thesis. It is not possible to say whether people quit their jobs because they are unsatisfied with the treatment in connection with their foreign assignment or if they feel that the corporate structure in the present company does not enable them to fulfil their career goals there and that they hence would quit anyway.

Some empirical findings fall outside of the scope of this thesis but are interesting input about careers. It seems that employees who works for the case study company over a longer period of time are networking themselves up the corporate ladder and the ones who are not comfortable with this system, or do not manage to do it properly, quit their jobs to pursue a career elsewhere. This falls outside the scope of this thesis but it can be said that people at the case study company who are interviewed does not seem to be putting their career moves first but are quite satisfied with being on average positions as long as they feel that they have got a challenging and meaningful position in the organisation. These findings might be true even for other organisations but this thesis cannot validate if that is true or not and hence this thesis leaves this indication to be examined further in future research.

As noted in the method section the ones who are likely to be most dissatisfied are not covered in this study since they most likely already quitted their job in the company to pursue a career elsewhere. However there have been some indicators from informants that this story holds true to some extent. It is however difficult to draw good conclusions from this information considering that it comes from secondary sources.

**Future research**

This thesis has investigated how expatriate employees experience their career in relation to international assignments. There are findings in this thesis indicating that expatriate employees are planning their career moves through their intra-company network connections rather than through formal career advancement procedures. How is these networked formed? As noted there
are likely employees who choose to leave their employer shortly after their repatriation. What are their motives for doing so and how prevalent is this problem?

This thesis has acknowledged that it does not cover the most dissatisfied expatriate employees who choose to leave the organisation shortly upon repatriation. What is their experience of the expatriation process and why did they choose to leave the organisation? What could have been done better in order to keep them in the organisation?
References


Linkedin (2011) [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com) Obtained 2011-12-12


Vetenskapsrådet (2011) [www.vr.se/etik Obtained 2011-11-14](http://www.vr.se/etik)

Appendix I: Description of case study company

CompanyX is a global company with a sales and service organisation in more than 100 countries. Aside from sales and services, CompanyX offers financial services in many markets. CompanyX’s production units are located in Europe and Latin America.

CompanyX has approximately 37,500 employees. Of these, some 16,000 work with sales and services in CompanyX’s own subsidiaries worldwide. About 12,400 people work at production units in seven countries and regional product centres in six emerging markets.

CompanyX’s Head Office is located in [xx], Sweden, where a total of 5,800 people work with sales as well as administrative and other tasks. Also in [xx] are CompanyX’s research and development operations, with about 3,300 employees.

CompanyX’s central purchasing department in [xx] is supplemented by local procurement offices in Poland, the Czech Republic, the United States, China and Russia.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the persons who let me interview them and gave me some of their valuable time to contribute to this thesis. I conducted ten interviews and all of them went very well thanks to these persons. I’m particularly thankful to my contact person at the case study company.

I would like to thank my tutor Vanessa Barker, associate professor in sociology at Stockholm University who has given me great support.

I would like to thank Hugo Strandberg, associate professor in philosophy at Åbo Akademi University for help and support.

We spend a lot of energy to discuss ethics in social sciences research. An important reason that research must follow ethical guidelines is the credibility of science in society. If society’s citizens are deceived by researchers in scientific studies, it is unlikely that they will participate in future studies. It is important to have good manners when conducting research. In addition to common courtesy, it may therefore also be a point to convey a sincere gratitude. Without help from individuals in the community, it is difficult to conduct social science research. If a person in front of you is holding up the door for you, it is customary to say thanks. If a person sets out with their help, advice and expertise, or allow themselves to be interviewed for an hour or so, then the least we can do is to say thanks.