

# Repatriate's knowledge transfer: Antecedents of knowledge transfer, transfer process, knowledge absorption and consequences

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**Abstract:** The present study aims to analyze the knowledge transfer of repatriates in organizations, a topic that has gained significance over the past decade. Due to its complexity, a systematic literature review was conducted to explore various aspects of this theme. To contribute to the academic literature, the authors developed a comprehensive framework for the process of knowledge transfer. The objective was to enhance understanding and identify the antecedents, consequences, as well as the processes of transfer, absorption, and diffusion of knowledge. The findings indicate that knowledge transfer often falls short of optimal practices, which impacts overall efficiency. Consequently, this study is relevant for organizations seeking to improve their knowledge transfer practices, as well as for researchers aiming to gain a deeper understanding of this subject matter.

**Keywords:** Competitive advantage; Knowledge transfer; Knowledge absorption; Repatriates; Systematic literature review.

## 1. Introduction

The globalization process has evolved over time, forcing large and small businesses to adapt to the dynamism of the international competitive environment (Dicken, 2011; Ribau et al., 2015). This evolutionary journey has led to the development of several different assumptions, frameworks and theories that explore the relationship between increasing business globalization and the subsequent rise in international competition among businesses.

The expatriation of mobile employees, managers and executives was (and still is) an essential strategy employed by firms, normally multinationals, to align their business processes to the requirements of destination countries (Shaffer et al., 1999; Wang, 2002), to overcome the lack

of qualified and skilled expatriates of foreign markets and to facilitate the transfer knowledge from the headquarters to foreign affiliates (Bonache et al., 2018; Shaffer et al., 1999; Tahir, 2018; Wang, 2002).

Technically, expatriation refers to the temporary residence in a foreign country, alone or with the expatriate's family, to address challenges, to transfer knowledge, to implement new projects, or to complement knowledge gaps in the destination country (Morence et al., 2020). Normally, the expatriation process concludes with the repatriation of the individual to the home country and organization (Chiang et al., 2018).

While expatriation entails the temporary stay of employees abroad for a period exceeding one year (Howe-Walsh & Torke, 2017), repatriation refers to the process through which managers or employees return to the organizations they originally worked for in their home country. Repatriation occurs after the completion of a business assignment abroad (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001).

While the expatriation process can encompass several stages, depending on the complexity of international assignments, repatriation was originally viewed as another stage within the expatriation process (Knocke & Schuster, 2017; Rodrigues et al., 2021). However, repatriates play an important role as the international knowledge gained during the international assignment can be capitalized as relational/social capital allowing them to implement important international knowledge transfers and business expansion strategies. Moreover, they possess important insights of the diverse international cultural contexts and markets they have been involved with, offering their employing companies knowledge-based competitive advantages by facilitating knowledge transfer between international branches of the organization (Knocke & Schuster, 2017).

Knowledge encompasses a vast body of data, information, ideas, and experiences that influence behavior and decisions. Knowledge is a strategic resource that should be exploited in order to result in competitive advantages for organizations (Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2014). The acquisition of skills and competencies through international assignments could be a vehicle to achieve valuable knowledge and competencies that contribute to the company's success, enhancing its competition in the global economy (Stevens et al., 2006). Knowledge transfer between the parent and subsidiaries could be a valuable resource, especially in the transfer of core competencies, as being geographically dispersed there will be relevant knowledge that will be developed.

During an expatriation mission, knowledge transfer from the parent company to the subsidiary is expected to take place. When the expatriation mission is over, expatriates return to their home country, and to the parent company, and are now considered repatriates (Chiang et al., 2018). There is an understanding that the knowledge that comes from the reverse process, from the subsidiary to the headquarters, could also be used as a competitive advantage since there is the assimilation of international knowledge, skills, capabilities or even experience (Chiang et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, there are limitations to the repatriation process, both due to the differences between the destination and origin organizations (Hurn, 2007). For example, Burmeister et al. (2018) highlight that repatriates face active and passive resistance when attempting to share

their knowledge. Similarly, the parent company may offer resistance in accepting knowledge coming from subsidiaries as it considers it inferior, since the subsidiary is more specialized and locally restricted (Bucher et al., 2022; Burmeister et al., 2018).

Knowledge transfer is an increasingly important issue for companies to gain competitive advantage and to stand out from their competitors (Jayasingam et al., 2021). Repatriation is a valuable resource for this process. Individuals who embrace international assignments abroad gain new experiences and new knowledge that can be very useful for organizations. Repatriates can play an important role as part of a social global network of the company, since they may speed up the transfer of knowledge from subsidiaries and affiliates to the parent company, and vice-versa. Moreover, the repatriation process represents an important research avenue, since the stay of an employee on an organization depends on the success of the repatriation process. Furthermore, repatriation issues often present more challenges, are more subtle, and are widely underestimated compared to those experienced during expatriation (Knocke & Schuster, 2017).

Multinationals can be understood as global knowledge-based systems, where knowledge flows from headquarters to subsidiaries, as well as among subsidiaries, as they create, exploit, transfer, and protect internal knowledge (Nielsen & Michailova, 2007; Omerzel & Gulev, 2011). To enhance their market competitiveness, multinationals must leverage knowledge generated across the organization (Argote & Ingram, 2000) and manage this knowledge to adapt it to local specificities (Laszlo & Laszlo, 2002). Clearly, knowledge transfer plays a key role in gaining a competitive advantage.

Argote and Ingram (2000) describe knowledge transfer as the process by which one business unit is influenced by the experience of another business unit, based on the knowledge or performance of the recipient. Since knowledge is intrinsically linked to particular contextual problems, multinationals need to manage different actors and units (Ambos & Ambos, 2009). Classical studies have analyzed the important role of internal knowledge management transfers (intra-MNC knowledge transfers) that can be split up in several management transfer types (Grant, 1996; Kogut & Zander, 1992, 1993; Castro & Moreira, 2023): vertical knowledge transfers (VKT), i.e. from HQs to subsidiaries and vice-versa, and horizontal knowledge transfers (HKT), i.e. across peer subsidiaries. Moreover, although there are several studies in the literature on knowledge transfer, most of them focus on expatriation and not on the repatriation process. Thus, in order to complement the knowledge about repatriate's knowledge transfers, this chapter aims to answer the following questions: What is the significance of repatriate's knowledge for companies? How can organizations motivate repatriates to transfer knowledge? What are the inherent obstacles in this process?

In order to answer these objectives, this chapter conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) on knowledge transfer from repatriates to their parent companies. The main focus is to analyze the knowledge transfer process during repatriation, specifically from the foreign country back to the home organization. It is important to emphasize that throughout the chapter several terms are used for the same concept. Terms such as 'home', 'parent company', 'headquarters', 'home organization', 'home firm', and 'home organization' all denote the company in the home country that sends an employee as an expatriate and subsequently receives them as a repatriate. Conversely, the terms 'branches', 'subsidiaries', 'host firm', 'affiliates', and 'host

organization' refer to the company in the destination country that hosted the expatriate for a certain period of time. Finally, the main themes analyzed emerged from the analyzed articles and were grouped in four main strands, that constitute the framework of analysis: antecedents of knowledge transfer; repatriate's knowledge transfer; knowledge absorption capacity; and consequences of knowledge transfer.

After this introduction, the chapter is composed of four additional sections. Section 2 outlines the methods employed to implement the SLR. Section 3 describes the results of the research. Section 4 presents the results obtained, divided into four subtopics: antecedents of knowledge transfer, the repatriate's knowledge transfer process, the capacity for knowledge absorption, and the consequences of knowledge transfer. After the presentation of these topics, section 5 presents the conclusion.

## 2. Research Method

This article follows the SLR procedures proposed by Denyer and Tranfield (2009), aiming to provide a replicable and scientific process that captures the essence of the topic under analysis. Denyer and Tranfield (2009) outline the following steps: defining the research question, locating relevant studies, selecting and evaluating studies, analyzing and synthesizing, and presenting the results. Once defined the research question, as presented in the introduction, the Scopus database was utilized to search for journal papers, as they have the highest reputation in the academic field and contain validated knowledge, normally through double-blind review processes (Tahai & Meyer, 1999). Secondly, to capture as much content as possible in order to identify and collect different perspectives, no restriction was placed on a particular set of academic journals in the field (Jones et al., 2011).

To obtain a selection of articles that fit the purpose of the study, a search was conducted using keywords and specific search criteria. The search did not impose any time limitations on publication dates, and was conducted on carried out 22, 2022. Table 1 shows the search data.

**Table 1** Search procedure implemented in the Scopus database.

Search	Terms and means used in the search
Search (TITLE-ABS-KEY)	"Repatriation" OR "Repatriat*" AND "Know*"
Inclusion criteria	Type of documents: <i>Articles e Reviews</i> Types of publication: <i>Journals</i> Area of Study: <i>Business, Management and Accounting</i> Language: English
Results	76 articles Without restrictions: 535 articles

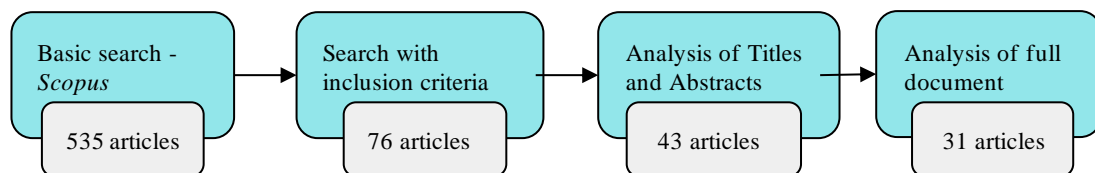
For this search the terms "Repatriation" or "Repatriat\*" were used to encompass both the repatriation process and the repatriates. The term "Know\*" was employed to capture knowledge related to the repatriation process. Since there are several variants of the word know,

we used the asterisk so that words like knowing, knowledge, know-how, know-who, among other derivatives, could be included. No additional keywords were applied since the selection of articles already provided an acceptable basis for analysis.

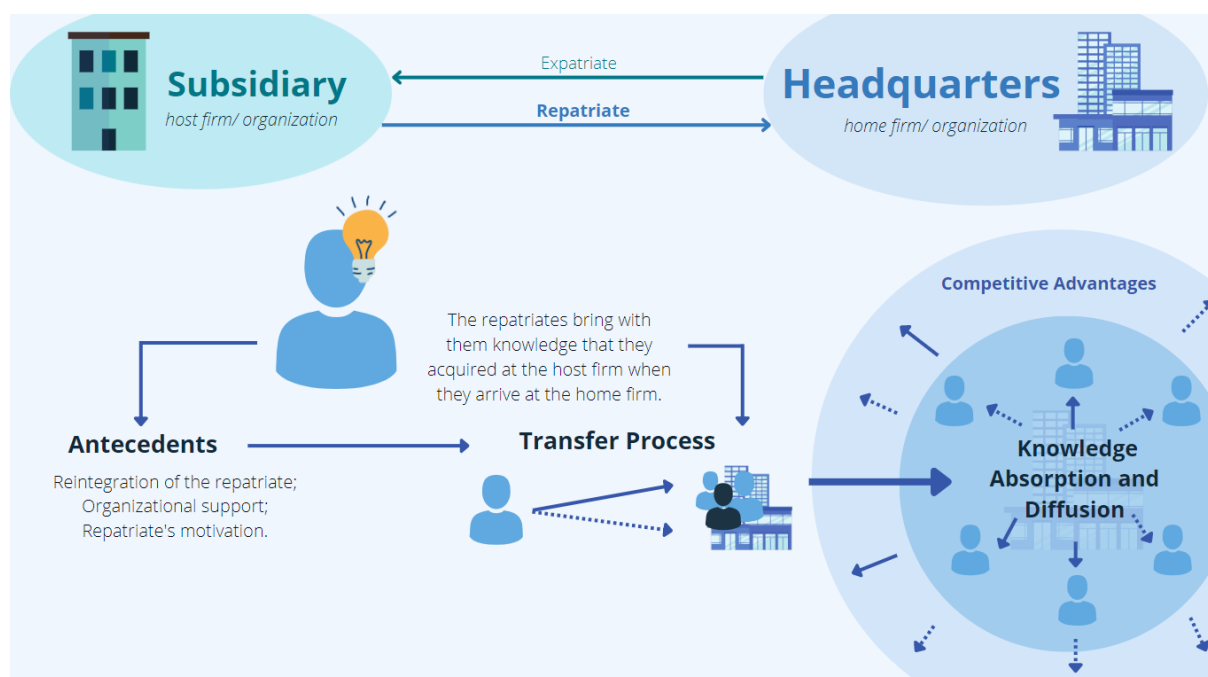
After selecting the set of documents, they were exported to an Excel file, and their titles and abstracts were analyzed individually by each of the authors of this document to understand and identify which articles were in accordance with the theme. A color-coded method was employed to decide what articles to include: green for articles requiring in-depth analysis, yellow for articles requiring further discussion, and red for articles that did not align with the objectives. After this selection, a meeting was conducted to discuss the authors’ choices. As a result, 26 articles were approved, 32 excluded, and 17 remained in doubt.

After this phase, a more in-depth search was conducted, involving a speed-reading of the articles in doubt. At the end of the selection process, 31 articles were approved for inclusion. The article selection process is illustrated in Figure 1.

The selected documents served as the foundation for understanding the themes explored in the literature, enabling the segmentation and grouping of topics in the results discussion. The question-problem addressed in this paper was to “understand the process of repatriation’s knowledge transfer, from the repatriate’s return to the absorption of knowledge by the parent company, highlighting the consequences of the process.”



**Figure 1** Article’s process selection.

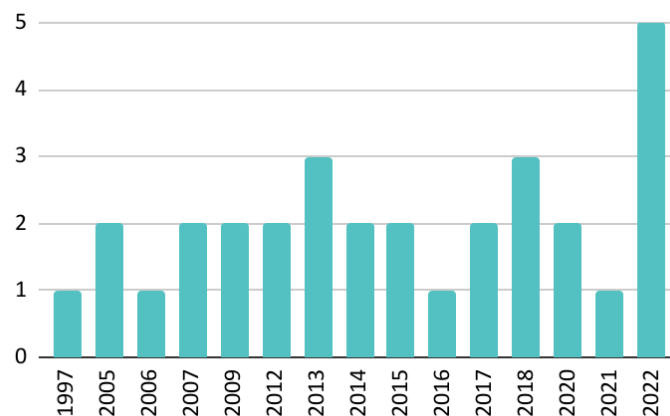


**Figure 2** Framework of analysis

Drawing from Weed (2008) and Mota et al. (2021), it was possible to combine content and thematic analysis to capture the explanatory value of the analyzed articles. As a result, a table was created categorizing each of the 31 papers according to their main topics. Based on these topics, the main themes analyzed were grouped in four themes that underpinned the framework of analysis: antecedents of knowledge transfer; repatriate’s knowledge transfer; knowledge absorption capacity; and consequences of knowledge transfer. Within the latter topic, two main subtopics emerged: competitive advantage for the home organization *and* Repatriates *Turnover*. Figure 2 presents the general framework for analyzing the underlying themes explored in this paper.

### 3. Results

Based on the selected articles for this analysis, it can be concluded that most of the articles are very recent, most of them being published from 2012 onwards. About one-third of the analyzed articles were published within the last five years, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3** Evolution of published articles over time.

The articles were published in 18 different outlets. The journals with the highest number of published articles are *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* and the *Journal of Global Mobility*, as can be seen in Table 2, with six and five articles each. Moreover, Table 2 also shows that over 60% of the articles pertaining to repatriation are published in the top six journals that focus on this subject.

This search yielded a total of 31 articles, with 65% of them being empirical studies (n=20), which are further categorized into interviews and questionnaires, while 35% are conceptual studies (n=11). They have 996 total global citations (TGCs) and 128 total local citations (TLCs). TGC represents the number of times an article has been cited based on the overall computation of the SCOPUS database. TLC denotes the number of times each selected article has been cited by the remaining articles within the selected literature (Alon et al. 2018). Among the selected articles, Lazarova and Tarique (2005) and Mäkelä and Brewster (2009) emerge as the two most cited documents. If we took into account the TGC per year, Reiche (2012) would

also stand out. However, Lazarova and Tarique (2005), Oddou et al. (2013) and Burmeister et al. (2015) stand out among the 31 manuscripts analyzed in terms of TLC scores.

**Table 2** Main outlets of the articles analyzed

Journal name	N.° of articles published	Percentage of total articles
<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	6	19.35
<i>Journal of Global Mobility</i>	5	35.48
<i>Journal of Knowledge Management</i>	3	45.16
<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	2	51.61
<i>Journal of World Business</i>	2	58.06
<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	2	64.52

**Table 3** Number of citations of the articles analyzed

Author	Title	Journal	TGC	TLC
Lazarova & Tarique (2005)	Knowledge transfer upon repatriation	<i>Journal of World Business</i>	154	16
Mäkelä & Brewster (2009)	Interunit interaction contexts, interpersonal social capital, and the differing levels of knowledge sharing	<i>Human Resource Management</i>	128	6
Reiche (2012)	Knowledge Benefits of Social Capital upon Repatriation: A Longitudinal Study of International Assignees	<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	90	9
Crocitto et al. (2005)	Global mentoring as a means of career development and knowledge creation: A learning-based framework and agenda for future research	<i>Career Development International</i>	70	2
Huang et al. (2013)	Knowledge governance mechanisms and repatriate's knowledge sharing: The mediating roles of motivation and opportunity	<i>Journal of Knowledge Management</i>	65	9
Vidal et al. (2007)	Antecedents of repatriates' job satisfaction and its influence on turnover intentions: Evidence from Spanish repatriated managers	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	60	5
Stevens et al. (2006)	HR factors affecting repatriate job satisfaction and job attachment for Japanese managers	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	44	1
Oddou et al. (2013)	Repatriates as a source of competitive advantage. How to manage knowledge transfer.	<i>Organizational Dynamics</i>	39	11
Nery-Kjerfve & McLean (2012)	Repatriation of expatriate employees, knowledge transfer, and organizational learning: What do we know?	<i>European Journal of Training and Development</i>	35	7
Crowne (2009)	Enhancing knowledge transfer during and after international assignments	<i>Journal of Knowledge Management</i>	33	6
Chiang et al. (2018)	Repatriation: What do we know and where do we go from here	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	31	7
Peltonen (1997)	Facing the rankings from the past: A tournament perspective on repatriate career mobility	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	30	3
Burmeister et al. (2015)	The micro-processes during repatriate knowledge transfer: The repatriates' perspective	<i>Journal of Knowledge Management</i>	29	11
Gonzalez & Chakraborty	Expatriate knowledge utilization and MNE performance: A multilevel framework	<i>Human Resource Management Review</i>	28	5

Author	Title	Journal	TGC	TLC
(2014)				
Froese et al. (2021)	Best of both worlds: How embeddedness fit in the host unit and the headquarters improve repatriate knowledge transfer	<i>Journal of International Business Studies</i>	23	2
Burmeister & Deller (2016)	A practical perspective on repatriate knowledge transfer: The influence of organizational support practices	<i>Journal of Global Mobility</i>	22	9
Burmeister et al. (2018)	Repatriate knowledge transfer: Antecedents and boundary conditions of a dyadic process	<i>Journal of World Business</i>	21	6
Vidal et al. (2018)	Repatriates and reverse knowledge transfer in MNCs	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	20	4
Hurn (2007)	Pre-departure training for international business managers	<i>Industrial and Commercial Training</i>	13	0
Howe-Walsh & Torka (2017)	Repatriation and (perceived) organisational support (POS): The role of and interaction between repatriation supporters	<i>Journal of Global Mobility</i>	12	3
Valk et al. (2013)	International assignment and repatriation experiences of Indian international assignees in The Netherlands	<i>International Journal of Organizational Analysis</i>	12	2
Amir et al. (2020)	Informal repatriate knowledge transfer: a qualitative analysis of Malaysian corporate executives	<i>Journal of Global Mobility</i>	8	2
Barakat & Moussa (2014)	Variables influencing expatriate learning and organizational learning	<i>Competitiveness Review</i>	8	1
Valk et al. (2015)	Warm welcome or rude awakening? Repatriation experiences of Indian and Dutch international assignees and intention to leave the organisation	<i>Journal of Indian Business Research</i>	7	1
Hao & Liu (2017)	The Impact of Australian Accounting Education on Repatriates' Career Development	<i>Australian Accounting Review</i>	6	0
Bucher et al. (2022)	The influence of empowering leadership on repatriate knowledge transfer: understanding mechanisms and boundary conditions	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	5	0
Jayasingam et al. (2021)	Knowledge sharing behaviour of overqualified repatriates	<i>Journal of Global Mobility</i>	2	0
Peltokorpi et al. (2022)	Reverse Knowledge Flows: How and When Do Preparation and Reintegration Facilitate Repatriate Knowledge Transfer?	<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	1	0
Shao et al. (2022)	Knowledge transfer of Chinese self-initiated repatriates: Exploring the returnee and company perspectives	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	0	0
Cave et al. (2022)	Examining antecedents of repatriates' job engagement and its influence on turnover intention	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	0	0
Oleškevičiūtė et al. (2022)	The international transfer of individual career capital: exploring and developing a model of the underlying factors	<i>Journal of Global Mobility</i>	0	0

## 4. Discussion of Results

### 4.1. Antecedents of Knowledge Transfer

Repatriate's knowledge transfer can be influenced by several factors, one of which is the repatriate's reintegration into the parent company. Generally, repatriates who are well received upon their return exhibit a willingness to transfer the knowledge acquired during their expatriation period (Peltokorpi et al., 2022; Shao et al., 2022). Conversely, some repatriates encounter difficulties with their reintegration due to reverse culture shock (Chiang et al., 2018).

Upon leaving their home country, expatriates are forced to adapt to the culture and practices of other nations and organizations. When they return as repatriates, they undergo a similar situation and often experience challenges in readjusting to their home country's culture and even the organization itself (Hao & Liu, 2017; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). This reverse cultural shock is particularly intense for employees from culturally homogeneous backgrounds, who have had to undergo drastic changes abroad and need to make substantial adaptations to their previous routines (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). Furthermore, unsuccessful reintegration can result from companies failing to assign repatriates positions that match their acquired experiences abroad, leading to a lack of motivation among repatriates (Vidal et al., 2007).

These factors can cause repatriates to not feel satisfied with their work (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012) and, in turn, leaving the company without transferring the knowledge gained abroad (Chiang et al., 2018). Additionally, some repatriate characteristics, such as cultural intelligence, relationship-building abilities, or even past expatriation experiences, can influence the knowledge transfer process (Oleškevičiūtė et al., 2022).

Repatriates' expectations also serve as a possible antecedent to the outcome of repatriation (Chiang et al., 2018). In many cases, repatriates hold higher expectations than those that the organization perceived for them, often leading to disappointment, particularly in terms of career progression (Peltonen, 1997). Thus, it is crucial for multinationals to assist repatriates in developing realistic expectations both during their expatriation and at the time of repatriation (Chiang et al., 2018).

Crocitto et al. (2005) propose three aspects that repatriates should address during the repatriation process:

1. Assessing the knowledge acquired in the host country;
2. Equipping the host country's employees with the appropriate skills to continue the work tasks initiated by the repatriate;
3. Communicate with the parent organization to evaluate career opportunities after repatriation.

This third point is particularly relevant in the knowledge transfer process because the greater the importance repatriates attach to their career opportunities, the higher their commitment to the organization, increasing the likelihood of transfer knowledge (Chiang et al., 2018; Oddou et al., 2009). Repatriates may initially introduce knowledge indirectly through social interactions with co-workers and, when they deem it appropriate, carry out directly the knowledge transfer (Amir et al., 2020).

It is possible to argue that organizational support plays a vital role both during expatriation and repatriation. If expatriates feel supported by their supervisors outside their home country, reintegration upon their return is more likely to be smoother due to the establishment of trust-based relationships (Valk et al., 2013). Managers should carefully plan and evaluate strategies aimed at retaining expatriates (Stevens et al., 2006). In this respect, the development of human resources support-based policies to support repatriates' adaptation is crucial (Howe-Walsh & Torcka, 2017). Moreover, a clear differentiation between repatriates and regular staff is

recommended based on the specific situation the repatriates are (Shao et al., 2022). For instance, some companies offer their employees a repatriation training program, to facilitate smoother reintegration, demonstrating organizational care for their employees (Hurn, 2007).

#### **4.2. Repatriate's Knowledge Transfer**

Repatriate's knowledge transfer can become a very important element for companies. Home country employees are left with a better understanding of foreign business experiences, cultures and markets, which allows multinationals to enjoy a strategic resource that is difficult for competitors to copy (Bucher et al., 2022; Crowne, 2009).

During international assignments, expatriates are tasked with transferring knowledge from headquarters to subsidiaries abroad (Edstrom & Galbraith, 1997; Froese et al., 2021). At the same time, during the process, expatriates acquire different types of knowledge, important for the parent company, such as market-specific knowledge, personal skills, work-related management skills, networking skills, and general management skills (Fink & Meierewert, 2005; Vidal et al., 2018). With the former, expatriates learn brand new things about the foreign country's business and the cultural differences between the host and the home country (Vidal, 2018). Personal skills are related to the individual's personality and may coincide with self-confidence, tolerance, and flexibility. Work-related skills, on the other hand, focus on technical knowledge and professional skills that repatriates must transfer to their colleagues (Vidal et al., 2018). Networking skills are also very important because expatriates, during their international assignments, create long-term relationships with international contacts that may be very useful for the organization. Finally, general management skills allow repatriates to understand more clearly the worldwide business structure of the organization.

All of this knowledge is a valuable source for companies, but also for the employees themselves who experience significant personal growth (Oddou et al., 2013; Vidal et al., 2018). This growth can be a lever for repatriates to improve their skills and capabilities to disseminate the acquired knowledge (Vidal et al., 2018).

For this knowledge to be put to good use, it is mandatory that the knowledge and skills of repatriates and the characteristics of the job at the parent company are compatible (Froese et al., 2021). Furthermore, the higher frequency of communication with the parent company during the expatriation process the more easily repatriates transfer their knowledge (Froese et al., 2021). Aligned with this idea, it is also important to emphasize that for knowledge to be truly transferred there must be a fit between the repatriate's willingness to transfer knowledge and the organization's receptiveness to that knowledge (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). Repatriates must have knowledge that is valuable to the company and be motivated and willing to share their experiences. This motivation may come from the repatriates' assessment of the costs and the benefits they have with this process, and therefore their decisions are based on expected rewards such as increased power, respect, reputation, and the opportunity cost of the time and effort spent (Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2014). On the other hand, organizations must have the right tools to absorb knowledge and create the right incentives for repatriates to accept this process (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005).

It is further added that the decision-making style of company managers is a possible obstacle to be taken into account in the transfer of knowledge by repatriates. Managers must recognize international experiences in order to help the repatriate share their skills and know how to use them correctly (Oddou et al., 2013). Moreover, the knowledge acquired by expatriates may not be exploited due to its tacit nature (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). As such, repatriates need programs and experiences that enable them to apply that knowledge to the new environment (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). Organizing social activities allows for the building of stronger relationships between repatriates and co-workers and leads to a better working environment, which positively influences the repatriates' decision to transfer their knowledge (Huang et al., 2013).

Amir et al. (2020) suggest some steps that companies should follow to obtain positive results in knowledge transfer by repatriates. One of them is to pay attention not only to expatriation, but also to repatriation, as mentioned before, so that the international mission offers good results for both the repatriate and the organization. In other words, expatriation and repatriation should be seen as an integrated cycle consisting of three phases – before expatriation, during expatriation, and after repatriation (Burmeister & Deller, 2016). Alongside this, there should be regular debriefings during the expatriation process, so that expatriates know the changes of the parent company and are not surprised at the time of repatriation (Amir et al., 2020).

Burmeister et al. (2015) propose a model of repatriate's knowledge transfer process, consisting of four phases: assessment; initiation; execution; and evaluation. The first phase involves analyzing the aspects that influence the decision to transfer or receive knowledge. In the second phase the drivers that precede the actual transfer of knowledge are identified. The third phase is characterized by the actual knowledge flow between the repatriates and the recipients. Finally, the fourth phase focuses on the results of the actual knowledge transfer. Throughout this model, the activities of the three players in the knowledge transfer process – repatriates, recipients and supervisors – are identified.

It should be noted that it is common for repatriates to take the initiative to share knowledge rather than for other employees to seek out this information (Oddou et al., 2013). This willingness of repatriates is related to four facts: the right knowledge; the right time; the right attitude; and the right work context (Oddou et al., 2013). This means that repatriates must be able to show how their knowledge relates to the problems the organization is trying to solve, so that employees understand the context of the knowledge they are receiving (Oddou et al., 2013). Furthermore, it is important that the repatriate is able to use the knowledge at the appropriate time, given the company's situation (Oddou et al., 2013). In the period of this knowledge sharing, it is crucial that repatriates have the right attitude, such as having patience, persistence and the ability to influence others (Oddou et al., 2013). Finally, it is important to emphasize that this whole process becomes easier when the repatriate is in the right position to exploit their skills.

### **4.3. Knowledge Absorption Capacity**

Knowledge transfer is a complex process that takes place within a social environment, as noted earlier. When sharing knowledge, absorptive capacity of individuals and organizations is key

because in the internalization and flow of knowledge (Burmeister et al., 2018; Moreira, 2009). In this sense, not all knowledge transferred will necessarily be absorbed. Knowledge absorptive capacity refers to the ability to incorporate knowledge into everyday routines, practices, and processes, essentially “knowing how to learn” (Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2014).

Trust among workers may serve as a mediator in this knowledge absorption process. There are several risks associated with knowledge transfer, which can be mitigated if there is trust among workers (Butcher et al., 2022). If repatriates do not feel welcomed within the group, they may lack the confidence to share their knowledge.

From the perspective of employees, they must perceive and recognize the value, uniqueness, and complementarity of the knowledge being transferred. Moreover, employees need to be interested in the knowledge being shared, which motivates them to invest time in understanding the international knowledge brought by the repatriate (Burmeister et al., 2018). Trust-based knowledge sharing trust between both parties enhances the likelihood of absorption and effective application of that knowledge (Bucher et al., 2022).

Repatriates' knowledge originates from a different country, market, culture, or reality, making it challenging for the organization as a whole and its employees in particular to perceive and absorb it (Bucher et al., 2022). Sometimes, knowledge may not be absorbed within the originating company due to the so-called “not-invented-here” syndrome, i.e. the perception of outside knowledge as less relevant (Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2014). Another factor that can be understood as an impediment to the absorption of knowledge is that the problems faced by the destination organization may differ from those at the home firm, resulting in a mismatch in the knowledge internalized.

Organizations can act as facilitators in disseminating and internalizing repatriates' knowledge through human resources techniques involving training and communication (Shao et al., 2022). However, it is first necessary to perceive knowledge transfer as a pedagogical process influenced by both the repatriate, as the bearer of information, who should have the ability to communicate it, and the workers, as learners, who most understand and assimilate the information (Burmeister et al., 2018).

Leaders play a prominent role in facilitating knowledge absorption by acting as mediators between the repatriate and the workers, fostering an environment conducive to knowledge transfer (Bucher et al., 2022). Moreover, leaders need to have capabilities to provide social resources that stimulate and leverage relationships (Bucher et al., 2022; Van der Laken et al. (2019).

In short, it is essential to highlight that repatriates acquire various skills and capabilities in their assignments, and that for the organization to benefit from them, it is crucial to establish an organizational climate and structure that enable the sharing of knowledge ensuring effective knowledge absorption among stakeholders (Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2014).

#### **4.4. Consequences of knowledge transfer**

The success of both the repatriation and the knowledge transfer process can be evaluated from two perspectives: at the individual level, in this case, the repatriate, and at the organizational

level (Chiang et al., 2018). In general, when knowledge is transferred by the repatriate and absorbed by the home firm, this results in positive factors for both parties, whereas when this process is interrupted, at whatever stage, fewer positive consequences are highlighted, such as the potential loss of competitive advantages and increased turnover intentions (Valk et al., 2015, Vidal et al., 2007).

#### 4.4.1. Competitive advantage for the home organization

The repatriate's knowledge transfer to the organization not only facilitates the development and creation of new knowledge (Chiang et al., 2018) but also serves as a basis for proposing improvements to current organizational practices (Reiche, 2012). Moreover, organizations contribute to greater success in international growth by creating and disseminating knowledge within them, just as they promote faster adjustment to changing conditions (Vidal et al., 2007). The combination of various knowledge sources is vital for organizations to differentiate themselves and achieve their goals (Vidal et al., 2007). It is important to note that repatriates, having carried out activities in different geographical regions, acquire knowledge that can be valuable for the parent company, as it provides insights into various aspects of international markets (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). All these factors contribute to the organization's competitive advantage.

Headquarters should develop policies that embrace repatriate's knowledge transfer, such as launching knowledge platforms, creating communities of practice, promoting dialogue and socialization tactics among repatriates, top executives, colleagues, among others (Cave et al., 2022; Reiche, 2012; Valk et al., 2015). It should be noted that the greatest advantage of repatriates lies in their ability to gain an overview of organizational and business behavior (Peltonen, 1997), and organizations should view repatriation as a basic opportunity to renew their skills (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012).

Knowledge transfer and absorption are dynamic processes. Repatriates establish connections and build social capital during their assignments in the host firm, which enables them to access knowledge and information (Mäkelä & Brewster, 2009; Reiche, 2012). Therefore, they may continue to have access to developments in the host organization, which can impact their activities in the home organization. Moreover, if repatriates feel organizational support, they are more likely to transfer the newly gained knowledge. Conversely, if repatriates do not feel this support, they are more likely to leave the multinational, and the knowledge hitherto absorbed by the company may become obsolete and outdated. However, the long-term effects of repatriates on the organization and the duration of their role as knowledge pipelines are not extensively explored (Chiang et al., 2018). What is certain is that if repatriates feel recognized and valued by the headquarters, they are likely to continue to develop connections with the host firms, contributing to a more sustained competitive advantage over time and space.

#### 4.4.2. Repatriates *Turnover*

Job engagement, which refers to the level of enthusiasm and dedication an employee feels towards their work, has a strong influence on turnover intentions, including those of repatriates (Cave et al., 2022). The repatriate's knowledge transfer can be a source of competitive

advantage for the company; however, if repatriates leave the company, this knowledge transfer process is disrupted, and their decision is closely linked to their perception and expectations they have of the home organization (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). Factors such as recognition for their international experience, level of involvement, team orientation, and utilization of their knowledge (Cave et al., 2022) contribute to their decision. Often, many returnees feel undervalued after their repatriation and end up leaving their home firms (Cave et al., 2022). It is worth noting that about 20% to 50% of returnees leave the companies they worked for within a year after returning from their international assignments (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Tyler, 2006; Yeaton & Hall, 2008).

Repatriates are aware that they have acquired valuable knowledge and developed an international network during their assignments, which they would not have gained had they stayed at the company's headquarters. When they return to the home firm, they expect their career to progress, both objectively through promotions and salary increases, and subjectively through the achievement of corporate goals, particularly in terms of recognition for the knowledge and skills they acquired during the expatriation period (Chiang et al., 2018).

Upon returning to their home firms, repatriates may find themselves in positions that do not fully utilize their skills and experience, often due to a lack of post-repatriation career planning. This mismatch can lead to decreased performance and a sense of reduced commitment to the organization (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). They may also be placed in roles that do not align with or leverage the experience gained at the host firm (Cave et al., 2022). However, it should be noted that repatriates may also be assigned to other divisions that better match their knowledge or even undertake new international assignments, which can reduce their turnover intentions (Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2014).

It is important to highlight that the transfer and absorption of knowledge may not be perceived solely due to the lack of pro-repatriation policies developed within the headquarters but also because the recipients resist accepting the new knowledge. The persistence factor plays a relevant role, as repatriates may continue to try to transfer the knowledge, or to adopt a more selective approach where they have been successful, or ultimately give up transferring that knowledge (Burmeister et al., 2015). Rewards and recognition granted to repatriates can motivate them to share the knowledge acquired during their international assignments (Burmeister & Deller, 2016). Still, repatriates are more satisfied when they perceive that their knowledge transfer was successful and effectively applied in a new context, rather than relying solely on monetary rewards (Burmeister et al., 2015).

In an empirical study conducted between Indian and Dutch home firms (with host firms located in the Netherlands and India, respectively), it was evident that Indian companies show greater receptivity and appreciation of the knowledge acquired by repatriates *vis-à-vis* Dutch firms. Thus, the Indian home firms acquired technical and cultural knowledge, which allowed them to enhance team projects performance, improve the labor market and foster conditions for lower turnover. They strategically develop their knowledge, strengthening the connection between the home organization and the international clients/hosts, thus contributing to a greater global competitive advantage. Such companies that demonstrate this responsiveness become more integrated into the global economy (Valk et al., 2015). In addition, as some of the perceived

knowledge is tacit, it difficult to imitate (Oddu et al., 2013). Differently, Dutch home firms did not facilitate knowledge transfer, nor did they value it, leading to repatriates experiencing frustration and disillusionment, ultimately leaving the organization (Valk et al., 2015).

Often, parent companies are not as receptive to the knowledge potential acquired from subsidiaries and prioritize knowledge transferred to host firms. As previously referred, this becomes a source of frustration for repatriates and a significant precursor to turnover (Stahl et al., 2009; Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2014).

## 5. Conclusions

Repatriation plays a crucial role in the development of knowledge-based competences within global organizations. Although extensive literature has been developed on this topic, it has gained particular momentum in the last decade. The knowledge transfer process can be influenced by several antecedents, among which the repatriates' reintegration into the parent company stands out very prominently. To circumvent this challenge, companies must devise support and welcoming strategies so that repatriates feel satisfied with their work and, in turn, are motivated to transfer the knowledge acquired during their expatriation period.

Knowledge transfer is a complex process, usually initiated by repatriates. Therefore, it is crucial to integrate them into an appropriate work context aligned with their expatriation experience, enabling them to share relevant knowledge at the right time, with the right attitude. However, it should be noted that the knowledge that is transferred by repatriates is not always absorbed by employees or the parent company for several reasons, as above referred. Given the benefits related with this process, measures should be implemented to ensure that this knowledge is, in fact, shared within the company, enabling the company to successfully explore knowledge-based competitive advantages.

In fact, if properly implemented, the repatriation process can be an important competitive advantage, as the knowledge acquired by repatriates, and subsequently transferred and absorbed by the parent company, is an asset for strategic decision-making. Repatriates can also be the link between subsidiaries and the home organization. However, for repatriates to be willing to share knowledge, home firms must recognize their value and establish structural mechanisms for knowledge sharing, in order to avoid partial or total losses in case repatriates decide to leave the organization.

Based on the TGC scores *vis-à-vis* the TLC scores, repatriation knowledge transfer is far from being consolidated, as indicated by the scattered themes analyzed. Moreover, recent articles are closely aligned with the core themes addressed in the selected articles. However, it is possible to claim that the exploration of repatriates' horizontal knowledge transfer to other sister units within the multinational firms is still an open avenue for future research.

This study presents some limitations that can be further explored in future complementary studies. In this paper no distinction is made between the various types of inherent knowledge, as it is analyzed as a whole. We know, however, that there are types of knowledge that are more easily transmitted and replicated than others, while some are difficult to imitate. Furthermore, the duration of the repatriate's stay in the host organization may have impacts for

the quality, quantity, and manner in which the knowledge is transmitted to the parent company, which is well beyond the scope of this study. The possible measurement of costs associated with pro-transfer of knowledge organizational policies is also not examined. Furthermore, existing literature does not address in detail how the absorption of knowledge transferred by repatriates is carried out and evaluated, or what strategies can be used to optimize and stimulate this process. In this sense, future studies should be conducted on this topic.

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