



Revisiting repatriation concerns: organizational support versus career and contextual influences

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Abstract

This paper reviews and integrates two perspectives on repatriate retention: a traditional one, which suggests that the main determinant of repatriate retention is the availability of repatriation support programs; and an emerging one, which focuses on individual career activism in a changing employment context. Results of a study of 133 expatriates from 14 MNCs indicate that both views contribute to our understanding of repatriate retention. Building on the results of our study, we put forward a framework to guide future research.

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Introduction

Increased globalization has been accompanied by a marked increase in the attention that academics and practitioners alike pay to the effective management of expatriate employees. Until recently, the primary focus of expatriate research has been on operational (personnel management) issues and the early stages of the expatriate experience – how to select the best candidates for assignment, how to train them, how to support them and their families during their transition abroad, how to structure their compensation, and so on. Recent work has adapted a more strategic focus, and often centers on the value of global expertise gained as a result of global assignments and the related knowledge-transfer implications of such assignments. This has resulted in renewed attention to repatriation and, specifically, the importance of retaining returning expatriates, increasingly seen as untapped elements of organizational capability (Peltonen, 1993; Tung, 1998a; Tsang, 1999; Lazarova and Tarique, 2005).

The theme of repatriation turnover as a major source of concern for repatriates and their companies has been invariably present in the literature for several decades now. Our paper describes, compares, and contrasts the traditional and the emerging propositions of the literature, the former focusing on the role of organizations, and the latter drawing attention to the roles of individual and environmental factors. We draw parallels between the two views, and then provide preliminary empirical evidence for both, based on a study of 133 repatriates. Our results suggest that changing conditions have indeed created the need for conceptual revisions of our study of repatriation.

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