

# International Careers as Repositories of Knowledge A New Look at Expatriation

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Expatriation as a major component of staffing in multinational corporations has received considerable attention over the past twenty years. In particular, that research has focused on expatriate adjustment (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Church, 1982; Deshpande & Viswesvaran, 1992; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985), cross-cultural training (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Kealey & Protheroe, 1996), selection and recruitment of expatriates (Miller, 1973; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997; Tung, 1982), and repatriation of expatriates (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992; Feldman & Tompson, 1993). Despite the significant increase in scholarly investigations on this topic, relatively few studies have systematically studied the expatriation from a career theory perspective.

Scholars have investigated some specific aspects of expatriate careers. For example, studies have explored repatriate attrition after global assignments have been completed (Adler, 1981), the initial effects of repatriation on careers of recently returned expatriates (Feldman & Thomas, 1992; Harvey, 1989), the relationships between expatriation and career success and achievement (Birds-

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Grateful acknowledgment is given for financial support provided by the Charles Tandy American Enterprise Center at Texas Christian University.

eye & Hill, 1995; Feldman & Thomas, 1992) and repatriation adjustment (Gomez-Meija & Balkin, 1987), and the degree to which expatriate assignments aid in the development of skills that can enhance future career success (Oddou & Mendenhall, 1991).

Nonetheless, although expatriation is embedded in the overall career experience of many managers and professionals, relatively little research has integrated theoretical models of international management and careers scholars on the expatriate phenomenon. This chapter begins to usher in just such integration, with the hope that recent theoretical, conceptual, and definitional developments in the study of careers may be of help in delineating the phenomenon of expatriation.

While several career theories have been used to understand expatriation, this chapter uses the perspective of careers as repositories of knowledge as its main integrating mechanism (Bird, 1994). We discuss this perspective in detail and illustrate how it can help synthesize previous research on expatriation within a new framework and serve as a heuristic for guiding future research on expatriate careers.

## **Careers as Repositories of Knowledge**

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Within the varied social science disciplines of psychology, sociology, political science, economics, history, and geography, Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence (1989) identify eleven separate descriptions of what constitutes a career. Social psychologists define career as an "individually mediated response to outside role messages." By contrast, economists define it as a "response to market forces," and political scientists view careers as "the enactment of self interest" (Arthur et al., 1989, p. 10). Common to all of these perspectives, however, are characteristics of work experiences occurring over some span of time. In its broadest sense, then, a career is "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur et al., 1989, p. 8).

Within these definitions, there is no clear agreement on the essential substance of a career. Differences in type, duration, length, and sequence of work experiences are viewed as important dependent and independent variables in studying careers. However, these are outward manifestations of external careers. A

more comprehensive conception of careers must explicitly encompass internal careers as well, that is, the inflows, outflows, and transformations of individual and organizational knowledge that result from sequences of work experiences.

For our purposes, we will characterize careers as accumulations of information and knowledge (for example, skills, expertise, and relationship networks) acquired through an evolving sequence of work experiences over time. From this perspective, changes in work experiences constitute the primary mechanism by which careers develop, though they are not themselves careers. Rather, the nature or quality of a career is defined by its accumulated information and knowledge. Viewing careers as repositories of knowledge allows for the possibility that in addition to being accumulated, knowledge may also be removed, modified, shared, guarded, re-arranged, improved, or replaced.

### **Syntax of Careers**

The relationship between knowledge and work experiences can be illustrated by borrowing two concepts from grammar: syntax and semantics. Syntax refers to “the way in which words are put together to form phrases, clauses, or sentences” (Merriam-Webster, 1977, p. 1183), whereas semantics refers to meaning or content.

The syntactic aspect of a career is its structure. Just as sentences comprise words that can be classed as verbs, subjects, or objects, careers comprise work experiences that can be classed in terms of duration, sequence, or occupational type. Much of the research on careers focuses on measuring their syntax and the relationship of syntax to a variety of individual and organizational variables. A representative example of this approach can be found in Rosenbaum’s study of careers (1984) of a cohort of workers in a single large organization. He analyzed roughly four thousand careers, indexing them in terms of such metrics as number of hierarchical levels advanced and length of stay at each level.

### **Semantics of Careers**

The semantic aspect of careers, by contrast, considers the significance of work as reflected in accumulated knowledge. It is concerned with the content and meaning of work experiences.

Semantic aspects of careers are often idiosyncratic and have different meanings in different contexts. Just as the meaning of sentences, regardless of syntax, may change depending on context, careers, too, are inextricably embedded in context.

The contents of a career are located in what is learned from experiences—in the information, knowledge, and perspectives that are acquired or changed over time as a result of a series of work experiences. For example, two employees might both work for three years as tellers in the same bank. The syntactic aspects of their careers are similar: the same position, the same bank, the same length of time. In semantic terms, however, there may be substantial differences as a result of the specific relationship networks developed, skills acquired, and expertise accumulated.

## **Careers and Organizations as Knowledge Creators**

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The notion of careers as repositories of knowledge cannot be untangled from a view of organizations as knowledge creators (Argote & Ingram, 2000; Inkpen & Dinur, 1998) or from the notion that the substance from which knowledge is created is the experiences of individuals (Nonaka, 1991). Whether firms compete on the basis of cost, quality, or service, a firm's strategy is aimed at distinguishing its products or services from that of its competitors. A firm's ability to differentiate itself from others is embedded in an invisible asset: its knowledge base (Prahalad & Hamel, 1994) and, by extension, the individuals from whom the firm's knowledge base emerges (Nurasimha, 2000).

Increasingly, all advantages are becoming informational in nature. To remain competitive and to ensure an ongoing ability to differentiate, firms must develop their human resources in ways that enhance the supply of information and knowledge available to them. Through knowledge creation and transfer, firms revitalize themselves and set themselves apart from competitors (Argote & Ingram, 2000).

An important way in which organizations create knowledge is by shaping the firsthand work experiences of employees and then drawing out this experiential learning in ways that allow it to be shared throughout the organization and lead to the accomplishment of organizational objectives. Under this conceptualization, a

key activity of managers is to give direction to the knowledge-generating activities of employees by creating meaning, that is, by making sense of seemingly senseless data (Louis, 1980; Weick, 1996).

## **Explicit Knowledge and Tacit Knowledge**

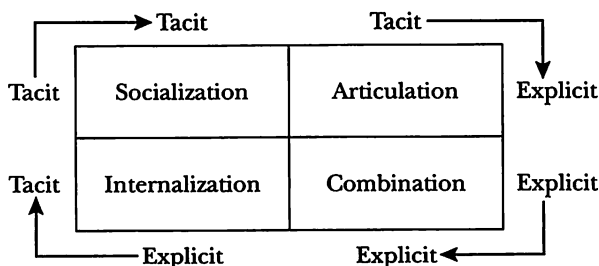
Organizations and individuals transmit knowledge in two ways. Explicit, or articulable, knowledge can be transmitted to others through formal, systematic language (Polanyi, 1966). It is impersonal and independent of context. A mathematical equation, for example, is explicit knowledge because it conveys knowledge by means of an impersonal (it is not rooted in any person or situation), formal (there are rules governing the structure of equations), systematic language (mathematical symbols).

In contrast, tacit knowledge refers to information embedded in people's experiences that may be difficult to communicate to others. Tacit knowledge is necessarily personal because it is attained through firsthand experiences and is deeply rooted in action and commitment (Nonaka, 1991). It is accessible to its possessor primarily in the form of intuition, speculation, and feeling. Tacit knowledge is the sum of an individual's understanding as described by Polanyi (1966) when he states, "We know more than we can tell" (p. 4).

Two aspects of tacit knowledge are relevant to its application to careers. First, tacit knowledge has a cognitive dimension that is reflected in traditional beliefs, paradigms, schemata, or mental models (Nonaka, 1990). The cognitive dimension helps us to make sense of the world around us, influencing how we perceive and define it. The second aspect is the technical dimension, which consists of skills, crafts, and know-how that are situation-specific. Much of tacit knowledge, particularly the cognitive dimension, remains beyond our ability to make it explicit (Winogard & Flores, 1986).

## **Types of Knowledge Creation**

The interplay between these two types of knowledge—tacit and explicit—gives rise to knowledge creation (Nonaka, 1990). There are four types of knowledge creation (see Figure 11.1).

**Figure 11.1. Typology of the Knowledge Creation Process.**

Source: Adapted from Nonaka, I. 1990. *Managing Innovation as a Knowledge Creation Process*. Paper presented at New York University, Stern School of Business, International Business Colloquium.

### *Tacit-to-Tacit Knowledge Creation*

One form of knowledge creation involves the transmittal of tacit knowledge between individuals. An apprentice who studies under a master craftsman learns not only through spoken words or instructions, but through observation and imitation as well. Socialization of the apprentice leads to knowledge creation through the expansion of his or her knowledge; the newcomer imbues or modifies what is learned from agents of socialization through the filter of his or her own understanding. Notwithstanding this process, however, little new knowledge is created through socialization. To paraphrase Polanyi (1966), it remains as more than can be told. Furthermore, transmission of knowledge through socialization is time-consuming and difficult to manage among large numbers of people.

### *Explicit-to-Explicit Knowledge Creation*

In contrast to its tacit counterpart, knowledge that is explicit in nature can be easily transmitted. Its very explicitness often makes combination transparent and easy. Consequently, we refer to bringing explicit knowledges together as combination. For example, collecting information about the financial performance of various overseas business units (explicit knowledge) brings about the creation of new knowledge: how the firm as a whole is performing in overseas markets (explicit knowledge).

Nevertheless, although combination can create new knowledge through synthesis, as with socialization (tacit-to-tacit knowledge creation), the new knowledge created tends to be minimal in its scope. The most profound knowledge creation occurs when knowledge spans tacit-to-explicit or explicit-to-tacit forms. It is also at this nexus individuals' careers and work experiences hold the potential to make their largest contribution to the organization.

#### *Tacit-to-Explicit Knowledge Creation*

The conversion of tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge—articulation—is significant for the organization because it makes possible the sharing of knowledge that was previously inaccessible. In a furniture company, when a master cabinetmaker is able to articulate the thinking and techniques behind his particular style of woodworking, that information can be widely disseminated within the organization. Designers can incorporate the newly created knowledge into future products. Also, the information can be shared with other cabinetmakers so that they can produce pieces of comparable workmanship.

#### *Explicit-to-Tacit Knowledge Creation*

When employees acquire explicit knowledge and then apply it to their own unique situations, the result is an expansion of their tacit knowledge base. Internalization leads to a reframing of knowledge that constitutes knowledge creation in its own right. Perhaps most important, the transference from explicit to tacit can lead to self-renewal of the employee and a deepening commitment to the work itself. In addition, self-renewal of individual employees, taken in larger groups, can constitute a self-renewal of the overall organization.

Tacit-to-tacit and explicit-to-tacit knowledge creation types appear similar in several ways. The difference between socialization and internalization in this typology lies in the primary informational source contributing to knowledge creation. In the tacit-to-tacit quadrant (socialization), the primary information source contributing to new knowledge creation is the master or the role model. New knowledge is created through replication, with the receiver's knowledge base contributing little to the newly created knowledge. By contrast, in the explicit-to-tacit quadrant, it is the

receiver's knowledge base that contributes the bulk of information. Here, the explicit knowledge stimulates learning by obliging the receiver to see things in a different light or think in a different way—both forms of new knowledge.

## **Career Paths as Spirals of Knowledge Creation**

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The sequencing of knowledge creation modes may be thought of as defining a career path. Different experiences lead to shifts from one mode to another. Nonaka (1991) outlines the nature of experiences in each mode, as well as shifts across modes in his description of how a product development team at Matsushita Electric Company created a new home bread-making machine.

Although a prototype had been developed, the bread that the machine produced was considered unacceptable. The crust was hard and the inside doughy. One member of the development team, Ikuko Tanaka, suggested they study the technique of Osaka International Hotel's baker, who had a reputation for making the best bread in Osaka. While working as an apprentice with the baker, Tanaka noticed that the baker used a distinctive technique of stretching the dough when kneading it. Upon returning to the product development team, Tanaka shared her insights with coworkers. After making several modifications in the design of the bread maker, Matsushita developed the "twist dough" method and came out with a new machine that set a sales record for kitchen appliances.

As Nonaka (1991) suggests, the emergence of the solution to the problem involved all four types of knowledge creation:

1. Ikuko Tanaka learns the tacit secrets of the Osaka International Hotel baker (socialization).
2. She translates these secrets into explicit knowledge that she can communicate to her team members and others at Matsushita (articulation).
3. The team standardizes this knowledge, putting it together into a manual or workbook and embodying it in a product (combination).
4. Through the experience of creating a new product, Tanaka and her team members enrich their own tacit knowledge base (internalization). In particular, they come to understand in an



extremely intuitive way that products like home bread-making machines can provide genuine quality. That is, the machine must make bread that is as good as that of a professional baker.

The use of project team experiences as the basis for this illustration is noteworthy for several reasons. First, the sequencing of experiences is laid bare (Nonaka, 1994). Although individuals usually begin getting socialized when they enter a firm or move from one position to another, socialization intensifies when they join a project or work team. Rounds of dialogue and discussion among team members trigger the shift to an articulation mode. As concepts generated by the team are pieced together or joined with existing data, there is often a modal shift to the combination mode. Experimentation with various new combinations results in a change to the internalization mode, as members of the team engage in learning by doing that results in the translation of explicit knowledge into various types of tacit knowledge.

As individuals reiterate this sequence of work experiences, their store of knowledge grows. A career, then, can be understood as the path of an individual's work experiences through the various knowledge creation modes. The sequences of modes between the tacit and explicit forms of knowledge can be visualized as an outwardly expanding spiral.

### Four Types of Knowing

Although the knowledge creation cycle provides a description of the trajectory that a career traces across work experiences, it fails to delineate the content of that career. In other words, realizing that work experiences involve progressing through cycles of knowledge creation still tells us very little about the types of knowledge embedded in the career. Kidd and Teramoto (1995) propose a four-class taxonomy of "knowings" that is useful in dissecting the knowledge content of a career.

*Know who* refers to a person's social capital, that is, the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships an individual possesses. Examples of know who include such knowledge as having a contact in a Japanese bank willing to make introductions on one's behalf to local firms or being acquainted with key individuals in the

Hong Kong Trade Development Agency. Knowing who involves not only an acquaintanceship with others, but also an ability to draw on various resources through those relationships.

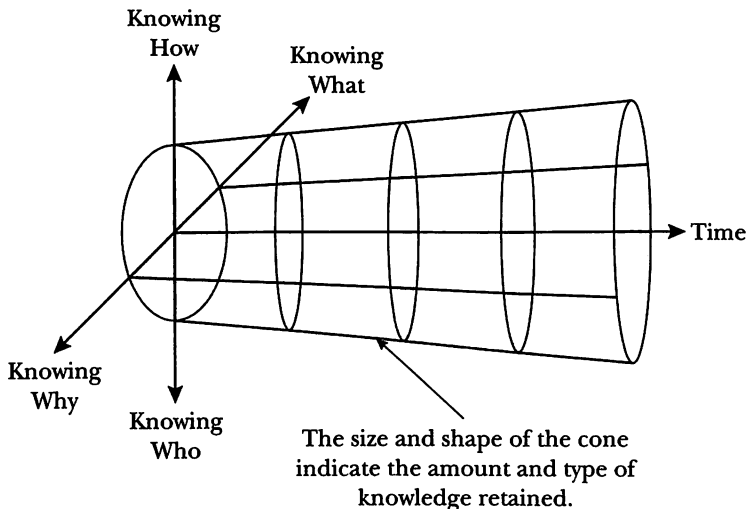
*Know how* relates to a person's set of skills and knowledge about how to accomplish tasks or do work. Methods for structuring invoicing schedules to offset the effects of hyperinflation in Russia represent one type of know how. Giving one's adversary some opportunity to save face in negotiations in China would be another.

*Know what* relates to the nature and extent of a person's understanding about specific projects, products, services, or organizational arrangements. A knowledge of the firm's product offerings in Brazil and an understanding of structure of the Brazilian subsidiary constitute types of know what.

*Know why* relates to the nature and extent of a person's identification with the firm's culture and strategy, for example, knowing why the firm chose to set up an overseas operation in Brazil rather than Argentina. Knowing why gives meaning and purpose to organizational and individual action.

Through time, the volume and value of each type of knowing may increase or decrease. In addition, specific types of knowledge may be acquired, lost, and recovered. Figure 11.2 presents a prototypical depiction of an idealized career developing over time.

**Figure 11.2. Four Types of Knowing over Time.**



## Types of Knowing in International Contexts

Although the perspective of careers as repositories of knowledge offers significant value for the study of all careers, we believe it is particularly useful for enhancing our understanding of international careers. A recurring theme of research on international careers has been the dramatic impact that the wealth of new experiences, both work and nonwork, has on people's understanding.

The essential element in knowledge creation is personal experience, the basis for all tacit knowledge. However, not all experiences contribute equally to knowledge creation. Those that are repeated frequently, for example, filing expense reports, provide little grist for new knowledge creation. Experiences likely to lead to significant knowledge creation share three facets in common: variety, quality, and self-knowledge (Nonaka, 1994). All three are present in the experiences associated with international careers.

*Variety* of experience refers to the range of experiences acquired over a period of time. International careers are striking in this regard because they are unlike most other work experiences. Working and living in a host country and traveling overseas present a wide range of new experiences. There is often a mixture of customs, norms, beliefs, and attitudes to be encountered across a vast array of situations and circumstances. The new environment often has a different climate, terrain, and weather. There are new foods and beverages to sample. There may be a new language to learn. And at the core of the experience, there is a new job with new colleagues in a part of the company not previously experienced.

A consequence of these varied novel experiences is that the *quality* of an overseas experience is richer and deeper than a domestic job change. Expectations about anticipated outcomes, which people carry into all experiences, are more likely to be undermet or overmet in overseas assignments (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991), forcing expatriates to pay greater attention to the international experience itself. Failures are likely to be more frequent (Mendenhall, 2001), causing people in international careers to reevaluate assumptions. Individuals are also more likely to experience unexpected successes (Mendenhall, 2001), filling them with surprise.

The heightened quality of overseas experience increases the probability that individuals will develop greater *self-knowledge*. That

is, overseas assignments create more self-knowledge because they evoke stronger affective reactions than domestic assignments do (Mendenhall, 2001). Moreover, the challenge of adapting and adjusting within international careers is often intensely stressful, heightening the impact of emotions, positive or negative.

In short, international job changes can be characterized as rare occasions during which managers are likely to acquire extraordinary volumes of tacit-knowledge experience. This explains why international careers are often characterized as a transformative experience for many managers (Osland, 1995). They have no obvious comparison within a work career context and few comparisons outside. The profundity of such experiences—the extent of variety, the depth of quality, and the intense emotionality—may also help explain why careers researchers have had difficulty in coming to terms with how to study them.

## **Application to International Careers**

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When understood within the context of knowledge creation, international careers possess unique properties, with implications for career theory and research.

### **Syntactic and Semantic Issues**

If international assignments (IAs) are to lead to significant knowledge creation beneficial to the firm, then human resource managers must address the syntactic and semantic dimensions of careers. Syntactic dimensions include duration, sequence, and structure.

For example, the duration of IAs tends to be arbitrarily established. Short-term assignments of nine months or less are usually based on the completion of a particular task or project. Long-term assignments often follow a standard length, three years being the typical tenure. These durations are set with little regard for the impact on knowledge acquisition or dissemination (Black, Gregersen, Mendenhall, & Stroh, 1999). Similar cultures, legal regulations, and a common language make it possible for a U.S. manager to learn how to get a new plant up and running in Australia quickly. By contrast, it may take that same manager considerable time to learn how to set up a similar plant in China.

The difference is not simply one of cultural distance, but involves the challenges of acquiring the right sorts of experiences through which useful new knowledge can be created. Whether a particular culture is characterized by high- or low-context communication preferences, for example, may influence whether the most effective knowledge creation methods will be tacit or explicit (Dulek & Fielden, 1991).

Chinese culture is high context; much of the communication essential to understanding what is going on is embedded in the situation rather than in explicit written documents or verbal exchanges (Hall, 1966). Consequently, U.S. managers working in China may need to acquire a substantial range of local experiences before they can make sense of what is going on around them. In other words, the most effective knowledge creation in the early stages of the assignment may take place through a tacit-to-tacit exchange—socialization—whereby a newly arriving manager might work closely with a local Chinese manager or an experienced expatriate. By contrast, U.S. managers in Australia may be able to create knowledge through a process of combination (explicit-to-explicit) in which they and their local counterparts share their understanding of plant set-up and management.

Sequence is also an issue when considering the use of IAs in developing global business leaders. Work by Gunz (1989) suggests that although many large organizations carry out career planning to identify logical sequencing of positions and promotions for managerial personnel, it is not clear that such planning factors into the knowledge creation process. An IA may be appropriate as the next step on a career path headed to the top of the organization, but may not be appropriate for moving a manager through the next phase of the knowledge creation cycle. For example, after eighteen months in a domestic department focused on mortgaged-based securities, one manager at a U.S. investment bank was transferred to Tokyo, where his new position was to oversee a Japanese securities trading operation. There was little, if any, room within the new assignment for internalization of knowledge he had acquired in the previous position.

This kind of disruption in the knowledge creation process also occurs when managers return from IAs (Gupta & Govindarajan, 1991; Black et al., 1999; Stroh, 1995). Adler (2002) notes that repatriates experience xenophobia from their colleagues and supervi-

sors, who may fear or reject the foreign knowledge brought back by the former expatriate. Such reactions inhibit the transfer of knowledge from the repatriate.

It is often difficult for firms to gain a deep understanding of what expatriates have learned or to position the manager so that his or her IA experiences can be used effectively in new knowledge creation activities. In one typical instance, a manager returning from five years in Germany was placed in a holding pattern: a six-month temporary assignment assisting in the training of new employees in the United States. His superiors had no idea how to capitalize on his German experiences within the context of existing training programs, nor could he identify ways to apply his hard-won insights in this assignment. By the time he received a longer-term assignment working with African subsidiaries, his German know who, so critical to the knowledge base, had already begun to dissipate. Key contacts had moved or were no longer in a position to help him.

Finally, firms are only just beginning to recognize that the structure of IAs must be tied to knowledge growth for both the individual and the organization. There has been a long-standing appreciation that foreign work assignments are an opportunity for expatriates to acquire knowledge and skills that are rarely available in their home country (Tung, 1998) and that this personal growth can have a positive payoff for the firm as a whole (Oddou & Mendenhall, 1991). However, few firms consciously consider the knowledge creation process in making such assignments. For example, mentoring is widely recommended as a means of helping to train and counsel managers on IA (Feldman and Thomas, 1992). Focused mentoring can also be used effectively to help managers make sense of their IA experiences in terms of what they can contribute to the firm or accomplish within it (use of tacit-to-explicit to create know why and know what).

Ironically, although firms send managers on IAs to get experience and develop new insights, few firms seem to appreciate how successful they have been, often underestimating the growth in knowledge that managers experience in IAs. Returning managers report that their work takes on broader significance. Moreover, they have a changed perspective of their role within the firm and within the world, as well as a changed understanding of where the firm fits in the world.

## Employee Transformation

Three aspects of the IA experience help to explain why managers undergo significant transformations. First, both short- and long-term assignments often result in a co-mingling of work and non-work experiences. When the IA involves moving a manager's family to a new location, the manager often becomes caught up in a host of nonwork experiences in the host country, which also lead to learning and insight about oneself, one's family, and the world in general. These insights inevitably extend to a changed view of the work setting. Even in the case of shorter assignments not requiring the relocation of family, extended absences or the need to develop social support systems in the host country often lead to a new perspective on work, the company, and larger life issues.

Second, IAs are often characterized by the compression of myriad novel and intense experiences into a short time span. Consequently, managers' repertoire of schema and scripts for dealing with a multitude of commonplace and not-so-commonplace events grows. One obvious example relates to the proper way to greet people in a business setting. Prior to an IA in Japan, a typical U.S. manager would employ a handshake as the common form of greeting and introduction. After working in Japan for several months or years, that same manager would return home with an expanded set of greetings and introductions that would include bows of various depths and rigidity, as well as handshakes of varying strength and duration.

Finally, IAs can also lead to significant losses of knowledge. Some friendships, acquaintances, and relationship networks wane; knowledge of some products and services or specific aspects of some organizational arrangements is forgotten, becomes outdated, or is no longer relevant. One's identification with the firm or its culture may ebb, and knowledge of certain techniques or the ability to use some skills may wither. IAs are not only a time of knowledge growth and development; they are also a time of loss.

## Problems with Sharing Tacit Knowledge

The potential for organizational knowledge creation from international assignments is substantial. Unfortunately, finding ways to elicit individual managers' tacit knowledge is problematic. The

conditions under which effective knowledge creation is most likely to occur are usually missing in the case of managers on, or returning from, IAs. Moreover, expatriates and repatriates themselves often do not possess enough self-awareness or knowledge sufficient to initiate organizational learning on their own.

Given the volume of tacit knowledge acquired on IAs, efforts at organizational knowledge creation can focus on two modes: socialization (tacit-to-tacit) and articulation (tacit-to-explicit). Socialization, requiring as it does the one-on-one participation of an apprentice, is costly, time-consuming, and, in the case of IAs, difficult to foster. Most socialization involves an understudy who observes and mimics a "master." This may be straightforward in the case of a cabinetmaker or a mechanic. However, it is hard to envision how one observes and mimics a master of IA. Effective socialization as a form of knowledge creation requires that the knowledge be observable through action or outcome, something that is virtually impossible to do with highly idiosyncratic IAs.

Articulation may not be much easier to facilitate. Nonaka (1994) suggests that the most effective vehicle for articulation involves dialogue in which participants enjoy a common frame of experience. Such interaction affords participants with occasions for explicit sense making in which one's understanding (knowledge) is made explicit through the stimulation that others provide (Weick, 1996). Dynamics of dialogue give rise to new understandings as participants react to one another's statements. Recall the bread-maker example in which Tanaka's insight is elicited through interaction with fellow team members.

The difficulties for organizations are fixing a location for this information sharing and assembling participants with the right set of shared experiences. To be useful, the knowledge must be created in ways that make it consistent with an organization's vision, mission, and strategy. However, in the case of IAs, the process of knowledge sharing cannot be easily controlled or shaped by the organization. Most IA managers engage in sense making and dialogue in local social groups in the host country. Alternatively, where there are sufficient numbers, IA managers may gather within the local subsidiary, but usually outside the office, in more social settings.

The conceptualization of new knowledge, then, is likely to be on a more personal level, connecting tacit knowledge to family and



self, relating to work primarily in terms of career. Without the influence of the organization, and outside a peer group of fellow managers within the firm, there is little chance that tacit knowledge will be developed in ways that meaningfully contribute to organizational goals. Even when the articulation process elicits knowledge valuable to the firm, there is little possibility that it will be accessed, tested, applied, or retained by the firm because it was created externally.

One option for organizations is to bring IA managers together on a regular basis, through knowledge retreats or under the guise of training seminars. For example, one Japanese multinational corporation holds a regional semiannual gathering for its human resource managers in Europe. As part of this gathering, Japanese expatriates frequently congregate to talk among themselves. The result is new explicit knowledge. The current challenge, however, is for the company to find ways to codify and transfer this newly created and fleeting explicit knowledge to others.

### **Problems in Organizational Control of Knowledge Creation**

Beyond the more basic structural challenges of shaping the tacit-to-explicit knowledge creation activities of IA managers are several additional challenges that face multinational corporations. Extended involvement with overseas subsidiaries and host country personnel may lead to a shifting of employee commitment to the local operation or the emergence of a dual commitment to both parent and subsidiary. A greater commitment to the host country subsidiary may lead to the development of knowledge that is overly localized. The old epithet, "He's gone native," may be appropriate for describing the direction of individual knowledge growth for the IA manager who has developed a strong allegiance to the host country operation. In such cases, there is often a perceived rift on the part of the IA manager—a belief that knowledge of the IA cannot be blended with organizational knowledge or systems.

On return from an IA, some repatriates may be less committed to the organization and more committed to their individual careers or personal lives and families. Repatriates may be unwilling to invest themselves in the organization's knowledge creation process

or become disillusioned with efforts to transfer the knowledge they have obtained to others in the organization.

Even when the returning manager is committed and the organization can structure the repatriate position to facilitate knowledge creation to work in its favor, shifts in the types of knowing within the organization's and repatriate's repositories of knowledge may be too significant for effective transmission to take place. For example, a repatriate's broadened and more philosophical view of the firm's place in the world may create difficulties in his or her ability to see connections between tacit knowledge and organizational mission. Similarly, repatriates may find it difficult to use their expanded network of host country contacts effectively in new initiatives when the composition or reach their network of headquarters relationships and acquaintances has altered or diminished as a consequence of the IA experience (Burt, 1997; Ibarra, 1993).

In a related vein, some of the most personally compelling learning and knowledge acquisition on IAs may not be firm specific at all. Managers often acquire non-work-related living and coping skills when adjusting to a new country and culture. Such skills may lead to improved interpersonal effectiveness, enhanced self-confidence, and heightened self-awareness. Nevertheless, it may be difficult for repatriates to change how they are viewed by colleagues back at headquarters. Indeed, many repatriated managers, having undergone a transformational IA, confront difficulties in fitting back into the home country organization (Osland, 1995). If managers do not share a sense of community, they cannot effectively share the tacit knowledge they have acquired.

## **Exploiting the Knowledge Creation Potential in International Assignments**

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Viewing organizations as knowledge creators and careers as repositories of knowledge alters our perceptions of IAs and their value in developing global business leaders. The conventional wisdom has long been that IAs are invaluable in developing skills and knowledge essential to becoming an effective global manager. What has been missing is a framework for understanding why and how IAs contribute to management development. Career planning takes on a different character when it is directed at providing

opportunities for acquiring the right sorts of experience and creating organizationally useful types of knowledge.

If firms are to capitalize on the experiences that managers acquire from IAs, they must take action in two areas. First, they must structure assignments to enhance the individual learning and growth that lead to tacit knowledge creation. Second, they must construct fields of interaction for IA managers in ways that will encourage conceptualization and crystallization of new knowledge of practical value to the firm. For actions in these two areas to be effective, firms must adopt a knowledge organization mind-set in which learning and the acquisition of new knowledge is valued as one of their central goals.

### **Enhancing Tacit Knowledge**

Through thoughtful career planning and assignment management, firms can capitalize on the enhanced levels of tacit knowledge acquired by IA managers. Managing the expectations held by soon-to-be or current expatriates and repatriates is key to this goal (Feldman & Tompson, 1993; Stroh, Gregersen, & Black, 2000).

For example, predeparture briefings provide occasions during which clear learning expectations can be established. A typical briefing might encourage a manager to consider what aspects of past experience and current knowledge might be applicable in the new assignment—and even whether they should accept or reject the offer of a foreign work assignment at all (Stroh, Varma, & Valy-Durbin, 2000).

In planning and managing IAs, firms too often do not, but should, take a strategic approach to the variety in experiences that expatriate managers receive (Forster, 1999). As many as 40 percent of repatriated managers have reported that their firms have not taken advantage of the skills they had learned during their foreign work assignments (Oddou & Mendenhall, 1991). On a more positive note, a Japanese multinational corporation with which one of us has worked has used the occasion of short-term assignments of three to six months in the United Kingdom to provide its managers with additional learning opportunities by incorporating visits to affiliated subsidiaries on the Continent. Although such visits were not necessary for completing the assignment, Japanese man-

agers were able to acquire additional insights into the company's worldwide operations that were useful in their positions back in Tokyo.

Firms may also want to incorporate additional tasks or projects specifically designed to foster the development of tacit knowledge in an IA. For example, an IA manager in a marketing position might be asked to write a sales prospectus to be used in the host country or design a seminar for host country nationals.

## Sharing Tacit Knowledge

Having provided managers with fertile IA experiences, the next challenge for firms is in finding ways to help managers share their tacit knowledge, thereby creating new knowledge and simultaneously developing global business leaders. Firms can facilitate sharing in three ways.

First, they can construct heterogeneous project teams and managerial groups. Returning managers often complain of being isolated or being placed in work units where they have little in common with others. Sharing requires a frame of reference that is at least partially held in common among group members. When IA managers are placed in units where they alone have international experience (or those with international experience are in a small minority), sharing is constrained and the knowledge gained from IAs is either suppressed or dismissed. These situations parallel those associated with groupthink.

Not surprisingly, recommendations for overcoming groupthink may also enhance the IA knowledge creation and transfer process: ensuring full focus on areas of doubt and uncertainty, tenaciously challenging assumptions and presenting the fullest possible information, soliciting and receiving feedback and criticism regarding organizational members' judgments, and appointing group members (for example, former IA managers) to evaluate critically the popular ideas and sentiments of the group. Including IA managers in decision making and strategic planning groups can help maximize the knowledge creation process within the firm.

Sharing of tacit knowledge gained through IA experience can also be accomplished by establishing formal and informal reporting and briefing opportunities that focus explicitly on what has

been learned. Most IA managers prepare reports on a regular basis about their progress on a particular project or assignment or on the performance of their units. However, it is unusual for them to report on what experiences they had, what they learned from those experiences, or how what was learned might be applied elsewhere in the organization.

Nonetheless, these learning reports are far more likely to lead to knowledge creation useful to the development of effective global leadership, for both the individual and the organization. In a related practice, some firms have returning managers give learning briefings for groups of colleagues and superiors. The briefings themselves and the accompanying question-and-answer sessions often lead to new insights for presenter and audience alike. IA managers' tacit knowledge can also be shared through systematic journaling made available to others in the organization, interviews with IA managers, preparation and dissemination of IA case studies, and simulations debriefed by IA managers.

A third step firms can take is enlisting returning IA managers in the preparation and subsequent mentoring of new IA managers. To the extent that IA managers' assignments overlap in time, the effectiveness of such mentoring may be enhanced. Aside from the benefits new managers can gain from this type of wisdom sharing, former managers themselves are often transformed as they internalize the very wisdom that they share.

An additional benefit of assigning returning IAs to work with new IAs is that it encourages the creation of informal networks for sharing IA tacit knowledge. Although not always formally supported, informal networks of IA managers develop naturally within most global firms. By bringing together new and returning IA managers, firms can support informal group formation, thereby expanding and influencing the fields in which knowledge is shared and created.

## **Implications for Future Research**

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In addressing a variety of implications that derive from taking a perspective of careers as repositories of knowledge, we begin by returning to a long-standing dichotomy in the careers literature: the distinction between objective careers and subjective careers. From there we proceed to a consideration of the current gaps in our un-

derstanding of international careers, specifically addressing the potential for this new framework to fill those gaps and possibly uncover others not previously considered.

### **The False Dichotomy of Objective Versus Subjective Careers**

The distinction between objective and subjective conceptions of careers surfaced early in the field's history (Hall, 1966; Stephens, 1994). The objective conception focused on outwardly, independently measurable aspects of a career—for example, positions held, tenure in positions, or frequency of promotion. By contrast, the subjective conception directed attention to how people perceived their work experiences over time. The concern was not with tracing work experiences through positions held within an organization, but rather on how people adopt new and different orientations to existing work roles—that is, how they make sense of their work experience (Stephens, 1994). These two approaches have often been seen as relatively distinct from one another, due in part to the fact that researchers in the two streams were interested in answering very different questions and adopted very different methodologies.

Adopting the perspective of careers as repositories of knowledge does not eliminate the validity or the value of considering objective and subjective aspects of an individual's career. Instead, it illuminates the interconnectedness of these two perspectives by uncovering the impact that individual perception and sense making have on the essential element that constitutes a career: the knowledge that is created, transformed, or lost due to specific career experiences. The subjective understanding of one's career necessarily has an effect on knowing why.

### **Theoretical Issues and Gaps**

The integrating theme of this book is a developmental perspective on careers, and our view of a career as a repository of knowledge sheds new light on this perspective. It has important implications for how career development activities geared to international job changers themselves (like selection, training, socialization, and mentoring) are implemented and evaluated. Additional theoretical work is

needed, however, to help us understand the antecedents, processes, and outcomes of knowledge creation in IAs. Related research domains, such as social learning theory, information technology, and knowledge systems management, have much to say regarding careers as repositories of knowledge. Certainly, we have raised more questions than answers, but they are questions that we believe are critical for understanding how to use more effectively (or avoid misusing) international job changers.

Much of the current research on international careers has focused on issues of adjustment (and, to a lesser extent, expatriate performance) both during and after the international assignment. Future work addressing issues of knowledge creation and transfer might fruitfully consider the other side of the coin:

- The extent to which expatriate and repatriate assignments entail development of new skills and how those skills can be codified and transferred to create new organizational knowledge
- How organizational knowledge systems should be structured and managed to foster knowledge creation and transfer
- Differences in stages of knowledge creation in the overseas assignment—that is, whether knowledge creation is best accomplished at preassignment, during assignment, or postassignment
- How cultural differences (especially behavioral and assumptive differences) between knowledge holders and knowledge receivers influence knowledge creation and transfer
- How knowledge codification may influence the success or adjustment of expatriates and those with whom they work
- The extent to which different types of international job changers (expatriates and repatriates) experience knowledge assimilation, creation, and transfer in different ways
- How different characteristics of international assignments affect the knowledge creation and transfer process (for example, assignment length, hierarchical level of the assignee, job characteristics, experience of the expatriate)
- How the tacit knowledge of the returning or experienced expatriate is best accessed, codified, transferred, and used
- The role of nonexpatriate international experiences in knowledge creation (for example, bringing foreign country nationals to the home country headquarters)

- The “lost” expatriate—that is, the expatriate who has co-opted and gone native or left the firm altogether

In particular, we know little about the differential effects of sequencing work experiences in international careers. This raises two future research questions in particular. The first involves the impact of sequencing in terms of work experiences leading up to and following international assignments. Although there is some writing in this area, it focuses mainly on adjustment issues rather than on knowledge flows. For example, do certain prework experiences improve or impede an individual’s ability to create new knowledge in the area of know who?

The second involves the sequencing of work experiences within the international assignments. Again, there is some literature that focuses on adjustment, and to a lesser extent performance, but an examination of the literature reveals little focus on the sequencing of work experiences in international careers as it relates to knowledge creation or transfer. Work on the transformational nature of international assignments (Osland, 2001) is one notable exception, but much remains to be accomplished in this area. In particular, we believe that examinations of differences between international and noninternational careers in terms of how people make sense of their careers—that is, subjective careers—would be a beneficial area of research.

In this postindustrial age, where the knowledge work paradigm is becoming increasingly preeminent, the ability to create and transfer critical knowledge resources is likely to distinguish competitive from uncompetitive organizations (Bennis, 1999). Ensuring that organizational visits and international job changes alike take advantage of new knowledge gained overseas will be a critical element in the success or failure of today’s global corporations.

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