THINKING STRATEGICALLY ABOUT INTEGRATING REPATRIATED MANAGERS IN MNCs

AVAN R. JASSAWALLA AND HEMANT C. SASHITTAL

Although multinational corporations (MNCs) invest considerable resources in sending managers on foreign assignments, too many managers report dissatisfaction with their postrepatriation careers, and a significant percentage leave the firm within a year. This failure to harness learning and develop a cadre of globally trained managers raises questions about the current objectives and strategies that drive the investment in expatriation. A study of managers who had recently completed their expatriate assignment points to underorganized home office operations, poorly defined mentor roles, and large gaps between managers' expectations and reality as key contributors to the problem. This paper calls for a strategic orientation toward managing the expatriate function and proposes a comprehensive configuration of processes, systems, and structures necessary for implementing new strategies for developing the next generation of globally trained managers. © 2009 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Keywords: managing repatriation, HRM strategy

If there is a problem with the U.S. economy right now … it is the shortage of skilled labor …. So forget outsourcing. America's labor challenge today is talent insourcing (Welch & Welch, 2006b, p. 88).

Despite these words from one of America's most celebrated CEOs, recent studies show an alarming trend in the way multinational corporations (MNCs) are managing talent and globally trained managers. On the one hand, MNCs are increasingly relying on managers with experience in running complex operations in foreign locations and markets, and they are spending approximately $2 million per expatriate during a four-year overseas stint (e.g., Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002; for converging estimates of costs, see Downes, Varner, & Musinski, 2007; Fink, Meierewert, & Rohr, 2005; Klaff, 2002; O'Connor, 2002). On the other hand, pointing to their dissatisfaction with postrepatriation career options, an estimated 20% to 50% are leaving the firm within a year of returning home (see Black & Gregersen, 1998; Martin & Anthony, 2006; Tyler, 2006). Despite the MNC's heavy investment, the learning with which managers return is largely wasted and not embedded into the organization (e.g., Bolino & Feldman, 2000; Downes, Thomas, & Singley, 2002; Mezias & Scandura, 2005). At a time when globally trained managers

Correspondence to: Avan J. Jassawalla, School of Business, State University of New York at Geneseo, Geneseo, NY 14554, E-mail: jassawal@geneseo.edu, or Hemant C. Sashittal, Bittner School of Business, St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY 14618, E-mail: sashi@sjfc.edu

are valuable and talent shortage is real, it becomes important to question the poor ways in which MNCs are managing repatriation and utilizing their key human resources (e.g., Newton, Hutchings, & Kabanoff, 2007).

At first glance, issues related to helping managers make a transition back to the home office emerge as well-plowed territory. Scholars have been discussing training, mentoring, and coaching to aid the transition back to the home environment for more than a decade (see Andreason & Kinneer, 2005; Cavusgil, Yavas, & Bykowicz, 1992; Forster, 2000; Hocking, Brown, & Harzing, 2007; Mezias & Scandura, 2005; Rushings & Kleiner, 2003; Swaak, 1997). More recently, scholars have raised concerns about wasted opportunities for transferring learning from foreign locations to the home environment and have called for supportive human resource (HR) practices to aid such transfers (see Andreason & Kinneer, 2005; Furuya, Stevens, Oddou, Bird, & Mendenhall, 2007; Harvey & Novicevic, 2006; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Minbaeva, 2007; Stevens, Oddou, Furuya, Bird, & Mendenhall, 2006). For instance, scholars have called for (a) active management of postrepatriation careers and discussion of the fit between the new foreign-office-related learning and the new job upon return (e.g., Martin & Anthony, 2006) and (b) assistance and aid to managers for coping with the reverse culture shock they tend to experience (e.g., Lee & Liu, 2006).

It is unrealistic to assume that all proposed remedies in the literature have entirely escaped MNC's notice. Yet there is little evidence to suggest the remedies are producing results; postrepatriation-related dissatisfaction persists, and high turnover and associated loss of learning continue. Worse, managers are increasingly defining expatriate assignments as preparation for careers in other firms (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Stahl et al., 2002), and repatriates seem increasingly reluctant to accept another expatriate assignment (Lee & Liu, 2006; Stevens et al.,

Managers are increasingly defining expatriate assignments as preparation for careers in other firms.

2006). It appears more likely that proposed solutions are failing to speak to the practical realities of MNCs and their HR functions, and they likely represent band-aids put on deep-seated problems.

Current writings about problems and solutions point to several research needs. First, new research is needed to explain why postrepatriation-related dissatisfaction persists despite proposed remedies. Second, whether mentors serve a useful function during repatriation as the literature suggests they do deserves fresh investigation. Third, what repatriates expect from the firm deserves exploration. The voices of experienced repatriates promise to shed light on how firms should strategically respond to the problems of integrating globally trained talent and build intellectual capital. This paper reports findings from 50 interviews conducted with repatriated managers. (Eighty percent represented Fortune 500 firms. See Appendix 1 for interview protocol.) Our findings extend current discussions in three important ways. First, using the context-rich voices of returning expatriates, we offer a more comprehensive explanation for why dissatisfaction persists than is currently available in the literature. Second, we identify why the mentor concept, viewed favorably in the international business literature, largely fails in practice. We propose that the mentor concept is outdated and its implementation is flawed—a case that current writings have yet to make. Third, based on managers' responses, we draw inferences about HR's strategic function. Repatriates indicate that MNCs (and HR functions) are too focused on expatriation instead of repatriation, too ad hoc and opportunistic instead of strategic in their behaviors, and too disorganized to implement postrepatriation-related programs scholars recommended. MNCs and HR functions seem largely unconcerned with the new and emerging problems associated with harnessing learning and managing intellectual capital; their present orientation and organization preclude them from effectively managing repatriation and from implementing the solutions scholars offer. Aligned with these findings, we

propose a new strategic orientation for the HR function to bridge the gaps between repatriated managers' expectations and reality.

We present our findings and implications in the following way. We begin with a brief description of our study. Consistent with our exploratory extent, our findings aim to stimulate new thinking and research in this complex, expensive problem MNCs face—as separate from the intent to produce definitive, widely generalizable findings. Then we discuss why mentors fail to live up to MNCs' expectations. We propose that the management of repatriation needs a significant overhaul. Finally, we draw implications for managers in the process of considering expatriate assignments.

The Study

The large number of empirically produced solutions coupled with the persistence of postrepatriation-related problems clearly implicated an exploratory study. In other words, literature-derived hypothesis tests of the "If firms do X, then positive postrepatriation-related outcomes will result" *genre* promised limited insights (e.g., Osland, 2000). We developed a formal interview protocol to guide in-depth interviews with managers who had successfully completed one or more expatriate assignments (see Appendix 1). The sample included four foreign nationals who had spent their expatriate assignments in the United States and 46 American citizens assigned overseas (Australia, Belgium, Bermuda, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Thailand, and the United Kingdom). The sampled managers were employed in their firms' consulting, law, construction, finance, design engineering, manufacturing, and sales and marketing functions and represented industrial manufacturers, banks, management consulting firms, and educational product developers. Students enrolled in an HR class taught by a coauthor (all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed) initially conducted 38 interviews. All students received instruction on interviewing skills. The coauthors and students conducting the interviews identified potential interviewees. We discarded 13 of the 38 interview transcripts when they revealed (a) all questions on the interview protocol were not asked and/or (b) responses from managers were not sufficiently probed. We content analyzed the remaining 25 transcripts. Fourteen included managers who had returned from their expatriate assignments in the previous four to five years, and 11 had finished their assignments more than six years before the interviews. Our content analysis of these transcripts suggested that while the main questions in the interview protocol produced necessary information, additional probes were also necessary to gain contextual information. Moreover, given the long period that had elapsed between the interviews and managers' completion of the expatriate assignment, we focused our attention on more recent returnees. In the second round of interviews, 12 were conducted by a student enrolled in a two-semester independent study course on international human resource management (HRM) that was guided by the coauthor. This student received extensive instruction and training on conducting interviews as part of the curriculum and was coached on topics related to active listening and asking probing questions. After we had completed preliminary content analysis of these 12 transcripts, we started the third round of data collection. One of the coauthors completed 13 interviews with recently returned managers. Of the 25 interviewees who participated in the second and third rounds, 10 had returned within three years, and 15 had returned within a year of completing their expatriate assignments. Fifty completed in-depth interviews serve as the basis for this paper.

The participating 40 male managers (80%) and 10 female managers (20%) had spent an

MNCs (and HR functions) are too focused on expatriation instead of repatriation, too ad hoc and opportunistic instead of strategic in their behaviors, and too disorganized to implement postrepatriation-related programs scholars recommended.

average of 3.53 years as expatriates (their minimum stay was 1 year, and their maximum stay was 10 years). All but 7 were married, and 26 were married with children. Twenty-eight (56%) of the 50 were not promoted after they returned, and 5 had returned too recently (less than three months) to know whether they would be promoted, whereas 17 (34%) reported that they were not promoted after they returned. Once we had collected all 50 usable transcripts, we conducted the content analysis in the following way. First, we identified the major themes across interviews that helped us with the initial categorization of data (i.e., how many managers are satisfied and how many are dissatisfied with their expatriation and repatriation, how many were assigned home and/or host office mentors, etc.). Then, on a large grid, we devoted each column to each manager, and each row to each key issue that was probed (e.g., what was satisfying about the expatriation, what was dissatisfying about the repatriation, whether a mentor was assigned, what the experience was like, etc.). In each cell, we wrote the key points the participant made in response to the particular issue. This way, each row could tell us at a glance what every participant had said in response to a particular issue. Similarly, each column could tell us at a glance what a particular participant had said in response to all key issues of interest. This made sure that we would consider all respondents and all responses. We also coded managerial descriptions (alphanumeric) and used a database to draw cross-tabulations to answer questions that relate to multiple dimensions, such as, How many respondents who were assigned mentors said that they were dissatisfied with their postrepatriation-related career choices? We made notes of our learning and found actual managerial quotes to support our inferences. This process was iterative; each coauthor independently examined the transcript and drew inferences. For internal consistency, we discarded inferences that could not be supported with actual data. Then the coauthors reconciled their findings, developed better-supported inferences, and discarded those with less support until a common understanding emerged.

All recounted that their firm and the HR functions were too unfocused, underprepared, and poorly organized to manage their postrepatriation-related needs and expectations.

There were three predominant themes in the data. All but two managers reported middle to high levels of postrepatriation-related dissatisfaction; all but one reported middle to high levels of dissatisfaction with mentors (when they were assigned); all recounted that their firm and the HR functions were too unfocused, underprepared, and poorly organized to manage their postrepatriation-related needs and expectations. In the following discussions, we (a) describe our data-derived findings about why repatriated managers are dissatisfied, why the mentor concept is flawed, and why MNCs and HR functions are not at the forefront of the problem; and (b) develop implications for HR functions in MNCs about strategies for reintegrating repatriates, managing globally trained talent, harnessing learning, and managing intellectual capital.

Why are Returning Expatriates Dissatisfied?

Managers' voices suggest that the causes of their dissatisfaction are rooted almost entirely in the repatriation process (e.g., Osland, 2000). Only 2 of the 50 returning expatriates report high levels of satisfaction with their postrepatriation-related careers, and more than half (52%) report significantly high levels of ambivalence and dissatisfaction after returning to the home office they originally left. Of these, 3 expatriates had left within a year of repatriation, and 2 were actively considering other career options with headhunters. In other words, we find more evidence of repatriates with festering dissatisfaction who remained with the firm than those who sought other career opportunities. Regardless of their stay-or-leave decision and dissatisfaction, all describe an underprepared and mostly unconcerned firm and wish that more had been done for them after they had returned

(e.g., Black & Gregersen, 1998, 1999). Andy White, who had spent two years in Hong Kong as a vice president, captured the commonly held view of expatriate experiences:[1]

> On a personal level, what I gained from the overseas assignment definitely exceeded my expectations. [On the other hand,] what my expectations were with the home office—it could have been better. I expected more to be done for me when I got back. It was one of the harder things. One of the hardest things is when you come back people are in different positions, people have changed, you have to reestablish your network and figure out whom you want to work for.

While our exploratory data preclude generalized conclusions, the dissatisfaction and feelings of ambivalence and powerlessness are too focal in managers' responses to ignore as a quirk of our sample. A host of factors, some within and others outside their control, contribute to this emotional condition; virtually all relate to the gap between what they expect from the firm and what the firm formally intends to, or is organized to, deliver (see Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001, for similar findings). Two interrelated issues are critical to understanding why this gap is formidable. First, other than the amount of money spent on the expatriation process, almost none of the managers received objective cues from which they could infer the value the firm places on their expatriate experiences. Second, they have little or no information to interpret objectively and frame their expectations. If we could thus generalize such a thing, expatriates view the foreign assignment as something much more than it really is and portentous of good things to come. They return with a clear sense of what they have sacrificed and with clear, if unarticulated, notions of what the firm owes them—notions poised to clash with the hard, cold reality of organizations (see Figure 1).

Selection and Reabsorption Processes

Some dissatisfaction is rooted in the stark differences between the expatriate selection and reabsorption processes. The selection process, focused on expatriates' promise and potential, is affirming. While overseas, virtually all enjoy greater power and control over budgets, people, and decision making. This experience strongly factors into their sense of self-worth and their inferences about the value the firm is placing on them. For some who see themselves as seasoned veterans, it seems reasonable to expect that their firms will value their experiences and newly gained worldliness and reward them with positions of greater responsibility when they return. Al Sims, a 40-year veteran of his firm, has recently returned from China after setting up a manufacturing facility. He had previously served on an expatriate assignment in France. He notes about other expatriates:

If we could thus generalize such a thing, expatriates view the foreign assignment as something much more than it really is and portentous of good things to come.

> Some people have higher expectations than others, in terms of, "I spent all this time over there, I should come back to be a president."

Because most expatriates return to their old jobs or to lateral available positions when they return, the reabsorption sharply discounts their newly gained experiences and personal sacrifices. Worse yet, they lose power to the decision-making bureaucracy of the home office. Twenty-six (52%) are surprised that their firms treat their postexpatriation careers as afterthoughts. John Cox has served as a brand manager and later as a marketing manager in four Latin American countries for seven years. He notes:

> Clearly, after a year [back in the home office], most of my expectations were unfulfilled. I viewed myself as kind of a seasoned veteran and to find myself pigeon-holed in a very narrowly defined, highly structured job which

Returning expatriates assume and expect that	All too often, returning expatriates find that
…having served away from the home office will benefit their resumes and careers.	…they have returned to their old jobs, similar jobs, or laterally situated jobs.
…they will be rewarded with a promotion and a fast-track career because they are seasoned veterans.	…the firm does not similarly value foreign experience, and they do not utilize their new learning in their home office job.
…they can leverage their new experiences into a promotion and a fast-track career because they have sociopolitical connections with key people in the home office.	…the strength of their network has weakened; key people have moved or left and new players have emerged.
…it is a sign that the firm has recognized their talent and worth and earmarked them for promotion and a fast-track career because they were selected to go overseas.	…the reasons for choosing them were opportunistic and unrelated to management development objectives and strategy.
…the firm will reward them appropriately after they return because the firm is aware of the sacrifices they have made while away from home.	…the monetary incentive they have received and the additional expenses the firm incurred on their behalf are the rewards.
…they will be treated as "special" in the home office because the host office made a big deal of their U.S. credentials and their home office connections.	…there is a new pecking order and a new sociopolitical hierarchy; they are now "one of the many."
…they will return to fun and exciting jobs in the home office because they had something of an impact in the host office and it was exciting.	…the bureaucracy, the routine, and the banality differ substantially from what they encountered in the host office.
…it is a sign of their worth and an indication that the firm is vested in their careers because the firm spent a lot of money on their travel and stay in the host location.	...the firm has thrown money at them to substitute for a management development strategy and an organization for repatriation.

FIGURE 1. Why Managers Are Dissatisfied Upon Repatriation: Comparing Expectations to Reality

was a staff job [whereas] I had always been a line person. I was unfulfilled.

Out of Sight and Out of Mind

Nearly all find that out of sight translates to out of mind (i.e., they are no longer central in the consciousness of new decision makers). Thirty-three (66%) note that their socio-professional networks weakened while they were away, 14 of whom (28%) report that they weakened severely because they were away. In the best cases, it takes more than a year and considerable effort to regain their political and social connections in ways that benefit their careers. While some expatriates are better than others at keeping old networks alive, the reality of their collective experience suggests that it takes inordinately

high levels of effort and focus to do so. Home office managers are focused elsewhere and have little vested in maintaining relationships with expatriates on assignment. Despite expatriates' frequent visits to the home office and face time with key players, the likelihood that such efforts deliver advantageous postrepatriation careers seems very low. Mike Winters, a 26-year veteran with his firm, recently returned after 20 months in Ireland. While there, he oversaw the opening of production facilities and served as the plant manager. His sojourn was interspersed with visits to the home office and face time with key players. He explains:

[At] the end of my assignment, I came back and I had spoken with a number of people about what I should do

next. And … what I found was that [with] people outside my sort of small immediate sphere, I was out of their minds completely in terms of career management. So when I came back, there were a few options on the table, but they weren't great options …. They were all pretty closely related to what I had done previously. Within the company, the experience gained on an expatriate assignment I don't think is highly valued. People (don't) … say, "Oh, (he) went and took this assignment and did this work over there, and so he's an improved version of the guy that left here two years ago."

He later adds:

When I came back there was a lot of stress. It wasn't as if someone . . . said, "This is what we're going to do for you." … And then I realized that everyone else has their own lists: "Here's the folks we have, and here's the folks that we're going to give the promotional opportunities to." And you realize that it's hard to wedge your way into one of those lists once you're gone.

Declining Conspicuity

The somewhat unique experience of being viewed as an important problem solver and representative of the home office in the foreign location also contributes to the postexpatriate stress. If only for their conspicuity, there is no escaping the special status expatriate managers have in the host offices. To one extent or another, after their return, all experience not just the loss of status, but also the disappearance of socioemotional acknowledgment. Joel Swanson served in the United Kingdom as a finance manager for 3 years and is a 30-year veteran in the industry. He recounts the following:

[I had] … trouble adjusting back to the lifestyle over here. When you are overseas, you're different [from] the

majority of the population. And that can be a plus …. With [name of firm], what I have found is here [in the United States], you work for [name of firm], and it's like, big deal …. [Name of firm] is a well-respected company, so you're a little more special in that regard (overseas) than you are in Boston. So there is a fair amount of adjustment that can take place.

The somewhat gratifying experience of being one of a kind is invariably followed by a somewhat humbling experience of becoming one of the many. The need for psychosocial stroking the expatriate experience creates confronts a somewhat uncaring and cold home office. John Cox elaborates on his experiences in the Latin American marketplace:

When you are out in the field, an international (executive) in a subsidiary … they [the foreign operations] tend to be lean and mean. There is very little distance between you and your boss in the international subsidiary. It is much more collegial. It is less formal; it is less structured. And my anxiety was coming back to the world headquarters in Boston, [into a] much more stratified, structured … less collegial environment. And to take it a step further, at 5:01 PM, everyone got into their cars and went to 48 different suburbs. [So] there was no collegiality after work, which is the American way. But, once you have been overseas, you tend [to want] to see one another socially quite a bit.

Differing Excitement Quotient of Home Office Jobs

For some, dissatisfaction is rooted in the changing nature of the job. Expatriate experience is fun and exciting and represents the opportunity to do new things. Owen Andrews is a 23-year veteran with his firm, who served 2 years in Singapore and 6 years in Hong Kong as a CFO for Southeast Asia. He

recently returned to take a vice president's position in the home office. He explains:

> It's the most personally rewarding experience, and you get opportunities that you know you just don't get in corporate headquarters. And, it changes you; it develops you personally like you'd never believe. Some days you can't believe that you are doing what you are doing, you're talking to the *Wall Street Journal*, you are doing an interview, or you are meeting the president of China.

The return to the banality of expatriates' day-to-day life in the home office, often to their old job, is a letdown. Beth Meyers, who served for three years in Brussels as a CFO for her firm's European, Middle Eastern, and African regions, notes:

The return to the banality of expatriates' day-to-day life in the home office, often to their old job, is a letdown.

> You're not going to settle [for a boring job] … once you've lived somewhere else and you've gone through [expatriation] …. I loved it; it was an adventure. And so if you come back to headquarters, [you think] "well this is boring, this isn't exciting, or where's the pizzazz, what's next?"

Myth Versus Reality

The inspirational mythology prevalent in some MNC segments about young expatriates returning from foreign assignments and getting on fast-track careers does not contribute positively to postrepatriation-related perceptions. While there is often a kernel of truth in the myths, the promises they hold are based more on general possibilities about what can happen and less on evaluating the likelihood that each expatriate will benefit similarly. Fourteen (28%) of the sampled expatriates volunteered for foreign assignments affected by this untested notion, and all expected their careers to benefit as a result. Owen Andrews elaborates:

There have been some examples of people who have done very well after their return from their expatriate assignments. Our departing chairman is one of them …. Even perhaps before I left, we had the view that the foreign assignment was one of the check-the-box requirements to really potentially get to the top of the company, right? It wasn't an absolute requirement [but] it was something that was viewed [as significantly helpful].

Some believe that the amount of money the firm spent on their sojourn is an indication of its commitment. This belief, however, is often based on untested and somewhat naive attributions: "Of course they want to benefit from my experiences and learning. Why else would they spend all that money on my trip?" The manager's notion of *what ought to happen when I return* seems strongly shaped by such unsubstantiated notions. Worse yet, the sums allocated for the trip trigger a host of perceptions that inadvertently exacerbate the problem of reintegration. Disappointed with postrepatriation careers, managers infer, "I am no longer valued; my sacrifices, learning, and experiences are not recognized." (See Linehan & Scullion, 2002, for similar findings.) Key managers in the home office infer, "You have just returned from a plum assignment where you were coddled and overcompensated; now you have a sense of entitlement that is grossly unjustified," (see Stanek, 2000, and Vermond, 2001, for similar findings). These clashing perceptions greatly hinder the resocialization process. Beth Meyers voices the clash between her heightened career-related expectations and the somewhat resentful coworkers she encountered after repatriation:

> They are really not interested in cushioning you from anything. They just expect you to deal with it …. I don't want to just go hang out at headquarters and live in temporary housing [when I return]. I want to have a life and have some grounding …. So, that [living in temporary housing,

hanging out at the headquarters] to me was a little bit of a sour taste, if you will, in terms of just the lack of sensitivity to what we do to humans.

Why Are Mentors Failing in Practice?

Scholars have argued that mentors are best suited for discussing career options before managers leave and easing their transition into the home office upon their return (Crocitto, Sullivan, & Carraher, 2005). A senior executive in the home office, for instance, who has previously served as an expatriate and is formally appointed to the role is described as the best candidate for mentor (Whitley, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991). Home office mentors are known to offer career-related and psychosocial help to managers before they leave, while they are there, and after they return (Downes et al., 2002; Martin & Anthony, 2006; Swaak, 1997). Before expatriates leave, mentors prepare executives for managing cross-cultural differences, set job and performance expectations, and discuss repatriation plans (Feldman & Thomas, 1992; Vermond, 2001). During the overseas assignment, home office mentors serve as sounding boards for dealing with stress (Ashamalla & Crocitto, 1997; Overman, 2004). They provide a formal and informal link with the home office and represent and lobby on behalf of expatriates in their absence (Linehan & Scullion, 2002; Vermond, 2001). Host office mentors can help expatriates adjust to the new culture, language, and workplace norms (Bennet & O'Gorman, 1998; Webb, 1996). Mentors seem to be the right solution for a host of repatriation-related problems in concept. Home office mentors can help plan and implement the transition upon the expatriates' return (Forster, 2000). Given all its potential functionality, the mentor-expatriate relationship is expected to factor into the latter's overall satisfaction (Feldman & Thomas, 1992; Vermond, 2001). Moreover, given the conviction with which the literature endorses the mentor role, it has likely served some firms well. Although not specific to the postrepatriation context, industry re-

ports continue to speak favorably of mentors (e.g., Fisher, 2007).

Tracey Edmondson, returning after a nearly four-year assignment in Germany, is the only manager in the sample who attributes his career success to his mentor:

> After being over there, I came to be the assistant general manager of our biggest business, and then within six months I became general manager of that business. That's about as good a job you can get in [name of the company]. And I think it was this mentor that really helped that happen. He really helped to bring me back to that kind of a job. It's interesting because he certainly was helping me out, but he was doing that very much behind the scenes. The guy that I worked for in Europe worked for this mentor, and so I think that this mentor was checking in and saying, "How's Tracey doing?" . . . My mentor was out in the background saying, "Tracey should be this" and "I think we should consider him strongly." . . . That doesn't at all imply that he was helping me on a daily or weekly or monthly basis, and I might not have even heard about the things he was doing, but it clearly was happening.

Some believe that the amount of money the firm spent on their sojourn is an indication of its commitment.

The reality of what mentors are actually doing, as most managers describe, is notably different; their descriptions question the merits of current arguments that favor the appointment of home and host office mentors. Less than half (38%) of the managers in our study had firsthand experiences with a formal mentor, although this number compares favorably with the 28% reported as an industry average about a decade ago (Bennet & O'Gorman, 1998). Four (8%) were assigned a formal mentor in the home and host offices, 13 (26%) were assigned a formal mentor in the home office (but no formal host office mentor assigned), and 2 (4%) were assigned a formal

host office mentor (but no formal home office mentor). Whether or not a formal mentor was assigned, managers are just as likely to report high levels of postrepatriation-related dissatisfaction. While some scholars have written about the importance of coaching to help expatriates (e.g., Abbot, Stening, Atkins, & Grant, 2006), none of the sampled managers recounts his or her acquaintance with coaches. Moreover, there is significant evidence in their voices that urge the reexamination of the mentor concept.

First, expatriates want a mentor with administrative authority to allocate necessary resources, with emotional intelligence to manage their psychosocial needs, and with political power to advocate vigorously on their behalf and help their careers when they return. This mythical mentor capable of aiding their ascent to exciting, fast-track careers upon repatriation rarely exists in real life. Bill James (4 years in China, 15 years with the firm) describes his relationship with his mentor:

The way I read the term mentor is close [relationship, but] … not supervision … close communication that really focuses on things business and nonbusiness, but helping people work their way through their career. And certainly that's not true at [name of company].

The [formal mentor] was located here at corporate, so I would typically try to make sure I connected once a month, especially when I went over initially. But what you found is that, over time, it would become once a quarter, biannual, and . . . I would come back to the States for holiday, to see my family here. . . . I always made sure I stopped down and saw

Expatriates want a mentor with administrative authority to allocate necessary resources, with emotional intelligence to manage their psychosocial needs, and with political power to advocate vigorously on their behalf and help their careers when they return. This mythical mentor capable of aiding their ascent to exciting, fast-track careers upon repatriation rarely exists in real life.

the person face to face, . . . so that you can still keep that relationship going.

Second, when mentors are assigned, their formal roles are poorly defined. We could not identify any mentors who had a clear job description. Bill James described his meetings with his host country mentor:

I would call them general discussions. Every month or so, I would go to his office, and we would sit down, and since there were real business issues that needed to be resolved, a lot of discussion focused on that: What did I think about this? What should we do here? But at the same time, there was the occasion to give social tips, ask how things are going personally, [ask if] there [was] anything I needed to have addressed. So, I would call that all-purpose mentoring.

In a general way, most formal mentors authorize spending, get questions answered, and proffer advice—but do little else. Informal mentors provide moral support and can help maintain informal communication networks in the home office to some extent, but they are often powerless to help career trajectories. Recounting what the mentor did for him, Bill noted:

He had some recommendations about what kinds of things I might consider. Also, he put a good word in for me: "This guy, he's working for me, he's a good guy, I was going to give you a call about him, [about] whether your department or your function has any suitable career-building assignments [for him]."

Andrew Jackson, returning from the United Kingdom after a 3-year expatriate assignment and 15 years with the firm, describes the appeal of the mentor concept:

I think a mentor is necessary, I really do, because you want to be connected back to the place that you come from. So without both ends of the equation, what you are go-

ing to find is that when you come back, somebody says, "I don't know you." So then you have to re-prove yourself. Then you didn't really gain anything internally [within the company's hierarchy], you have gained a lot yourself and you have gained a lot externally …. So you don't want to lose that connection.

Mentors do not work very well in practice, at least in part, because they are asked to fill too wide a gap between what the expatriates expect of them and what they are empowered to deliver. Some firms charge formal mentors with finding the expatriate a job—any job. The returning expatriate is often guided toward accepting what is available. Whether the process of being guided toward accepting any job is justified or not, the repatriated managers expect something more, and their dissatisfaction tends to fester. Consider the words of Suzanne Klein, whose U.S.-based firm first sent her to Switzerland to manage key European accounts. Based on her performance, she was made responsible for marketing operations in Europe and the Middle East within months. Yet, after her 22-month stay, she returned to a disappointing career in the home office:

> The hardest part was the job given upon repatriation, no choice in the job, no communication about what that job would be, until I was told what it was. And then basically [I was told] that [the] job [was] going away after two months. All in all, it was terrible. And I just find it interesting that a company would spend so much to send someone overseas and then treat them that way upon return. It was very disappointing.

Andrew Jackson found his mentor unable to deliver on his career-related expectations:

> Well, the things that were discussed is basically I was looking for something a little bit short term, if I am going to take the assignment, fine, I just don't want to be forgotten about back here

corporately, so I want to make sure I am still visible. Back to your first question, what's the career path for somebody to say, "Here, if you do well, you are going to go into this position …." They can say all that, but that doesn't mean that you're not [going to experience] "out of sight out of mind." So I was trying to make sure that this person kept me visible in the career-planning process, and also, too, to have a path back [when my assignment was up]. And you know something, that just wouldn't be; there [were] a lot of expats whose time would come up, and [they had to] come on back and interview and try to find … a position. So, that leaves you a little bit open, hanging.

Third, the inference we draw from the collective voices is as follows: The concept of mentoring in corporate consciousness is too strongly tethered to the notion of benevolence. Mentors are viewed as patrons and benefactors, and expatriates are viewed as protégés and beneficiaries of their largesse and wisdom. This myth is not completely illogical because the notion of mentors is often prominent in the stories about successful expatriates who leapfrogged over others and reached career heights. The problems with benevolent mentors and grateful, appreciative, and dependent protégés are quite simple—they are not the stuff of management and do not belong in modern organizations based on interdependent relationships. The present line of thinking prevents any move to link mentor performance with career advancement, and the expatriate bears the entire brunt of mentor failure. Mentoring cannot become an effective organizational function when ensconced in an aura of benevolence.

Despite the popularity of the mentor concept in the literature, its implementation in reality explains why mentors have a negligible impact on expatriates' postrepatriation-related transition and satisfaction (see Simon & Eby, 2003, for similar views). The literature's conception of mentors is too strongly

shaped by notions of what they can possibly do rather than what the returning expatriate expects and what the organization really sets them up to do. After a three-year posting in Hong Kong with his bank, Simon Herb explains the difficulty of finding the mythical mentor:

> I think it is difficult to have a mentor for an expatriate at some points … just because many companies (this one included) are spread out all over the country, all over the world.... You have to find the right senior people and then, at least with our company, they have to be willing to do it (to give the time, to put in the extra amount of work). So, they (mentors) have the chance to realize that they really do make a difference ... that they have something incredibly valuable to offer.... They have an experience abroad, most of them, and they can help others work and live in another country—representing our company.

The aggregate of managerial voices leads us to question whether the mentor concept holds currency, largely because it cannot substitute for weak or poor HR strategy or for an unprepared firm. In the least, the concept begs reexamination and realignment with the modern reality of interdependent relationships, assessment, accountability, and rewards.

Why Are MNCs and HR Functions Not at the Forefront of the Problem?

Managers suggest that HR's objectives are disconnected from concerns about (a) developing a talented cadre of globally trained managers (see Paik, Segaud, & Malinowski, 2002, for similar findings) or (b) harnessing and institutionalizing learning or addressing returning managers' anxiety and socioemotional needs (see Klaff, 2002, for similar evidence). Instead, repatriation-related planning

The aggregate of managerial voices leads us to question whether the mentor concept holds currency, largely because it cannot substitute for weak or poor HR strategy or for an unprepared firm.

is ad hoc and reactive. John Cox, capturing a common sentiment among returning expatriates, explains:

> It [repatriation planning] is the weakest link in the chain. I returned as expected, walked into my boss's office, and said, "I'm back!" And he says, "Oh? You're back?... Why don't you sit in so and so's chair because he is out traveling this week, and we'll see if we can find you something to do …." They [the HQ] didn't do anything to ease that anxiety of coming back. They assume you are a big boy and can do it on your own …. They could have done a lot better. I think they could have done a better job along with the mentoring of outlining possible career paths. Instead of [expatriation] being a proactive planning exercise, it became a very reactive … affair. I'd say on the whole it was very reactive and opportunistic instead of strategic.

In a similar vein, Bill James notes:

> [The job after repatriation] wasn't systematic at all; there was no HR [involvement]; it wasn't driven by HR at all. As far as the career part of that, HR was totally absent, invisible as far as I could tell.

The firm's resource deployment choices in general and the HR function in particular seem anchored in the view that sending expatriates overseas is similar to sending a manager from one U.S. city to another (i.e., a matter of expenses and additional compensation). This, too, is working very well; managers make no complaints about the adequacy of funds available to support their sojourns. Our interview transcripts are rich with descriptions of available funding for language lessons, cross-cultural training, preliminary inspection trips to find housing, professional services (moving, tax specialists), and visits back home.

For the emerging challenges of harnessing and institutionalizing learning, retaining talent, and developing the next generation of

globally trained managers, however, MNCs and HR functions seem unfocused and unprepared. The proposed solution, "discuss career options before managers leave on expatriate assignment" (e.g., Martin & Anthony, 2006), does not have many real-world analogues because, as managers overwhelmingly report, the firm does not define how expatriate assignments are related to career development goals. Virtually everyone in our sample is back at his or her old or laterally situated job where the dissatisfaction festers and the learning remains unutilized. If their firms were to implement this solution, potential expatriates would have to be told they are returning to their old or a laterally suited job—a move likely to reduce the interest in taking up expatriate assignments. While no firm may consciously intend to convey that expatriates are matters of additional expenses or their learning is unimportant or their careers are afterthoughts, without having explicit objectives and plans for reintegrating them, they do it anyway.

Our inferences about unfocused and unprepared HR functions, instead of reflecting a quirk of our sample, seem aligned with others' current observations. For instance, a leading scholar in the field notes:

> When it comes to what the HR department should do, some companies are close, but none has it exactly right. One thing is for sure: In an organization that wants talent to be its source of competitive advantage, the HR department can't be the stepchild it usually is. (Lawler, 2008, p. R8)

Similarly, the words of a celebrated CEO and a leading industry observer resonate strongly with managers' descriptions of fabled mentors as purveyors of steep career trajectories and HR functions disconnected from the reality of talent shortages:

> Human resources, unfortunately, often operates as a cloak-and-dagger society or a health-and-happiness sideshow …. HR rarely functions as it should. That's an outrage, made only more frustrating by the fact that most leaders aren't scrambling to fix it …. The stealthy stuff occurs when HR managers become little kingmakers, making and breaking careers, sometimes not even at the CEO's behest. These HR departments can indeed be powerful, but often in a detrimental way, prompting the best people to leave just to get away from the palace intrigue. Almost as often, though, you get the other extreme: HR departments that plan picnics, put out the plant newsletter (complete with time-in-service anniversaries duly noted), and generally drive everyone crazy by enforcing rules and regulations that appear to have no purpose other than to bolster the bureaucracy. They derive the little power they have by being cloyingly benevolent on one hand and company scolds on the other. (Welch & Welch, 2006a, p. 88)

What Would It Take for MNCs and HR Functions to Operate at the Forefront?

While the answer to this question is complex, the first-order implications drawn from managers' experiences provide some useful answers (see Figure 2 for how we derived strategy- and organization-related inferences from managers' responses). First, it would first take an HR function that operates from an explicit awareness of the gap between the returning expatriate's expectations and the firm's reality. Returning expatriates want their sacrifices recognized and their new learning and experiences acknowledged and rewarded by steeper career trajectories and choice assignments. They want a mentor who can help them socially and politically and clear the obstacles in their way to a fast-track career. HR functions have a role to play in managing these expectations and linking them to the firm's reality.

Second, it would take an HR function that operates from an explicit awareness of the gap between what the firm may implicitly desire and actually finds. Scholars suggest

What Managerial Responses Indicated	What We Inferred About the Need for HR Strategy and Organization
The firm treats the repatriation process and assignment of jobs (and responsibilities) upon return as afterthoughts. There is little regard for utilizing the knowledge and experience with which managers have returned.	Clear objectives related to harnessing learning and developing intellectual capital are necessary.
Expatriation is opportunistic; no clear definition of the link between executive development and foreign experiences exists.	Expatriation and repatriation should be linked to executive development objectives and processes.
Expatriation and repatriation are defined as expenses. The firm thus allocates resources to reimburse and compensate managers.	Repatriation is more than an expense because managers return with new knowledge, experiences, and expectations. The firm should align its HR objectives and strategies with these experiences and expectations.
Processes for managing logistical needs of returning managers exist and work very well.	There are no clear processes for managing the psychosocial and career-related needs of returning managers. These processes ought to be developed.
The organization is unconcerned about channeling new learning into appropriately challenging job assignments for repatriates.	The organization needs systems for managing and assessing learning and intellectual capital.
The mentor concept and its implementation are mostly flawed. They often represent the sole structural mechanism for managing expatriation and repatriation.	A clear organizational structure—defining flow of authority and responsibility—is necessary to ensure resources are allocated to the needed talents, activities, programs, processes, and systems.

FIGURE 2. How We Derived Strategy- and Organization-Related Inferences from Managers' Responses

that MNCs are best served by older, more informed expatriates without trailing spouses and families, capable of: (a) keeping their home office networks alive, (b) adjusting to the downward shift in status upon return, and (c) managing their own psychosocial baggage and career aspirations without looking to the firm for help (see Suutari & Valimaa, 2002; Takeuchi, Wang, & Marinova, 2005; Yeh-Yun Lin & Wei, 2005). Our sample of managers suggests that MNCs would also be served by returning expatriates who can derive high levels of satisfaction from any job to which they are assigned upon repatriation, stay long enough, and work tirelessly to transfer their learning to a largely uninterested firm. The HR function clearly has a role to play in bridging the gap created by these unrealistic, if implicit, expectations.

By "operate from," we mean an HR function that can *formulate* new objectives and strategies that reflect the reality of talent short-ages and wasted learning, demonstrate its relevance to the firm's globalizing operations, and *organize* itself for effective implementation. For instance, clear HR objectives and strategies (i.e., resource deployment choices) that address how the firm intends to reintegrate and develop globally trained managers are necessary. In the absence of these objectives and strategies, MNCs are unlikely to waver from their current practices of treating repatriation as an expense and postrepatriation careers as afterthoughts. A distinctively reorganized HR function is also essential. At present, the problem is not absence of sound ideas in the literature, but MNCs and HR functions organized to produce nothing other than what they currently produce (i.e., allocate funds for expatriation and find a slot for managers to occupy when they return). To effectively implement new objectives and strategies, a congruent organization (i.e., a configuration of talent, processes, systems, and

structure) is necessary (see Sashittal & Jassawalla, 2001). Training, mentoring, and the host of HR programs to aid repatriation can amount to little more than band-aids for deep-seated problems when implemented within the confines of the current organization. In other words, new objectives and strategies cannot be implemented when left to the current configuration of talent, processes, systems, and power structures because they are vested in the current pattern of resource deployment, are geared to produce current results, and resist changes that threaten to disrupt their comfort levels and real or perceived access to information and resources.

A New Strategic Orientation

The present strategic challenge for the leadership in MNCs and HR functions is to carefully and explicitly define to what extent, if any, (a) expatriation is part of executive training and a step in the process of developing the next generation of globally trained leaders (e.g., Caligiuri & Colakoglu, 2007) and (b) the firm takes responsibility for managing the returning expatriates' career aspirations and psychosocial needs that are exacerbating the gap between their expectations and reality. At present, the largely default answer to both is either no or to a negligible extent. Explicit answers to these questions and formulation of explicit HR objectives via a formal process can benefit firms and managers. Within firms, they can raise consciousness about poor returns on investment and career expectations of returning expatriates and spur thinking and discussion about appropriate ways of deploying resources. Explicit objectives related to reintegrating managers and clear resource allocation choices (i.e., evidence that the firm means to do what it says) can also help managers draw objective inferences about the value the firm places on expatriation and frame their expectations about rewards and career trajectories if they decide to accept the assignment. Presently, these inferences, decisions, and expectations are based on rumor, innuendo, and anecdotes. MNCs' leadership and HR professionals still unclear about the need for a new and explicit

strategic orientation may consider that (a) few, if any, talented managers will agree to go overseas if they know that what awaits them is their old job or a laterally situated job identified as an afterthought, (b) recent reports suggest that returning expatriates choose to leave their firms because they do not view them as committed to managing repatriation (e.g., Lee & Liu, 2006), and (c) managers increasingly define expatriate assignments as preparations for careers in other firms, a trend that threatens to further erode the return on the firm's investment in expatriation (e.g., Stahl et al., 2002). Developing and articulating expatriation-related objectives and strategies, however, are not enough. Effective implementation requires, at the least, the following configuration of processes, systems, and structure congruent to the repatriation management/career development strategy.

New Processes

Organizational processes strongly influence expatriate satisfaction immediately upon return (e.g., Lazarova & Caligiuiri, 2001). Processes or workflows are designed to solve complex problems in logically connected steps (i.e., they help returning expatriates define what happens first, what happens next, and what happens after that in ways that eventually address their concerns and solve their problems). Effective processes can help reduce expatriates' felt powerlessness because they can engage and validate expatriates and provide feedback about purposeful progress toward predefined goals. In most instances, effective processes for managing logistics of returning expatriates are in place. Wes McNab had left his previous place of employment because of postrepatriation-related dissatisfaction with career options. Upon his return from an expatriate assignment in Asia, he describes the processes his new employer has in place for managing the transition into the home office:

> You were assigned someone who was on the receiving end back in the States, kind of your dedicated HR person, who did everything from

soup to nuts for you. The second the company found out you were coming back to the States, you were assigned a relatively senior HR person, who did everything from visas for your children … born overseas, to the movers, to setting up appointments for you with your new boss and with your new peers, to arranging social events for you in the new areas you were working in back in the States. Really, the HR function within international (departments) in the headquarters of [name of firm] I think did a really good job of the reentry process from the practical to the social and the psychological.

This description speaks volumes for the thoughtfulness of processes designed to manage the logistics of an expatriate's transition to the home office. It is important, however, to differentiate processes that take care of logistics present in most firms in our study from processes needed to address the unarticulated psychosocial needs of returning expatriates. John Cox describes absent processes:

Unfortunately, the HR person assigned to help with expatriation and repatriation either … viewed his job or the company defined his job as 90% compensation and benefits related as opposed to career counseling. There was really no expatriation or repatriation career counseling. The HR people were very qualified to tell you [about repatriation in terms of] dollars and cents, but there was no one, no mentor, either in HR or elsewhere, to help you with the [job- and career-related] anxieties.

Investment in processes that can engage and help returning expatriates manage their anxiety and ambivalence seems essential. If our data provide any indication of a larger

After three to four years spent on assignment, [returning expatriates] are in need of, to one degree or another, reframing, decontamination, and resocialization—for which no formal processes are in place.

trend, it seems likely that returning expatriates, after three to four years spent on assignment, are in need of, to one degree or another, reframing, decontamination, and resocialization—for which no formal processes are in place.

Reframing processes help managers reconstruct their reality and draw new inferences about their postrepatriation-related expectations based on objective information. In particular, all repatriates are required to reframe their theories of action (i.e., deep-seated beliefs about "If I do X, then Y will result") and define new ways of deploying their talents and energies to fit and function effectively in the home environment. Dated theories of action are known to produce dysfunctional coping behaviors (e.g., Feldman & Thomas, 1992). If uncorrected, the acting out of postrepatriation-related frustrations can lead others to label their behaviors as difficult, further complicating the repatriation process (e.g., Klaff, 2002). While researchers have done important thinking about reframing techniques (e.g., Kardes, Fennis, Hirt, Tormala, & Bullington, 2007; Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2007) and discussed the role of reframing in shaping strategic perspectives (e.g., Sillince & Mueller, 2007), new thinking about reframing processes to help managers develop informed and practical postrepatriation-related perspectives has yet to occur.

While much of the operations-related learning with which managers return is useful to the firm, much of the social learning is detrimental to their reintegration. In particular, the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral learning rooted in the extra attention and affirmation received during their sojourn must be unlearned. Repatriates often feel like foreigners in their home offices because they do not receive the validation and attention to which they have become accustomed (e.g., Webb, 1996). Decontamination is essential because the dysfunctional learning triggers unrealistic expectations of what the firm owes them and sets them up for disappointment. Few of them receive the acknowledgment they have come to expect. Decontamination processes can help managers break from their old practices and rou-

tines appropriate for the host office environment and clear the way for new learning. While the issues of unlearning old ways of thinking and doing and decontamination have attracted attention, MNCs sorely need fresh thinking about such processes for managing returning expatriates' psychosocial baggage (see Caudron, 1999; Martin de Holans, Philips, & Lawrence, 2004, for perspectives on unlearning).

Finally, resocialization must occur because expatriates return as changed persons to changed sociopolitical environments (e.g., Andreason & Kinneer, 2005). All are required, to one extent or another, to abandon old and develop new ways of thinking about formal and informal interpersonal relationships in light of changed priorities, new pecking orders, and new kids sitting around the cool table. The literature has strongly advocated for mentors in large part because they promise to help the resocialization process (see Linehan & Scullion, 2002; Vermond, 2001). Additional research to identify effective processes for reframing, decontaminating, and resocializing returning expatriates is necessary. New processes seem more likely to work, however, upon the investment in the following systems.

New Systems

We find no evidence of dedicated systems for managing returning expatriates' cognitive and psychosocial needs. For instance, even though all expatriate experiences and all expatriates are not equally valuable to the firm, there is marked uniformity in terms of what they seem to expect from their firms. This signals the weakness or absence of systems for assessing expatriate worth and performance. When assessment systems are effective, the turnover among expatriates can pose less of a problem; valuable ones are rewarded and may choose to stay, while others might choose to leave. There is also a marked absence of systems for assessing the firm's intellectual capital (e.g., Grossman, 2006; Lawler, 2008; Moon & Kym, 2006). MNCs thus cannot monitor their loss when managers choose to stay with low morale and fester-

ing dissatisfaction or choose to leave because of their dissatisfaction. Moreover, repatriates cannot objectively gauge their contribution to the firm's intellectual capital or calibrate their expectations. If firms actively assess and audit intellectual capital, it is likely they will act sooner and more decisively to harness and institutionalize learning.

Most important, there is a pressing need for knowledge and learning systems to ensure that the firm benefits from what the expatriate has learned (e.g., Fink et al., 2005; Hocking et al., 2007). We cannot find any instance, however, when firms made an effort to formally channel the repatriated manager's learning into the organization (e.g., Palthe, 2004). Moreover, our sample of managers is unaware of any conversation regarding the institutionalization of their learning in their firms, if it is occurring at all.

Janet Sorenson, an 18-year veteran in her firm, had served 2 years in the United Kingdom and 4 years in Switzerland. She was assigned to her old job when she returned to her firm's U.S. headquarters. She describes the lost opportunity to institutionalize her learning:

> *…. I am a very loyal company person. Is [my loyalty] going to be best served within the company?*

> There is a part of you that feels … if you are looking at an overall career and how to take this wonderful experience into achieving its potential …. I am a very loyal company person. Is [my loyalty] going to be best served within the company? When they kind of just put you back in and say, "Okay, great! We're glad you got this experience, now go do this other thing that does not fully utilize that [experience]" …. I understand what I have to do right now, but I also know, on the outside there are lots of opportunities to [better utilize my expatriate experiences] …. So, do I feel fully satisfied at the end result? I think there's a world out there, too, that values the experience I have.

For the organization to learn, three things must occur (see Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Madhavan & Grover, 1998; Nonaka, 1994, for detailed insights into embedding knowledge in organizations).

First, other people in the organization must learn what the expatriate has learned about the foreign office and marketplace. This requires knowledge systems that can capture the learning and make it available cheaply and effectively to the rest of the firm. At present, virtually all the knowledge resides in increasingly cynical expatriates' minds, where it remains unused or walks away from the firm. Knowledge is also transferred when the firm gives the returning expatriate the kind of responsibility that would harness and channel new learning in ways that benefit the firm. This seldom occurs. Asking repatriated managers to mentor others after they return is one such mechanism that can help the transfer of knowledge. Only 4 of the 50 (8%) repatriates in our study served as formal mentors. While there is evidence to suggest that communicating and information sharing through networks help knowledge transfer (see Furuya et al., 2007; Pfeffer, 1998), MNCs are actually exacerbating the problem. When relegated to their old or a laterally situated job, repatriates report a rapid decay in their motivation to transfer and share their learning.

Second, the organization must learn what the expatriate has learned (i.e., the learning must embed the organization's processes, systems, structure, and culture so future practice is better informed and managed). In the absence of learning, organizations cannot improve their capabilities for managing the expatriate function. Each returning expatriate thus faces the same problems, year after year.

Third, leadership must make resource allocation choices to ensure that the right kind of learning occurs. In the absence of appropriate allocation of resources, the learning embedded in the firm's processes and systems relates almost entirely to the logistical problems of expatriation; no significant learning about managing psychosocial needs of returning expatriates occurs. The absence of organizational flywheels to capture the emergent learning has particularly egregious implications for firms expanding into underdeveloped markets and/or sending manufacturing or back-office operations to low-wage countries that are culturally, socioeconomically, and politically different from Western Europe and North America. The cultures of underdeveloped or low-wage countries are high context, and their sociopolitical and legal systems more opaque than transparent, so the learning derived from personal experience—even though it is internalized and difficult to share with others—is critical for the organization's global operations. Failure to embed expatriates' valuable learning in the organization makes for uninformed decisions and slow market responsiveness. While scholars have given some attention to knowledge systems in the international management context (e.g., Appleyard, Brown, & Sattler, 2006), MNCs need new thinking about systems that can harness the learning of returning expatriates to impact the next wave of globalization. Processes and systems are of limited value unless the firm formally develops a clear structure for implementing its strategic orientation and defines who has the resources and the authority to manage new processes and systems.

New Structure

Two of the clearest problems afflicting HR functions in general are their lack of organization and the absence of requisite talent and skills. A leading scholar in the field notes:

> While most companies say they value human capital, in reality, few are run that way. They may have systems in place for hiring talented people, but their organizational structures aren't designed to develop, motivate, and retain the best ones. And the group with the expertise to help the organization better manage and utilize people—the human-resources department—often is too mired in administrative tasks to tackle higher-value

work …. In a company built to leverage human capital, the HR staff would spend less time processing benefits requests and more time being the expert resource on the state of the organization's work force and its ability to perform. (Lawler, 2008, p. R8)

In our sample, mentors represent the sole investment in talent and structure for managing postrepatriation careers. Formal mentors, however, lack sufficient formal authority to make a difference in postrepatriation-related career choices, and they exacerbate the demoralizing sense of powerlessness returning expatriates feel by mostly shepherding them into a job, any job—often their old or a laterally situated job. Because mentors are not assessed or held accountable, they have no personal stake in producing outcomes that benefit either the firm or the returning expatriate. Some scholars have noted the advantages of assigning multiple mentors to help the firm embed expatriated managers' learning (e.g., Crocitto et al., 2005). Regardless of their singular or collective talent and sociopolitical influence, the postrepatriation-related needs associated with reframing, decontamination, and resocialization are too much for mentors to manage. It also is time to abandon the benevolent mentor concept, which may well fit within the modus operandi of HR as kingmaker, and recognize repatriation as a value-creating activity that deserves a dedicated structure (i.e., a framework of authority and responsibility assigned that manages the necessary configuration of talent, processes, and systems). Managers' voices clearly call for a revitalized, strategically oriented, and organized HR function endowed with the requisite variety of talent (i.e., managers for foreign-operation-based intellectual capital and talent retention) and formally charged with (a) harnessing the tacit knowledge that resides within returning expatriates and embedding it into the organization to inform future practice and (b) developing the next generation of globally trained managers.

What Should Managers Considering Expatriation Know?

Even if MNCs eventually restrategize and reorganize for repatriation as we and others believe they should, it is important to distill implications for managers considering expatriate assignments until this occurs. Since we only spoke to managers who had successfully completed their expatriate assignments and we did not have access to the broad spectrum of experiences related to visits cut short, we urge aspirants to triangulate what we say with other expatriates' experiences before drawing definitive inferences.

Expatriation promises managers and their families heavily subsidized and generously rewarded educational and growth experiences. More often than not, however, the returning expatriates occupy old or laterally located jobs. Firms discount their new learning and experiences, and thus their loss of stature and status is real—issues that should factor into framing expatriates' expectations. Some scholars say that returning expatriates should expect little from the firm and should manage their own careers (e.g., Egan, 1994; Mezias & Scandura, 2005). Others have noted that managers often derive value from their sojourns and are uncontaminated by their postrepatriation experiences (e.g., Stahl et al., 2002). Our data are overwhelmingly aligned with these notions. Even though the firm loses the opportunity to develop and utilize intellectual capital, nearly all returnees make the best of the situation, view the experience as part of personal growth, and succeed as a result of renewed efforts. Managers who returned from their expatriate assignments six years (or earlier) before the interviews were conducted more commonly reported this. Consider Tracey Edmondson's advice to managers considering expatriation:

Q: What would you say to other potential expatriates looking at going abroad on a foreign assignment?

A: Number one, go for the experience. Because if you go for the promotion … [you will be disappointed because] things change …. It's fine to [hope

for a promotion] as well, but go there to expect to embrace change and to learn and to grow personally and professionally in the [overseas] environment. Have that be your primary goal because [with] the other [getting promoted] … there's too much unknown, there's too much out-of-sight-out-of-mind, there's too much variability and, quite frankly, there's too much lack of control.

Under the best of circumstances, the currency of social and political networks in the home office invariably diminishes while posted in foreign locations and disappears entirely if expatriates make no effort to sustain them. While networking is important, few work-related relationships seem to survive in ways that ensure an accelerated postrepatriation career. Finally, feelings of anxiety, ambivalence, and dissatisfaction are normal. Because all firms and all expatriates are not equally or highly worthy, finding a new career in a new firm is not necessarily a lose-lose option. It is possible, however, for expatriates to leverage newly learned knowledge and skills and their expanded sense of worldliness into accelerated careers, but the necessary investment in new activities and reconnection with networks often make it a long process. If our sample of managers serves as an indicator of a larger trend, it takes about a year or two of focused effort to bring old networks back to life and develop a steeper career trajectory.

Conclusion

We conducted our study to explore why repatriated managers are dissatisfied, why the mentors fail to deliver, and why MNCs and HR functions are not at the forefront of solving the emerging problems of lost learning and intellectual capital in an increasingly globalized environment. Although much has been written about poorly managed repatriation and the merits of mentors, few have explained why numerous explanations and remedies offered in the literature have failed to make a significant impact. Consistent with our exploratory intent, our findings

aim to stimulate new thinking and spur new research that can speak to the practical realities of MNCs, HR functions, and managers considering expatriate assignments. We propose a new strategic orientation for MNCs and HR functions that defines expatriate assignments as part of executive development and focuses on reintegrating returning expatriates and thus harnessing globally trained talent. Our findings deserve rigorous testing in a variety of settings before definitive knowledge can emerge. In particular, it is important to evaluate our findings based on the following caveats.

First, our inferences are drawn from the experiences of managers who had returned after successfully completing their expatriate assignments. Their voices, therefore, do not reflect (a) experiences of those who returned midway through their expatriate assignments or (b) the firm's perspective. This weakness calls for new research that focuses on the firm's (and on HR's) concerns, as well as additional scrutiny into why managers leave their assignments midway.

Second, while using students to conduct interviews is ordinarily problematic and resulted in our rejecting one-third of the interviews they conducted, the early interviews provided valuable information about probing questions we included in later interviews. For instance, in all remaining interviews, managers were asked to provide specific examples of what occurred in addition to the details of their experiences and learning. Similarly, while it is a weakness that 11 interviews in which managers described their repatriation-related experiences occurred six or more years after their return, what we lost in freshness was made up by what we gained from perspective they had developed about their careers.

Notes

Acknowledgment

AVAN J. JASSAWALLA (Ph.D., School of Management, Syracuse University) is associate professor of management at the School of Business at the State University of New York at Geneseo, where she teaches courses in organizational behavior, human resource management and leadership. Her research interests relate to product innovation processes, teamwork, strategy implementation, pedagogy (managing classroom teams and learning), and International HRM.

HEMANT C. SASHITTAL (Ph.D., School of Management, Syracuse University) is professor of marketing at the Bittner School of Business at St. John Fisher College, Rochester, New York, where he teaches courses in marketing, innovation, and organizational change. His research interests relate to strategy implementation, product innovation processes, teamwork, and pedagogy.

References

Abbot, G. N., Stening, B. W., Atkins, P. W. B, & Grant, A. M. (2006). Coaching expatriate managers for success: Adding value beyond training and mentoring. Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources, 44(3), 295–317.

Andreason, A., &. Kinneer, K. D. (2005). Repatriation adjustment problems and the successful reintegration of expatriates and their families. Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management, 6(2), 109–126.

Appleyard, M. M., Brown, C., & Sattler, L. (2006). An international investigation of problem-solving performance in the semiconductor industry. Journal of Product Innovation Management, 23(2), 147–167.

Ashamalla, M. H., & Crocitto, M. (1997). Easing entry and beyond: Preparing expatriates and patriates for foreign assignment success. International Journal of Commerce and Management, 7(2), 106–114.

Bennet, R., & O'Gorman, H. (1998, April 1). Benchmark with the best. HRMagazine, 43(5), 19–21.

Black, S. J., & Gregersen, H. B. (1998). So you're going overseas: A handbook for personal and professional success. San Diego: Global Business.

Black, S. J., & Gregersen, H. B. (1999). The right way to manage expats. Harvard Business Review, 77(2), 52–62.

Bolino, M.C., & Feldman D. C. (2000). Increasing the skill utilization of expatriates. Human Resource Management, 39(4), 367–384.

Caligiuri, P. M., & Colakoglu, S. (2007). A strategic contingency approach to expatriate assignment management. Human Resource Management Journal, 17(4), 393–410.

Caudron, S. (1999). Let go of bad habits. Workforce, 78(3), 19–20.

Cavusgil, T., Yavas, U., & Bykowicz, S. (1992). Preparing executives for overseas assignments. Management Decision, 30(1), 54–58.

Cohen, W., & Levinthal, D. (1990). Absorptive capacity: A new perspective on learning and innovation. Administrative Science Quarterly, 35(1), 128–152.

Crocitto, M., Sullivan, S. E., & Carraher, S. M. (2005). Global mentoring as a means of career development and knowledge creation: A learning-based framework and agenda for future research. Career Development. 10(6–7), 522–537.

Downes, M., Thomas, A. S., & Singley, R. B. (2002). Predicting expatriate job satisfaction: The role of firm internationalization. Career Development International, 7(1), 24–36.

Downes, M., Varner, I. I., & Musinski, L. (2007). Personality traits as predictors of expatriate effectiveness: A synthesis and reconceptualization. Review of Business, 27(3), 16–23.

Egan, G. (1994). Hard times-contracts. Management Today, 48–50.

Feldman, D. C., & Thomas D. C. (1992). Career management issues facing expatriates. Journal of International Business Studies, 23(2), 271–293.

Fink, G., Meierewert, S., & Rohr, U. (2005). The use of repatriate knowledge in organizations. Human Resource Planning, 28(4), 30–36.

Fisher, A. (2007, December 2). The millionaire mentor. Fortune, 154(13), 140.

Forster, N. (2000). Expatriates and the impact of cross-cultural training. Human Resource Management Journal, 10(3), 63–78.

Furuya, N., Stevens, M. J., Oddou, G., Bird, A., & Mendenhall, M. E. (2007). The effects of HR policies and repatriate self-adjustment on global competency transfer. Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources, 45(1), 6–23.

Grossman, M. (2006). An overview of knowledge management assessment approaches. Journal of American Academy of Business, 8(2), 242–247.

Harvey, M., & Novicevic, M. H. (2006). The evolution from repatriation of managers in MNEs to "patriation" in global organizations. In G. K. Stahl & I. Björkman (Eds.), Handbook of research in international human resource management (pp. 236–246). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Hocking, B. J., Brown, M., & Harzing, A. (2007). Balancing global and local strategic contexts: Expatriate knowledge transfer, applications, and learning within a transnational organization. Human Resource Management, 46(4), 513–534.

Kardes, F. R., Fennis, B. M., Hirt, E. R., Tormala, Z. L., & Bullington, B. (2007). The role of the need for cognitive closure in the effectiveness of the disrupt-then-reframe influence technique. Journal of Consumer Research, 34(3), 377–385.

Klaff, L. G. (2002). The right way to bring expats home. Workforce, 81(7), 40–44.

Lawler, E. E., III. (2008, March 10). The HR department: Give it more respect. Wall Street Journal, R8.

Lazarova, M., & Caligiuri, P. (2001). Retraining repatriates: The role of organizational support practices. Journal of World Business, 36(4), 389–401.

Lazarova, M., & Tarique, I. (2005). Knowledge transfer upon repatriation. Journal of World Business, 40, 361–373.

Lee, H., & Liu, C. (2006). The determinants of repatriate turnover intentions: An empirical analysis. International Journal of Management, 23(4), 751–762.

Linehan, M., & Scullion, H. (2002). The repatriation of female international managers: An empirical study. International Journal of Manpower, 23(7), 649–660.

Madhavan, R., & Grover, R. (1998). From embedded knowledge to embodied knowledge: New product development as knowledge management. Journal of Marketing, 62(4), 1–12.

Marigold, D. C., Holmes, J. G., & Ross, M. (2007). More than words: Reframing compliments from romantic partners fosters security in low self-esteem individuals. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92(2), 232–248

Martin, D. C., & Anthony, J. J. (2006). The repatriation and retention of employees: Factors leading to successful programs. International Journal of Management, 3(2), 620–631.

Martin de Holans, P., Philips, P., & Lawrence, T. (2004). Managing organizational forgetting. MIT Sloan Management Review, 45(2), 45–51.

Mezias, J., & Scandura, T. A. (2005). A needs-driven approach to expatriate adjustment and career development: A multiple mentoring perspective. Journal of International Business Studies, 36(5), 519–538.

Minbaeva, D. (2007). Knowledge transfer in multinational corporations. Management International Review, 47(4), 567–593.

Moon, Y., & Kym, H. (2006). A model for the value of intellectual capital. Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences, 23(3), 253–269.

Newton, S., Hutchings, K., & Kabanoff, B. (2007). Repatriation in Australian organizations: Effects of function and value of international assignment on program scope. Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources, 45(3), 295–313.

Nonaka, I. (1994). A dynamic theory of organizational knowledge creation. Organization Science, 5(1), 14–37.

O'Connor, R. (2002, October 1). Plug the expatriate knowledge drain. HRMagazine, 47(10), 101–107.

Osland, J. S. (2000). The journey inward: Expatriate hero tales and paradoxes. Human Resource Management, 39(2/3), 227–238.

Overman, S. (2004, March 1). Mentors without borders. HRMagazine, 49(3), 83–86.

Paik, Y., Segaud, B., & Malinowski, C. (2002). How to improve repatriation management: Are motivations and expectations congruent between the company and expatriates? International Journal of Manpower, 23(7), 635–650.

Palthe, J. (2004). The relative importance of antecedents to cross-cultural adjustment: Implications for managing a global workforce. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 28(1), 37–59.

Pfeffer, J. (1998). The human equation. Boston: Harvard University Press.

Rushings, K., & Kleiner, B. H. (2003). New developments in executive relocation practices. Management Research News, 26(2/4), 12–19.

Sashittal, H. C., & Jassawalla, A. R. (2001). Marketing implementation in smaller organizations: Definition, framework, and propositional inventory. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 29(1), 49–68.

Sillince, J., & Mueller, F. (2007). Switching strategic perspective: The reframing of accounts of responsibility. Organization Studies, 28(2), 155–176.

Simon, S. A., & Eby, L. T. (2003). A typology of negative mentoring experiences: A multidimensional scaling study. Human Relations, 56(9), 1083–1098.

Stahl, G. K., Miller, E. L., & Tung, R. L. (2002). Toward the boundaryless career: A closer look at the expatriate career concept and the perceived implications of an international assignment. Journal of World Business, 37(3), 216–217.

Stanek, M. B. (2000). The need for global managers: A business necessity. Management Decisions, 38(4), 232–242.

Stevens, M. J., Oddou, G., Furuya, N., Bird, A., & Mendenhall, M. (2006). HR factors affecting repatriate job satisfaction and job attachment for Japanese managers. International Journal of Human Resource Management, 17(5), 831–841.

Suutari, V., & Valimaa, K. (2002). Antecedents of repatriation adjustment: New evidence from Finnish repatriates. International Journal of Manpower, 23(7), 617–635.

Swaak, R. (1997). Repatriation: A weak link in global HR. HR Focus, 74(4), 29–30.

Takeuchi, R., Wang, M., & Marinova, S. V. (2005). Antecedents and consequences of psychological workplace strain during repatriation: A cross-sectional and longitudinal investigation. Personnel Psychology, 58(4), 925–948.

Tyler, K. (2006, March 13). Retraining repatriates. HR Magazine, 51(3), 97–101.

Vermond, K. (2001). Expatriates come home. CMA Management, 75(7), 30–33.

Webb, A. (1996). The expatriate experience: Implications for career success. Career Development International, 1(5), 38–46.

Welch, J., & Welch, S. (2006a, July 17). So many CEOs get this wrong. Business Week, (3993), 88.

Welch, J., & Welch, S. (2006b, July 31). Outsourcing is forever. Business Week, (3998), 88.

Whitley, W., Dougherty, T. W., & Dreher, G. F. (1991). Relationships of career mentoring and socioeconomic origin to managers' and professionals' early career progress. Academy of Management Journal, 34(2), 331–351.

Yeh-Yun Lin, C., & Wei, Y. (2005). An Eastern and SME version of expatriate management: An empirical study of small and medium enterprises in Taiwan. International Journal of Human Resource Management, 16(8), 1431–1453.

APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

1. How would you describe your experience as an expatriate manager?

2. What were some difficulties or stresses you faced as an expatriate, and how did each impact your work? Please include stresses you faced in the predeparture, overseas assignment, and repatriation stages.

   a. What kinds of company support did you get, and how did they help? How did each stressor impact your work?

3. Did you have a mentor? If yes:

   a. What kind(s) of mentoring did you experience when you worked as an expatriate (e.g., formal or informal)? In the host country or home office?

   b. What role did the mentor(s) play?

   c. To what extent did you find mentoring helpful?

4. How would you rate the overall success of your overseas assignment?

   a. Why do you feel you were successful/unsuccessful? What were the key contributors to success/failure?

   b. Based on your experiences, what does the firm need to do in order to help returning expatriates?