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**International Business II:**

*How Swedish MNCs Handle Repatriate Knowledge Transfer*

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Title:** *How Swedish MNCs Handle Repatriate Knowledge Transfer*

### **Background and Problem Discussion**

The economy today is highly dependent on the ability to share knowledge within the organisation. Therefore, expatriates' are an important asset to the company since they provide a natural knowledge sharing between different departments. Although the knowledge transfer from home office to host country is functioning the knowledge transfer from host country to home office has been proven to be more difficult.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how Swedish MNCs currently handle the process of repatriate knowledge transfer. Furthermore, this thesis aims to acquire an additional understanding for the repatriation process from the repatriates' point of view.

### **Method**

The empirical data has been gathered from qualitative interviews with seven repatriates who work at Skanska and SKF. Thereafter this data was compared with the theoretical framework gathered from primary and secondary sources.

### **Conclusion**

We conclude that the repatriate knowledge transfer is lacking in efficiency since most of the respondents found that there had been no too little knowledge transfer between themselves and the company. Therefore, we found that there is a need for better programs and policies in order for the repatriation to be planned and structured. We also found a number of changes that in our opinion could be made in order to assist the progression to a more extensive knowledge transfer. We provide three areas for developments of importance: the individual development, the development of knowledge, the mapping of skills.

## **Definitions**

*Repatriate*: a person who has been repatriated which in turn means to be sent back to his or hers country or land of citizens.

*Expatriate*: an individual who lives in a country other than their country of citizenship. In general this is only temporarily and due to work reasons.

## **Abbreviations**

*HR*: Human Resource

*IA*: International Assignment

*HRM*: Human Resource Management

*MNC*: Multinational Corporation

## **Key words**

*Knowledge, Human Resource Management, Repatriate knowledge transfer*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

*This first chapter give an overview of the repatriate knowledge transfer and a problem discussion of the subject presenting the potential challenges. Thereafter, the purpose of the study and research questions is outlined, followed by the delimitations of the study.*

## 1.1 Background

Today close to 80 per cent of large to middle-sized MNCs around the world send their employees overseas. Therefore companies are aiming to answer questions such as why to send expatriates, who to send and what the costs of the process would be (Black & Gregersen, 1999). Tung (1998) and Evans *et al.* (2002) divided the expatriation process into four stages: recruitment and selection of candidates; training and development; the assignment period and repatriation. He also explained that this last stage of the expatriation process is characterized by the main complications within the expatriation process. Black, Gregersen, Mendenhall and Stroh (1999) observed this in their research study, uncovering that repatriation is a large problem for MNCs, mainly those located in Europe and North America. The expatriates are amidst the most expensive employees of the company, costing the company around two-five times more than their domestic counterpart. Although the companies invest large sums of capital into the process of expatriation, they are often unable to absorb the knowledge the employee have gained (Black and Gregersen, 1999). The neglected repatriation has resulted in that 16 per cent of former expatriates leave the company within two year after coming home (EY, 2013). Research presented by Black, Gregersen & Mendenhall (1992) acknowledged that the inadequacy of the repatriation phase, experienced within some companies, might result in unwillingness from future expatriates to accept an offer of international positions. The transfer of knowledge, gained by the expatriate, will not be able to occur if the employee decides to leave the company. Hence, the ability to absorb the knowledge and to keep the repatriates within the organisation can be viewed as a competitive advantage for MNCs (Reynolds, 1997).

## 1.2 Problem Discussion

In today's Global Economy, organizational learning is of strategic importance. Knowledge is a key resource for all companies that must be managed and integrated into the organization in order for it to grow and become a viable competitive advantage (Conner & Prahalad, 1996; Pena *et al.*, 2010). An established method of transferring knowledge is the rotation of employees, where expatriation is an efficient way to accomplish this rotation. Knowledge acquired by expatriates during international assignments is of high value to the company. However, companies and researchers know little



regarding how the repatriate knowledge transfer works and what variables affect it (Oddou, Osland & Blakeney, 2009). Studies executed by researchers such as Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001) and Oddou *et al.* (2009) have shown various cases where the knowledge is not absorbed by the company and thus goes to waste, which they considered surprising due to its significance. Therefore, a problem prevalent in today's economy is the incapacity of knowledge transfer between repatriate and headquarter (Harzing *et al.*, 2004; Oddou *et al.*, 2009).

Companies tend to forget the last stage of the expatriation process even though it is crucial for the transfer of knowledge between repatriate and home office (Adler & Ghadar, 1990; Solomon, 1995). Difficulties surrounding expatriates selection, preparation and placement are frequently discussed whereas the obstacles regarding repatriation have historically gotten little attention. There have previously been attempts to define these difficulties concerning repatriation, however, there is still a lack of empirical studies. Companies' deficient absorption of the generated knowledge might therefore be an international HR problem (Dowling, Schuler & Welsch, 1994). Therefore this thesis seeks to explain how companies secure the transfer of expatriate knowledge and if any developments could be made in order to strengthen this transfer. What this study adds to the existing research within the area is the analysis of Swedish expatriates' knowledge transfer to headquarters in an international context.

### **1.3 Research Question**

*How is repatriates' knowledge transferred and absorbed in Swedish MNCs?*

Sub-question: *What routines could be developed in order to secure the knowledge transfer?*

### **1.4 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how Swedish MNCs handle the repatriate knowledge transfer today and what changes could be made in order to facilitate for the process. Furthermore, this thesis aims to acquire an additional understanding for the repatriation process.

### **1.5 Delimitations of the Research**

Several of the delimitations in this thesis have been made due to time limitations. We have chosen to only research how the repatriate knowledge transfer appears in two Swedish MNCs. The reason for only look at Sweden as a geographical area is on one hand due to time limitations and on the other due to a gap in earlier research of repatriate knowledge transfer in particularly Sweden and Scandinavia. A requirement for the companies' was to be international and using expatriates as a way to transfer knowledge between home and host country. The respondents' in turn had the requirement

of being home country nationals having been on international assignment and returned to the company who sent them abroad. Another delimitation has been made where we decided to focus on the repatriation part of the expatriation process, however since it is a continuous process therefore we open up to discuss other parts of the whole process that can affect the repatriate knowledge transfer.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & EARLIER RESEARCH**

*This chapter present theories and earlier research needed to fully understand the concept of repatriate knowledge transfer. In order to present a visual overview: concept, characteristics, challenges and room for developments are conferred. Finally, the chapter is concluded with a self-produced model.*

### **2.1 The Repatriation Process**

#### *2.1.1 Definition and meaning*

While the market for companies grows bigger and becomes increasingly global, there is a heightened demand for employees with international experience. Due to the significance of sending employees abroad the area has been widely researched (e.g.; Guzzo, Nooman. & Elron, 1994; Harzing and Christensen, 2004; Scullion and Brewster, 2001). In general the expatriate's international assignment do not last more than a couple of years before returning home (Suutari and Brewster, 2003). As mentioned previously the expatriation process exists of four stages: recruitment and selection of candidates; training and development; the assignment period; repatriation (Evans *et al.*, 2002; Tung, 1998). The main characteristic of the repatriation process is the expatriate returning home to headquarters after the international assignment has come to an end. Since few companies have programs and policies preparing for the repatriation phase it can be a time represented by anxiety for the repatriate (Ashamalla, 1998; Yeaton and Hall, 2008).

Black *et al.* (1992) questioned why this area had not been researched in the same extent as the expatriation process. However, they stated that an easy explanation would be that the expatriate returns home, to a known culture, known people and known habits and thus managers may not see it as problematic. Some researchers, such as Stroh, Gregersen and Black (1998) as well as Morgan, Nie and Young (2004), stated that the repatriation process is just as hard as the expatriation process. Showcasing this problem EY's (2013) presented annual report note that 16 per cent of employees out on international assignments left the company within two years of coming home. There has been a tendency to look at repatriation as a single event that occurs at the time of the expatriates return. Because of this narrow-minded approach, companies generally start to plan the homecoming close to the actual date for the expatriates return. Previous studies suggest that this approach generate a poor repatriation, which most likely results in unmotivated employees and limited knowledge transfer back into the home company (Allen and Alvarez, 1998; Solomon, 1995).

## **2.2 Knowledge**

In order to understand expatriate knowledge transfer it is important to comprehend what kind of knowledge is transferable. Boisot (2002) stated that intangible resources, which knowledge is a large part of, have replaced tangible assets that previously have been seen as the main driver of the economy. Knowledge can be divided into two groups: Explicit and Tacit. Although both are important, they are usually managed at the expense of one another (Boisot, 2002). However, Massingham (2014) states that a correlation between these two exists in the sense that they are interdependent on one another.

Explicit knowledge is knowledge that can be documented, taught and transferred easily among divisions, subsidiaries and companies. Tacit knowledge on the other hand is hard to express in writing or verbalizing. It is people specific knowledge and often bound to individuals such as scientific expertise, operational know-how, and knowledge of an industry or such. These two knowledge transfer management models can coexist in one company, although only in companies where divisions are enabled to work independently (Hansen, Nohria & Tierney, 1999; Smith, 2001)

Knowledge management has been directed with some criticism over the years. One primary critique, presented by Ray & Clegg (2005), is that some knowledge cannot be managed due to it being highly attached to its owner. Davenport and Prusak (1998) stated that some managers attempt to convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge since it would make it easier to transfer between divisions within the company. They thereafter explained that this transformation could be both troublesome and time consuming. Moreover there is a lack of guidelines regarding how to make this process efficient. Joia (2007) states that there should exist training whenever there is an actualisation of transfer of employees between units in the company. Training indicates that the company strive towards prioritising spreading the tacit knowledge.

## **2.3 Repatriate Knowledge Transfer**

In today's economy, knowledge is a valuable resource and a part of the company's competitive advantage on the market (Argote, 2013). Due to a continuous growth of the market there is an increased importance of knowledge transfer. Thus, in order to enable for the transfer of knowledge companies are sending employees abroad on international assignments. This process has been acknowledged as an important operation to facilitate for knowledge transfer between host country and headquarter (Lazarova and Caligiuri, 2001). Knowledge transfer from headquarters to host country is often the main reason for sending employees abroad. However, the process of transferring knowledge

from host country to headquarters is neither well explored or understood (Harzing and Christensen, 2004; Oddou *et al.*, 2009).

### *2.3.1 Management of Repatriation Knowledge Transfer*

The lack of management regarding repatriate knowledge transfer is unanticipated since the range of knowledge acquired by the expatriates during the international assignment is wide (Oddou *et al.*, 2013). A research conducted by Harzing, Pudelko & Reiche, (2015) implied that if the repatriate knowledge transfer from expatriate to headquarters was more encouraged, coached and distributed within the organization the company's international business operations might be improved. According to Antal (2000) the knowledge transferred between expatriate and headquarter is both explicit and tacit. He stated that explicit knowledge is often easy to transfer since it can be codified, such as information about the local market, customer preferences and cultural differences. This is valuable knowledge, however Antal (2000) stated that the most important knowledge gained during an international assignment may be that of a tacit form. As mentioned earlier the tacit knowledge can be skills such as management, language competencies, global networks or industry know-how (Hansen *et al.*, 1999).

When managing knowledge transfer within the company the repatriates, who are considered to be the knowledge owners, must be motivated in order to transfer the knowledge. Successful knowledge transfer is directly related to the company's ability to motivate the source of knowledge (Minbaeva *et al.*, 2003). In 2007 Vidal, Valle, Aragón and Brewster presented a research study highlighting two aspects of how to motivate the repatriates to share their knowledge. The first aspect being career consideration and the second being commitment to the work unit. Career consideration signified that the repatriate would initiate knowledge transfer if it would be beneficial for the future career. By sharing the acquired international knowledge the expat could gain status within the work unit. In contrary, commitment to the work unit revealed that the repatriate could be motivated by unselfish motives depending on how strongly they feel about the company. This organisational commitment is defined as emotional connection to the organisation where strong belief and acceptance of the organisation's values is important (Vidal *et al.*, 2007).

### *2.3.2 Obstacles for Repatriate Knowledge Transfer*

Social scientists such as Baruch, Steele & Quantrill (2002) and Black *et al.* (1992) have discovered obstacles regarding companies' inability to circulate repatriate knowledge at the home office. The lack of career-pathing and support upon the return may result in the repatriate perceiving that the position offered after returning home is inferior to their skillset. Both Baruch *et al.* (2002) and Black

*et al.* (1992) meant that a consequence the repatriate might be less dedicated towards the company. This has resulted in high turnover rates among repatriates, which according to Suutari and Brewster (2003) is considered to be a large problem for knowledge transfer.

Naturally, the daily contact regarding operations in the workplace is lost during the assignment and social network with colleagues and managers in the domestic company has to be re-established (Baruch *et al.*, 2002). Suutari and Valimaa (2002) conducted a study with Finnish repatriates where the repatriation adjustment is described as a multifaceted phenomenon affected by many factors. They explained that in the process of tailoring a repatriation program the domestic organisation should take some individual factors into account. These factors could be the age of the repatriate, duration of the international assignment, cultural distance between host and home country, positive experiences during the assignment, type of duties included in the job and headquarters participation during the repatriation.

Chang *et al.*, (2012) discussed that the returning employee is often well aware of the value of his newly gained knowledge and might be reluctant to share it. The tacit knowledge places the repatriate in a powerful position at the company since the previous mutual relationship is now skewed. They continued and explain that because of this ‘exotic’ knowledge the repatriate has a competitive advantage in comparison to its counterparts. The decision to keep the knowledge to themselves in an attempt to stay competitive they end up hurting the company.

According to Szulanski (1996) ineffective companies are preventing themselves from effectively sharing the knowledge among different departments. This occurs when the company fails with the placement of the returning employee. Furthermore, he mentioned that there exists an internal stickiness in an organisation; meaning that the absorption of knowledge by the recipients at headquarters will be fairly slow and the sharing of the repatriate’s experience may receive resistance. Thus, he meant that the rigid structure and culture of the organisation do not promote knowledge sharing and means companies should develop a learning culture within the own organisation. Kjerfve and McLean (2012) continued to explain that the creation of an internal learning culture, where knowledge is gladly shared, would in the future be an important contribution to the value creation of the company.

## **2.4 Policies and Programs**

Black *et al.* (1999) expressed the importance for companies to have a well-refined repatriation program. Dowling *et al.* (1999) explained that two of the main reasons for not having such a program

was due to a lack of knowledge for how to design such a program and what the expenses would be for developing such a program. A suggestion expressed by Vermond (2001) was for the repatriation process to be introduced early in the international assignment. Moreover, he meant that the process was supposed to continue after the return to the home country in order to help the expatriate to adjust into the new role at the home office.

Jassawalla, Connolly and Slijowski (2004) constructed a model presenting the design of an effective repatriation program. The model divide the repatriation process into three different stages and thereafter presents the outcomes. They further emphasise the importance of starting the preparations for homecoming as early as possible. Jassawalla *et al.* (2004) argued that dealing with the uncertainties around the assignment right from the beginning could solve many issues regarding the expatriation and repatriation process. In this model transparency, career counselling, and formal policies for repatriation would reduce the uncertainty and build trust for both the employee.

**Table 1.** A model of effective repatriation and the outcomes for both the firm and the employee.

Prior to departure	During their stay	After they return	→ Outcomes
Task clarity	Perception of support while on assignment	Quality of interaction with sponsors	→ <i>For the firms:</i> improved retention, return on investment in human capital.  → <i>For the employee:</i> Lower uncertainty and anxiety, greater satisfaction, greater feeling of belonging
Career counselling	Nature and frequency of communication	Perceptions of support upon return	
Formal policies for repatriation			

(Jassawalla *et al.*, 2004, pp.40)

Solomon (1995) expressed that formal policies would prevent hasty design and inadequate planning that in some cases characterise the international assignments (Solomon, 1995). According to Harvey (1989) formalising policy guidelines for repatriation is strongly correlated to the expatriate's effectiveness. Harvey also stressed that the presence of policy guidelines reduce the uncertainty that might hold back the expatriate from fully focusing on his assignment and strengthens the confidence and willingness to accept a foreign assignment in the first place. When finishing the assignment, Jassawalla, *et al.* (2004) enhanced the importance of support for the repatriate. The authors suggested that the companies should invest in programs and other procedures to reorient the expatriate to the home office. The final part of a repatriation program should include the company providing the repatriate with some sort of recognition for the international assignment. This could for example be

offering the repatriate a new role in the home office with room for promotion and further career progression (Jassawalla, *et al.*, 2004).

## **2.5 Summary of Theoretical Framework**

Repatriation is the final phase in the expatriation process. It is often viewed as an isolated event however, both Allen and Alvarez (1998) and Solomon (1995) means that this approach will result in unmotivated employees where no knowledge is transferred back to the home office. In the history of expatriation, most companies have had the apprehension that the expatriate is a knowledge bearer and not a receiver and therefore the focus on transferring knowledge from the repatriate to the home country has been lacking in efficiency (Harzing and Christensen, 2004; Oddou *et al.*, 2009).

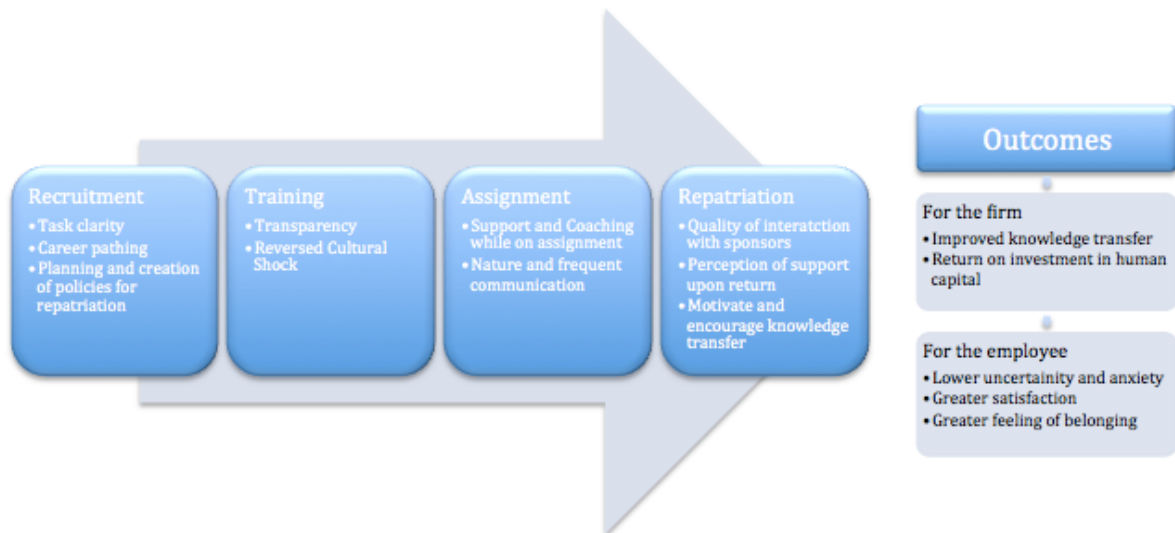
Boisot (2002) mentioned that there are two types of knowledge that can be transferred, namely tacit and explicit and Hansen *et al.* (1999) went on to explain that while explicit knowledge can be documented and easily transferred, tacit knowledge is hard to share since it is people specific. According to Antal (2000) both explicit and tacit knowledge is transferred between repatriate and the home office. However, he stated that the knowledge of a tacit kind is of most importance to the company. Harzing *et al.* (2015) presented research, which implied that by increasing the repatriate knowledge transfer, through actions such as encouragement, coaching and expanded distribution of the knowledge, it would result in the company's international business operations being improved. In order to make this knowledge transfer possible according to Vidal *et al.* (2007) the company need to motivate the repatriates to share the knowledge in two aspects. The first aspect was for the repatriate to share knowledge in order to benefit his or her own career and the latter one to share knowledge in order to benefit the unit and the company, which depends on how deeply the repatriate feels about the company.

The main obstacles presented by the theoretical framework concerned lack of career pathing and support, the repatriates own unwillingness to share in order to stay competitive and the companies incapacity to absorb, circulate and develop the knowledge (Baruch *et al.*, 2002; and Black *et al.*, 1992; Chang *et al.*, 2012; Szulanski, 1996). Because of what these obstacles might result in Black *et al.* (1999) stressed the importance for companies to have well-refined repatriation programs. According to Dowling *et al.* (1999) the lack and incapacity that exist within these programs are due to lack of knowledge for how to design repatriation programs and what expenses it would amount to. Jassawalla *et al.* (2004) created such a theoretical model for how to design an effective repatriation (see Table 1). Based on this model as well as the theories and research presented in the theoretical



framework we have created the following illustration, which shows what is needed in the repatriation in order to secure knowledge transfer and improve the repatriation phase.

**Figure 1.** Effective repatriation according to the Theoretical Framework



### 3. METHODOLOGY

*This chapter seeks to create understanding for how the research in this thesis was planned and conducted. This chapter includes a clarification of the scientific approach, research method and research approach among others. The presentation of the chosen methods includes the execution of each method and a justification of its relevance.*

#### 3.1 Scientific Approach

When constructing the scientific approach we consider both epistemological and ontological assumptions. Epistemology surrounds the many concepts of what constitutes credible knowledge and the understanding of the social world by analysing its members (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Collis and Hussey (1997) created a table in order to showcase the pathways of the two main approaches within Epistemology: Positivism and Interpretivism.

**Table 2.** Epistemological Paradigms: interpretivism and positivism.

<i>Positivism</i>	<i>Interpretivism</i>
Quantitative	Qualitative
Objective	Subjective
Scientific	Humanist
Traditionalist	Phenomenological

(Collis & Hussey, 1997)

Based on this table and the fact that our thesis is based on personal experiences the epistemological assumption of this thesis is interpretivism. This approach takes the existence of multiple realities into account. Interpretivism states that it is important for the analyst to understand that differences exist between people (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). We have this important to take into account during the interviews conducted in this thesis since every respondent have, due to their own reality, a different perception of their experiences. We found this to be prevalent during the interviews when two respondents described the same event but with differing perception of it. Phenomenology, a philosophy often linked to interpretivism, states that human behaviour should be researched in its absolute and should be encountered first-handily in order to be understood. Therefore, the interpretivist perspective has been argued to be the suitable option for research within the field of

HRM (Bahari, 2010). This is similar to what the ontological assumption of this report, subjectivism, states that only the actors immediately involved in the activities can understand social reality (Collis & Hussey, 2014). That, together with time limitations, is why we chose to solely interview the repatriates themselves, since they are the ones who experienced the phenomenon repatriate knowledge transfer first handedly.

### **3.2 Research Method**

Research method concerns the way the research has been conducted and the technique for gathering and analysing the collected data. The fundamental intent of the Research method is to enable the gathering of knowledge and skills and applying these within the chosen area of research (Adam, Khan, Reaside & White, 2007).

#### *3.2.1 Qualitative Research*

We have chosen a qualitative research approach to this thesis since it, in contrast to a quantitative approach, seeks to acquire an appreciation of the area studied and not to provide statistical figures in order to make generalisations. According to Adam *et al.*, 2007 the general appreciation of a qualitative research method is that it is used in order to understand the motivations and opinions for in our case, the people's behaviour. Therefore we find the best way to deepen our comprehension of the knowledge transfer between the expatriate and headquarters, the most appropriate approach is that of a qualitative kind. According to Collis and Hussey (2014) the most frequent way of executing the study is through face-to-face or telephone interviews, which is what we have carried out in the gathering of data in this report. There has occurred some criticism towards the qualitative approach since it can be seen as too subjective, and therefore be lacking in transparency. However, because the qualitative data provide a high degree of validity it seems that this approach reflects the knowledge transfer most accurately (Collis & Hussey, 2014).

### **3.3 Research Approach**

The research approach for this particular thesis is an abductive approach, which is a combination between an inductive and deductive approach and seeks to overcome the limitations these two approaches have. The Inductive reasoning begins the observations of certain instances and thereafter seeks to establish generalisations. Whereas deductive reasoning is based on theory establishes for the empirical data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). According to Mantere and ketokivi (2013) the abductive reasoning sees a phenomenon as a puzzle and seeks to explain it and making it less ambiguous.

### **3.4 Developing of Theoretical Framework**

#### *3.4.1 Literature sources*

##### *Primary Data and Primary Sources*

The main difference between Primary and Secondary data is that the latter is not collected with the thesis specific research problem in mind. Primary data would therefore be to prefer if you seek to perfectly fit the requirement posed in the research problem. One of the main advantages of primary sources conducting a case study is that they more effectively provide evidence tailored to a certain research problem. The three most well known sources of evidence are: interview, documents, archives and observation. Among these, interview is the most widely used (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2011).

##### *Secondary Data and Secondary Sources*

We believe that the use of secondary sources is an important part in providing a just overview of the theoretical framework since it provides interpretations of these primary sources and together with an understanding of the findings in the primary sources' conclusions. We have utilised a limited amount of secondary sources in this thesis since much of our theoretical framework is derived directly from the researcher (Collis & Hussey, 2014). The secondary sources used for this thesis contains of scientific journals and physical books which have carefully been chosen and criticized. For example we have accessed two of the world biggest databases for scientific publications: Emerald and Retriever Business. The research field of HRM is under constant reconstruction and therefore extra attention has been drawn to year of publication. Furthermore the authors quoted in this report have been critically reviewed before implementing any of their theories (Collis & Hussey, 2014).

### **3.5 Literature review**

We have conducted research both through our own research and by reviewing others' research in order to answer our research question. Black *et al.* (1992), Solomon (1995), Stroh *et al.* (1998) and Suutari & Brewster (2003) are some of the main sources those have provided us with insight of the repatriation process, what programs and policies are being used today. Furthermore they have expressed relevant opinions regarding these programs as well as what obstacles the repatriate knowledge transfer faces. Thereafter, Antal (2000), Harzing *et al.* (2015), Oddou *et al.*, (2009), Oddou *et al.*, (2013) and Vidal *et al.* (2007) have provided us with further understanding regarding the repatriate knowledge transfer and how to manage it. What this thesis contributes with, that has not been covered by previous research, is how the repatriate knowledge transfer appears in Swedish MNCs. This thesis also provides the field with what developing areas exist and concrete changes that could be made in order to facilitate for an improved repatriate knowledge transfer.

### **3.6 Method for Empirical Data Collection**

#### *3.6.1 Sampling Method*

The method for sampling is usually divided in two different categories: probability sampling and nonprobability sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Due to time limitation and because we want to conduct in-depth interviews, we did not conduct a probability sampling method in this thesis. Thus we have chosen to turn towards the latter method: non-probability sampling. It is not conducted at random and can therefore be subjective and limited in its ability to generalise (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We have taken this into account when analysing the data, however we found that the thesis required a specific knowledge and experience concerning repatriation and thus decided not to choose the respondents at random.

Holme, Solvang & Nilsson, (1997) assigned the sampling method with two types of categories concerning the respondents: the respondent interview and the informant interview. The respondent interview is suitable to interviewees who at the time or previously had been participating in the phenomenon. This category is the one we have used in the interviews conducted in this research study.

#### *3.6.2 Selection of Sample*

The main criteria retained for the sampling of the respondents were for them to be, or to have been, home country national expatriates out on international assignments for large to middle sized Swedish MNCs. The choice of companies in this thesis has been conducted according to the criteria in order to find the suitable respondents for this research study. A balance of heterogeneity was sought after, however since a non-probability method was conducted in this report this heterogeneity cannot be guaranteed.

#### *3.6.3 Justification for 'Selection of Sample'*

The qualitative research method has undergone criticism due to the sampling method not being noticeably transparent. However, it was not desirable to conduct either a quantitative research method or a probability sampling method, where a random sample in a large population would be conducted (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Hence, in order to fairly present and analyse repatriate knowledge transfer the respondents had to be able to represent and contain knowledge about the specific field and therefore the previously mentioned criteria was decided. The chosen companies that dispatched these expatriates are both Swedish MNEs, and all respondents are home country nationals who have been on expatriation and are aware of the knowledge transfer, which has or has not occurred. The interviews are limited to a small sample of respondents ( $n=7$ ). In order to create diversity of the

research the sample has been made from two different companies in different industries and the interviewees has been on assignment to different places, had different positions and the assignments lasted different durations. In order to create validity all respondents answered to the same set of questions, with differing follow-up questions. The findings should be viewed as a foundation for further studies since they are conditional and not presenting of a generalisation. Due to a small size in respondents the reliability of this research study could be questioned since the choice of interviewees, and the answers provided by them, are bias to the respondent. The appreciations of knowledge transfer they contain are dependent on their own background and knowledge. Hence if the study was done with different repatriates the answers provided might have differed from the ones presented in this report.

#### *3.6.4 Empirical Material Collection: Qualitative Interviews*

According to Bryman and Bell (2015) there are three main forms of how to conduct interviews. We have chosen to conduct a semi-structured interview in this report, in order to use a fixed set of general questions (See appendix for our questions), which can be altered or followed up by adding new questions depending on the interviewee (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The semi-structured interview therefore allows for new issues to emerge and permit for these to be further examined. This form of interviewing is non-standardised and often assigned to qualitative research interviews since it is extensive and detailed (Saunders *et al.*, 2009).

Qualitative research interviews can be executed through both personal interviews and telephone interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We have conducted both of these types of interviews since it in some cases was not possible to meet with the interviewees and therefore the alternative offered was telephone interviews. We have chosen to rely on telephone interviews since it is fast to administer when an opportunity to conduct an interview and it is also more cost efficient. One additional advantage is that a telephone interview removes the effect that the interviewer may have on the interviewee (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

The questions we asked during the interviews were mostly open questions, which according to Saunders *et al.* (2009) encourages the interviewees to provide broader answers that better reflect the reality and should help to avoid bias answers. These questions were thereafter followed-up by so-called probing questions, which are designed to examine the field further and produce a thorough answer from the interviewee. Interview questions of a closed kind were in some cases asked in order to obtain specific facts and also to allow the interviewees to confirm or contradict something (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). In our research, closed questions have not been used to a large extent, but

solely as follow-up questions whenever we found something in the answer to be unclear. Most interviews were audio recorded in order to facilitate for transcription of the answers by the interviewees and also to validate the information and analysis provided in this report (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Some interviews were not recorded since it was impossible due to them being executed over the phone. During these interviews we took extensive notes.

### 3.6.5 Interviewed Participants

The interviewed participants in this research have been selected from two Swedish MNCs: SKF and Skanska. The choice of these specific companies was due to their relevance for the subject matter with a history of sending employees abroad, as well as being active on the international market (SKF, 2016; Skanska, 2016). Whereas we interviewed five people at SKF, we only interviewed two people at Skanska. This was singularly due to time limitations and accessibility to relevant respondents who would fulfil the criteria explained in 3.6.2 *Selection of sample*. Presented below is the respondents we have interviewed during this thesis, some are represented by an alias due to not wanting to be presented by their actual name.

**Table 3.** Visual presentation of the repatriates interviewed.

	<b>Company</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Position during IA</b>	<b>Position after IA</b>
<b>S. Svensson</b>	SKF	3 years	China	<i>Business engineer;</i> Business development manager	Project leader, Tech support.
<b>J. Andersson</b>	Skanska	On/off 17 years	E.g. India, Laos, Thai.	<i>1. Project leader;</i> <i>2. Area manager South West Asia,</i>	District manager
<b>M. Andersson</b>	SKF	8 years	Singapore	<i>1. Trader;</i> <i>2. Managing Director at treasury centre Asia &amp; Pacific</i>	Internal Audit manager.
<b>C. Kylin</b>	SKF	2.5 years	China	Communication manager Asia for SKF	Responsible for brand in-house bureau, strategic activities etc.

<b>B. Johansson</b>	SKF	4 years	China	COE operative role	Stabs role
<b>A. Löfgren</b>	SKF	3 years	USA	Group purchasing manager for seals solution	Business line manager for Linear, Actuators technology
<b>A. Linder</b>	Skanska	6 months	USA	Mechanical Engineer	Project manager

### 3.6.6 Administration of Empirical Data Collection

By contacting SKF and Skanska, we were provided with contact details to relevant and interesting employees. These were thereafter contacted and those with an interest of participating in the study an interview was set up. Upon this scheduled time the participant would receive a call or a visit from us at which point the 30-45 minutes long interview would take place. All interviews were conducted between April 15 and May 16. There were two different aspects in the selection of interview participants. Firstly, both authors have utilised their contact network. Secondly, to secure a good mixture of interviewees much effort was put into finding repatriates from different departments. We have managed to cover: treasury, communication and retail among others.

## 3.7 Method for Empirical Data Analysis

### 3.7.1 Narrative and Template Analysis

We have chosen to use a template analysis method for this thesis, which is a type of thematic analysis method that allows for a more flexible analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The template analysis occurs through arranging the qualitative data into thematic categories in order to make it easier to uncover themes within the collected data and ordering them in a hierarchical and useful order. The theoretical framework was arranged in certain categories according to what was found important during that phase (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). However, during the empirical data collection we found that some categories should be removed due to a lack in relevance and some categories were added for the same reason. This method seeks to bring out the most important parts of the chosen area studied and the parts that highlight the research question the most. It constitutes for allowing new areas of importance to surface during the research process (Saunders *et al.*, 2009).



### *3.7.2 The credibility of the study: validity and reliability*

To ensure the credibility of the research findings and in order to estimate the quality of the study the two main criteria according to Bryman and Bell (2015) are validity and reliability. Validity refers to what extent the findings from the conducted research, with accuracy, reflect the phenomena that is being studied. Reliability, on the other hand, describes absence of variation in the result if you were to repeat the research (Collis & Hussey, 2014). A relationship exists between reliability and another criterion of research, namely replicability. The decision of researchers to choose to replicate already conducted studies is quite rare. Having said that, occasionally the original study might not match other relevant evidence. If a researcher were to feel the need of redoing the research it is highly important that the study can be replicated. Therefore the original researcher must explain all his procedures as detailed as possible and is responsible for the study's ability to be executed in the future. Furthermore, essential for securing the reliability of measures and concept the procedures, which lead up to the new finding, must be replicable by another researcher, who are assumed to have no pre-knowledge about the original study (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

To strengthen the reliability of this study, we have been determined to make the methodology as detailed and clear as possible. In addition, as previously explained most of the interviews were recorded and also transcribed, which provides transparency in how conclusions were derived from the answers. It also alleviated the process of critically evaluating relevance of the findings. Validity is connected to the integrity of the conclusions those are generated from the research study (Blumberg *et al.*, 2011). To ensure validity the respondents were offered anonymity to eliminate the risk of them to be uncomfortable to share their information. Finally, the nature of the interviews being semi-structured, encourage the participants to elaborate their answers. The answers become tailored, personal and facilitated for a better overview, which in turn increases both reliability and validity.

### *3.7.3 Execution of the Analysis*

The purpose of the template was essentially a tool for us to as producers of the thesis to create an overview of the data collected. Moreover, it provided the reader with an idea of what we find most relevant for the subject matter and is to be brought forth in the analysis. The template provides a presentation of similarities and differences in each category. Furthermore, these are then analysed under three main categories those where determined already in the theoretical framework. The execution is a weight of previous research set in a relationship with our own empirical findings. However, the last section of the analysis, discusses our contribution to the research field hence why that part solely contains of empirical data together with our own ideas. In this final part we use our

reasoning skills and the analysis results in a suggestion for development, which is indirectly based on both theoretical framework and empirical data.

### **3.8 Ethics in Research**

Ethical issues are present at different stages in business and management research. These issues need to be dealt with when conducting a research study since they are directly related to the integrity of the interviewed objects. According to Bryman and Bell (2015), there is a clear disagreement among social scientist, which create frustration because of different approaches to the issue. The conflict around ethical principle concern whether harm is done to the participants, if there is risk for invasion of privacy, if there exists a lack of informed consent and finally whether deception is involved. The four areas have formed a useful classification of ethical issues, which today assist social scientist when doing business research. Guidelines have been formed with the intention to help understand the complexity around ethics and increase the awareness of people's integrity (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Throughout the whole process of conducting this study we have been aware of that we are dealing with people and that they share personal information and experience with us who are strangers to them. Moreover, important for us has been to portray their stories in a correct way, reflecting the reality. The study was conducted with the interviewees' best interest in mind. During the writing process we have carefully chosen what to bring forth since we see it as our responsibility that the interviewees are completely comfortable with the end result. Focus has been on the content of the stories rather than the person behind it and before using any names in the thesis we were reinsured that all interviewees were happy with it.

## **4. EMPIRICAL DATA**

*This chapter initiates with a brief description of the two Swedish MNCs who have participated in the conducted study. It then moves on to present the empirical data collected from the seven interviews held with former repatriates. The empirical material is divided into seven different focus areas since this is one of the more extensive parts of the thesis. Additionally, to simplify the introduction of the interviewees, their background and characteristic are presented in a figure.*

### **4.1 Participating Company Presentation**

#### *4.1.1 SKF*

SKF is a Swedish automotive bearings company located in the automobile cluster in the Gothenburg region. Since its establishment in 1907, SKF is world leading in the manufacturing of automotive bearings. SKF's prominent strength has been the company's ability to develop new technology, which has given their customers valuable competitive advantages. The company is active within 40 different branches and in addition, today SKF offers maintenance service of machines using their produced components. This production and service company has over 48 000 employees, 140 factories and operate in 32 different countries (SKF, 2016).

The relevant and interesting aspect for this report is how such a massive company can operate and transfer its knowledge worldwide. In the knowledge transfer, expatriate managers are essential for the company to function. In a presentation from 2013, Birgitta Söderberg, the HR – director at SKF, highlighted the importance of the company sending expatriates abroad. “At SKF expatriates have played a key role in the international expansion over the years. The need to transfer knowledge, share experience and build networks still makes it essential for the company to support and facilitate the transfer of employees via international assignments.” (Söderberg, 2013).

#### *4.1.2 Skanska*

Skanska is one of the leading project development and construction corporations in the world. The origin of Skanska goes back to 1887 (Skanska Group, 2016). At that time the company called, Cementgjuteri, was quickly applying innovations such as reinforced concrete, which revolutionized the industry. Skanska Cementgjuteri was nationally recognized for constructing various types of concrete structures. In 1897, their international expansion was a fact. Since their first international introduction Skanska has changed its business approach and developed an international corporation based on strong local companies rather than sending out Swedish people. The local expertise is still

focused on the original core business activities project development and construction (Skanska Sverige, 2016).

## **4.2 Introduction of Interviews**

We interviewed former expatriates in order to get an insight in how the repatriation phase is really functioning. They have been on international assignments in different parts of the world with a time spread of six months to eight years. In seven semi-structured interviews, former expatriates share their experiences, both positive and negative, how they perceived the repatriation process and what improvements they think should be made. Before the interviews took place the respondent was informed that the subject would be knowledge transfer. When asked what knowledge they had generated during the expatriation phase we received a wide range of answers. Some more common acquired knowledge was that of; leadership, project development, doing business in China and Asia, operative knowledge and technical know-how. However, when asked how well this knowledge had been transferred and absorbed by the company three of the respondents answered that nothing had been transferred. Three of the resisting four respondents answered that they personally used the knowledge and tried to share it in their daily work although not in an organised way. The last respondent was the only case encountered where the company had arranged some form of organised knowledge transfer. A presentation of the respondents is provided in Table 3 *Visual presentation of the repatriates interviewed*.

## **4.3 Management of Repatriation Knowledge Transfer**

### *4.3.1 Communication*

When asked about the continuous communication that the repatriates had experienced during their international assignment, we received various answers. Several respondents mentioned talking with the manager in the home office but only about specific projects and nothing else. The most common answer concerning the communication however was that the expatriate got used to handling themselves without the help of HR, due to the lack in contact. B. Johansson mentioned talking to a HR representative, while still in Sweden, who mentioned that there would be continuous contact during the international assignment. However, once he left on the assignment there was no contact with HR at all and he describes that he did not receive any call at all during the four years that he spent abroad. S. Svensson was the only respondent who mentioned having a continuous contact with HR during her time abroad, where she one to two times a year talked with her own HR contact and that they came down and visited her and the other repatriates once during her time in China. The Skanska employees interviewed presented a similar dilemma as B. Johansson, saying that there was little to no contact or evaluation with the HR department or such during the expatriation. Some

Skanska employees, such as J. Andersson and M. Andersson, explained that the knowledge they had acquired during the international assignment was hard to share with others since it is something they carry with themselves. The only way of transferring the knowledge J. Andersson meant was through him interacting within his unit and personally transfers the knowledge.

#### *4.3.2 Structure and Planning*

Both C. Kylin and A. Löfgren explained in their interviews that they were expected to handle most of the practicality regarding homecoming themselves, which they didn't see as a problem due to their long work experience. A. Löfgren continued to express his thoughts around the hard environment, which might be even more difficult to handle for younger employees earlier on in the career since they are inexperienced in comparison. C. Kylin also mentioned that she took the initiative to arrange her own mentorship and contacted people with experience in working abroad when she was about to begin her assignment in order to have support from someone experienced. However she meant that it would be much easier to establish these arranged mentorships with help from the HR department. She mentioned that this should not be too difficult for HR since they have access to all the expatriate's details and only need to establish the contact between the future expatriate and the repatriate. B. Johansson emphasised a similar issue when he expressed the importance for employees not to become discouraged to accept international assignments. He meant that it is important for the companies to provide the expatriate with support throughout the whole process as well as increased transparency concerning expectations when it comes to what job opportunities will be provided when the expatriation contract expires. A. Löfgren exemplified small adjustments that would have made him feel much more welcome when he returned to Sweden; if the employees were aware of him coming, if they were informed about that he had never worked at SKF in Gothenburg before and finally if they had been understanding about the fact that he did not know all routines in the Gothenburg office.

#### *4.3.3 Motivation and shared values*

After interviewing seven former expatriates, we found a tendency of a willingness to share one's experiences. All interviewees expressed eager to share their experiences and knowledge from their time abroad. Two of the respondents from SKF explained how they felt about returning to the home company and described their ambition and willingness to share their experiences. M. Andersson described it as *"you slip into the home organization and provide as much support as possible"*. B. Johansson explained that he felt that the general mind-set amongst employees who return after an international assignment is that they are proud about their accomplishments abroad. Because they have experienced how the organisation operate in a completely different context, and have created knowledge on many different levels, the repatriates view the home company differently. Except from

sharing their experiences, B. Johansson meant that expatriates have a lot to say about potential improvements and such, which could be useful for the company. Several of the respondents agreed that this part of the expatriation process could cause frustration for both the home company but especially for the repatriates. Thus, how this stage is managed seems to be one of the key elements for successful knowledge transfer.

Interviewing the repatriates, specifically at SKF, they mentioned the shared values and the SKF mentality. Without being asked about it, M. Andersson and S. Svensson brought up 'The spirit of SKF', which today is a well-established expression within the organisation. M. Andersson mentioned the importance of minimizing the psychological distance between different departments in a company as big as SKF. Furthermore, A. Löfgren explained how the company tries to standardize all processes as far as possible in order for the organisation to function smoothly. However, what M. Andersson explained about the 'The SKF spirit' goes beyond standardized work-methods. The company's mentality is a sub-culture developed within SKF over a long period of time. It is hard to specify and is an abstract phenomenon, but in some ways it describes the feeling of belongingness amongst the employees. According to M. Andersson, one example when 'The SKF spirit' becomes noticeable is when employees leave the home office to visit other offices and employees in other parts of the company and everybody tend to be friendly and welcoming.

#### **4.4 Support from the HR department when returning home**

Several of the respondents mentioned that after returning home, they felt that they had not received enough support from the home office. This became clear during the interviews when six out of seven respondents mentioned that they in some way would have wanted more support from HR. Some meant that this support could have been a correspondence with HR where the personal development status was evaluated. Others meant that this support could be for HR to establish contact some months before it was time to return home in order to provide help and reassurance. However, many of the uncertainties mentioned during the conducted interviews concerned job opportunities. J. Andersson described feeling an anxiety prior to going home due to being given notice when the international assignment came to an end. A. Löfgren, amongst other respondents, mentioned that HRs practical administration, such as help with declarations or finding schools for the children, was well managed. In contrast, there was an insufficiency in the help from the HR department regarding work related subjects as well as certain parts in the repatriation phase concerning the individual development. This has previously been presented when for example M. Andersson explained that the HR did not contact him at all prior to returning home.

## **4.5 Policies and Programs**

The reality today is that, after raising the voice of seven former repatriates, neither SKF nor Skanska seem to have a well-functioning repatriation program. According to the interview objects, there is an ambition at the HR department to provide the expatriates with support during the entire process, but unfortunately the companies' struggles to realise such a program. In this case study only one of seven respondents have experience of a well-designed expatriation program where the repatriation phase is taken into consideration from an early stage in process.

### *4.5.1 Skanska job program*

J. Andersson's impressive expatriate experiences, from being on international assignments on and off for the last 17 years, has provided us with plenty of information about being an expatriate. Having said that, we need to take into consideration that all information might not be up to date since he began his international assignment in 1993. From some parts of his experience with Skanska's HR department he felt that more could be expected and demanded.

J. Andersson explained that much has happen at Skanska lately. They have cut down on the number of expatriates and developed a program for International assignment, where Skanska provide the possibility for all full time employees to work in one of their ten domestic markets. He meant that many of the younger employees take the opportunity to apply to go abroad and working at one of Skanska's international projects. One of the applicants for such a project was A. Linder. She applied in 2010 and went abroad on a project in New York for six months. That year, A. Linder was one of 20 Skanska employees from different countries who were sent abroad. She described this expatriation period as a good learning experience. She also found it positive that, due to the relatively short assignment abroad, she could easily return to her previous role in Sweden. The negative aspect of the program, according to A. Linder, is that the applicant does not have the option to choose what project to apply for, which in her case resulted in a poor fit for her skill-set. Even though she has met some of the former expatriates afterward, A. Linder would have wished that there were some type of established network. She finished off by saying that they have talked about the importance of exchanging competencies but little has been done so far.

### *4.5.2 SKF job policy*

How SKF handle the reemployment of their expatriates is a clear example of an in-official policy that is not yet implemented fully. It states that the HR department are to establish contact with the expatriate six months before the completion of the contract. At an indefinite time during this period the HR department should also present three job propositions to the repatriate. This policy is adequate

in theory, however some answers, from the SKF respondents, revealed that this was not always what reality looked like. In fact we found that only one of the interviewees from SKF had experienced this policy and received three offers. According to S. Svensson, who was that one repatriate who received these three offers, it was not well administered since the offers was given at separate occasions. Therefore it did not fulfil the purpose of allowing the repatriate to choose between the jobs offers. In the contrary she mentioned that it left uncertainty of whether or not the following offer would be sufficient enough or not.

Even though such a policy exists several of the SKF respondents have not experienced it. The interviewees mention that the HR department did not contact them concerning job offers at all during their return. Both M. Andersson and A. Löfgren describes their managers in Sweden contacted them and presented a job opening in the home office, but was not contacted by the HR department. Yet A. Löfgren stresses that even though his homecoming was tough and a lot of the responsibility was directed on him, he acknowledged that SKF contributed with a lot for the expatriates. Even though, there is a risk that repatriates end up not being completely satisfied with their placement when returning back to the home company, they are secured a job role, M. Andersson explained.

At both Skanska and SKF the expatriates together with HR department sign a re-employment contract, which secure that they will be given a work role when they return. However, the type of role received after the homecoming can differ a lot. M. Andersson introduced the term “Shadow role” in his interview, which is the position the expatriate had before going on an international assignment. In some ways it represent what role you will receive after returning home. The wish from the repatriates would be that that the “Shadow role” and more importantly, the role that they receive when coming back corresponds with the changed professional profile.

## **4.6 Obstacles for Repatriate Knowledge Transfer**

### *4.6.1 Company absorption of repatriate knowledge*

We asked the respondents what they found to be the most severe obstacle regarding repatriate knowledge transfer and got differing answers. According to most interviewees however, one of the main problems within knowledge transfer is the companies’ inability to utilize skills and absorb the knowledge generated during the international assignment. As mentioned earlier several of the respondents had apprehended that no knowledge at all was transferred between the repatriates and the company. Several had the perception that they personally transferred knowledge, although not through any organised form. Only one of the interviewees, A. Linder from Skanska, mentioned some form of organised knowledge transfer, where the repatriates upon return had held presentations for



certain groups about the 6 months they spent abroad. Her main problem with the assignment was not the utilization of skills and competencies after the return home, as several others has mentioned, but rather that they were not taken into account when providing her with a position abroad.

A former employee at SKF, B. Johansson, explained that there was no thought about how to absorb the knowledge, which he acquired abroad in China. He continued and described that if there was no change in the absorption and the approach to repatriation he forecasted a large fall in the employees' desire to accept an international assignment. To showcase this he drew a parallel to Germany that has experienced, according to B. Johansson himself, a large decrease in expatriation and employees on international assignments. He explained that the main reason for this decrease was due to a poor execution of the repatriation where the assignee was to return home and continue working for the firm at home. M. Andersson, who went on an international assignment for SKF in Singapore for eight years, also described one of the main obstacles for international companies today being the inability to take care of skills and competences from the repatriates through organised forms. He meant that he transfer some knowledge through his daily job and by interacting with the people in his own department. However he explained that there was no organised way to absorb the knowledge he had gained and that the knowledge he had acquired stayed within his own department. Nevertheless some of the respondents found that their knowledge have been absorbed by the home company to some extent. The clearest example is C. Kylin at SKF. During her international assignment she realised the advantages of outsourcing most web activities to India. Back in Sweden, post international assignment, she made use of her knowledge from her time abroad and initiated the outsourcing of web activities. SKF valued her opinion and trusted her expertise, and the outsourcing of web activities to India is today implemented and well functioning. It is one of many examples where repatriates contribute to the company with their newly gained expertise.

A majority of the interviewed repatriates mentioned that they, upon the return to the home office, experienced some form of resistance to assimilate their knowledge and experience, which has been generated during their time abroad. This resistance was not only from the company; in some cases the repatriates mentioned encountering this ignorance from the home colleagues as well. J. Andersson, who has been out on international assignment for Skanska on and off during almost 17 years, described that few are interested in what you have experienced, and not many people can understand what has happened. This describes fairly well the overall perception of many of the respondents. While some, such as C. Kylin and M. Andersson, found that their work colleagues were interested in learning from them and hearing their experience.

S. Svensson, who lived in China for 3 years on behalf of SKF, mentioned that the main obstacle according to her was to make a change in the company mentality and also the focus of expatriation. She found that a problem for repatriate knowledge transfer is the narrow-mindedness some companies have, who view expatriates solely as knowledge bearer who moves to the host country, which is the knowledge receiver. Due to this view the company don't recognize the repatriates as a knowledge bearer who return home with new knowledge and competencies, but only a knowledge bearer who depart with knowledge. S. Svensson described that the company mentality: *"is that knowledge bearers is sent out and transfer knowledge abroad, but there is no thought that I might also have learned and that I might have acquired knowledge"*. She continued and explained that this change in mentality is something she appreciated would take a long time for SKF to change.

#### *4.6.2 Career pathing*

We continued with questions regarding the job opportunities received before returning home. All respondent had some negative experience or apprehension of this part of the repatriation phase. C. Kylin felt that the chance more than anything determined the career progression after an international assignment. As previously mentioned, J. Andersson described that he was essentially given notice when the foreign department ceased upon his return, as previously mentioned. He was not provided with any help from HR department, which most of the other respondents described, but explained that his job at Skanska after the repatriation was a coincidence through a work colleague's advice. The remaining respondents had also received a job offer in one way or another before returning home. M. Andersson mention that he had been in contact with his manager in Sweden a year before the contract expired. However he explained that this was not a case of long-term preparation but a coincidence since there was an opening at a position at the home office, which the manager expressed desire for him to apply for. He mentioned that after he had returned home and received a job, he thought of what would have happened if this job opportunity had not arisen at the right point in time. He had not received any contact from the HR department and he remembered doubting that they knew that he had gotten a job-offer. Regardless if they knew about his new job role or not, M. Andersson expressed that he would have wanted to be contacted by the HR department since if he could not have been internally reemployed by a coincidence the HR should have taken up that responsibility.

#### **4.7 Improvements for the Repatriate Knowledge Transfer**

When asked if there were any immediate improvements that could be made in the repatriate knowledge transfer we received a wide range of answers. The largest improvement needed, which several respondents also found as one of the largest obstacles, was the inability of the company to make use of their skillset. We found three main improvements that the repatriates described as the

main parts to achieve this and overcome this obstacle. Firstly, an improvement was to focus on the individual development of the employee. Secondly, another improvement would be to allow the development of this generated knowledge to provide more support from the home office. A final improvement needed would be to start mapping the skills that were generated abroad.

#### *4.7.1 Individual development: career and personal*

A problem highlighted during several interviews was the feeling that there was a lack of interest in the eyes of the company and that the international assignment was more equal to a pause in the career. There was not much consideration about what the employee might have gained during his or her time abroad. Instead some of the respondents attest to perceiving that there is an appreciation from the company that the same employee, with the same competencies, who went away is now coming back, which is not always the case. B. Johansson was one of the employees who found that SKF did not take his time abroad into account when reintegrating him into the home office in Sweden. When asked whether or not any goals was set before leaving both personally and career wise he said no, however, that it would have been desirable. S. Svensson also mentioned experiencing this. Her first position in China was equal to a Business engineer, but since there was some movement of people in the company at the time she instead became the Business Development manager. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, she generated much leadership skills and knowledge of personnel management. Upon her return however she received a position equal to the one she had previous to her international assignment. She continued to explain that she was satisfied with the position at first, however when she arrived at the new position it was a technical support role where she had no use for the generated knowledge.

#### *4.7.2 Development of generated knowledge*

One additional improvement that could be instituted according to two of the respondents was to offer the employees to further develop the knowledge and skills that was gained abroad. S. Svensson was one of these two respondents. She mentioned the absence of opportunity to develop or use what she found to be her most important knowledge generated abroad. She explained that during her time abroad she was promoted to manager, which made her develop both leadership skills and personnel management knowledge. This was not accentuated when she returned home and she did not receive any opportunity to evolve or use this new skillset. Therefore she expressed the desire for a possible improvement during the interview that she found necessary. She explained that in her opinion, development courses within the area of generated knowledge should be offered to repatriates in order to build and advance the knowledge instead of allowing it to fade. Hence if you generate much

technical operational skills during your time abroad she meant that a continuous course or such should be offered within this in order to further develop the skill.

#### *4.7.3 Mapping of skills*

During the interviews a majority of the respondents mentioned that at some point in the process, either during the assignment or after the return, they felt that the company did not take the skillset they had acquired in consideration. One repatriate, M. Andersson, then mentioned that a way to improve this and avoid the problem of mismatched job integration or such would be for the company to map the repatriate skills and the knowledge that has been generated abroad. He continued to explain that SKF had acknowledged this to be a problem that they need to work on, and he mentioned that surveys had been sent out surrounding this problem but that he had yet not seen any results. A. Linder, who works for Skanska and spent 6 months in the U.S as a part of an expatriate program, also found that, during her international assignment, the company did not have an appreciation of the employees' skillset. Her job position abroad was a role where she had limited previous experience thus she felt that the placement did not match her skillset. Considering that the placement abroad was not related to her position in the home office, to which she returned after the assignment, she felt that the company had not taken her competencies into account. The lack of mapping of skills or that the company in general try to keep track of the employee skillset was something that most interviewees had noticed. One expatriate mentioned applying for a job through the HR department at which they were surprised that he had been an expatriate at all and was startled by his competencies.

## 5. ANALYSIS

*In the analysis part of the thesis, a discussion is presented of the empirical material in relation to the theoretical framework, which has showcased a number of development areas. The chapter analyses how to solve the posed problem and summarizes the data in order to fulfil the purpose of the thesis. Moreover, it serves as the foundation for the conclusion.*

### 5.1 Management of Repatriation Knowledge Transfer

#### 5.1.1 Communication

We were a bit taken back during the interviews when realizing how little communication had been carried out between the expatriates and the home office. Six out of seven respondents had the perception that they have had limited contact with the HR department during their international assignment. Moreover, the few respondents who mentioned that they have had contact with HR described it as purely work related, concerning planning of projects and such. This is supported by Harvey (1998) and Jassawalla *et al.* (2004) who both meant that there needs to be more support for the expatriate in order to facilitate for knowledge transfer.

During the interviews we found it startling that the respondents felt a shortcoming in the opportunity to communicate their knowledge and experience back to the company. Especially since Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001) expressed that expatriation has been recognized to be one of the most important operations for knowledge transfer. However, the respondents described that the knowledge acquired was mostly that of a tacit kind. According to Hansen *et al.* (1999) the most troublesome knowledge to forward is the one of a tacit form, since it is hard to express in neither writing nor verbalizing. Consequently it might not be as unexpected as we initially found it to be that no knowledge is transferred. The research provided by Hansen *et al.* was also something that our interviewees confirmed. J. Andersson explained that the knowledge he acquired is something he carries with him, but is not something he can directly share with anyone else. He uses his experience and knowledge continuously in his work and which meant that in some ways he indirectly shares these resources with his unit. What J. Andersson explained also supports one of the main criticisms for knowledge management, where Ray and Clegg (2005) presented the idea that knowledge cannot be managed because of its attachment and inseparability to the knowledge bearer. Thus, in order for the organisation to absorb and circulate the knowledge of repatriates, Davenport and Prusak (1998) meant that a solution would be for companies to convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. However, they also explained that this transformation of knowledge from tacit to explicit can be time consuming and difficult, since no guidelines exist for how to make this conversion efficient. We see a need for this conversion in our findings as well, for example in J. Andersons' case as previously described.

### *5.1.2 Structure and planning*

Our empirical evidence shows that there had not been sufficient long-term planning prior to the repatriation. B. Johansson acknowledged this problem during his interview when he explained that his repatriation was poorly executed due to a lack of support and planning before his homecoming. In contrast, Jassawalla *et al.* (2004) presented a theoretical model that divided the repatriation process into three parts where the repatriation planning was to begin at the initial stage of the expatriation in order for the company to receive retention and the employee to become satisfied and motivated. However, our empirical findings as well as the research presented by Solomon (1995) showcased another reality where the repatriation is seen as an isolated process and is characterized with quick fixes and weak planning. According to our empirical findings, where B. Johansson brought forth that he felt mismatched with his job position after the return home, the companies are in several cases unsuccessful in combining a certain skillset with a suitable role. His own appreciation was that there had not been any knowledge transferred from him to SKF. This is consistent to Allen and Alvarez (1998) study which showed that lack in planning and reintegration would make repatriates unmotivated in their work and that a diminished amount of knowledge would be transferred.

As we understand, knowledge transfer in some cases can be explained as a coincidence. We believe a quote by C. Kylin sums this up pretty well, “*chance will most likely determine how you as a repatriate will end up after an international assignment*”. According to her and B. Johansson, the element of planning seems to have been quite small. C. Kylin and A. Löfgren also brought up the lack of structure in the repatriation process since they had to handle most practicalities themselves. C. Kylin found the need for the HR department to provide more support through arranged mentorships for example, which we found to be an interesting aspect. This idea is supported by Harzing *et al.* (2015) in which it is stated that more support and coaching provided in order to transfer the knowledge would result in more knowledge transferred from the repatriate to the company. We find that a mentorship program, where expatriates and repatriates are paired in order for the expatriate to have a contact person who has been to the same location, could not only facilitate for knowledge transfer but could also be helpful when it comes to knowledge creation through shared experiences.

A lack of structure and planning might not only lead to an insufficient knowledge transfer but B. Johansson described that it could result in discouragement in accepting international assignments or in repatriates resigning upon return. B. Johansson's estimation is supported by Suutari and Brewster (2003), who consider the retirement of repatriates to be a large problem for the knowledge transfer. It is also confirmed by EY's statistics, in which it is stated that 16 per cent of the expatriates leave the

company within two years of coming home. With some repatriates, such as J. Andersson, this would mean that the company would lose 17 years of international experience and all knowledge gained during that period, which could be seen as invaluable to the company. This argument is strengthened by Söderberg (2013) whose opinion is that much of the international expansion of SKF is due to their expatriates. Additionally she meant that their importance lie in knowledge transfer, shared experience and build networks.

### *5.1.3 Motivation and Shared values*

The willingness to share the expatriation experiences that we found during our interviews is not consistent with the research presented by Chang *et al.* (2012). Where it was stated that there might be some resistance from the returning employee to share the gained knowledge, since the repatriate is aware of the value that the gained knowledge has to the company. Therefore the repatriate might be reluctant to share it since it is a competitive advantage in comparison with the co-workers. However, our research presented a different reality where the respondents were of the perception that the knowledge had no particular value to the company and that they wanted to share but no one at the company was interested. Kjerfve and McLean (2012) presented research, which stated that the creation of an internal learning culture where knowledge is gladly shared would in the future be an important contribution to the value creation of the company.

Both Minbaeva *et al.* (2003) and Vidal *et al.* (2007) presented research that showcased the need to motivate the repatriates to share their knowledge. According to Vidal *et al.* there was two aspects in motivating people: career consideration and commitment to the work unit. The first aspect, which states that sharing the knowledge might benefit the future career, is something some of the repatriates have experienced. Such as C. Kylin who mentioned utilizing her experience as the Asia Communication manager as she saw an opportunity and a need to outsource some of SKF's web activities to India in order to benefit for both the home office and the office in India. SKF trusted her knowledge and experience and organised for the outsourcing to happen. Thus she got a new responsibility in terms of administrating for this new project to happen, and this opportunity occurred through sharing her experiences. Other respondents, such as M. Andersson and J. Andersson, found that they wanted to share their experience in order to aid the unit and the company. As mentioned previously, M. Andersson described it as "*you slip into the home organization and provide as much support as possible*". This is coherent to the second reason, that Vidal *et al.* (2007) mentioned, to motivate for knowledge sharing, which regards to how strongly the repatriate feel about the work unit and the company. Fundamental is that the employee have similar values to the organisational values and if so the employee will want to share their experience.

## **5.2 Support from the HR Department when Returning Home**

J. Andersson described experiencing this anxiety prior to going home, due to being given notice prior to returning home and 17 year of expatriation coming to an end. Fortunately he received a job offering from a colleague in the home office. J. Anderssons case as well as five other respondents experiences of lack of support from the HR department is in some ways consistent with Allen and Alvarez (1998) research, which describes a tendency of looking at the repatriation as a single event and that many companies make the mistake of planning the homecoming late in time. However, the model provided by Jassawalla *et al.* (2004), which states that the repatriation planning is to begin prior to the assignments start would in J. Anderssons case not have been possible due to the extent of his assignment. This is consistent with both J. Andersson as well as other empirical findings such as A. Löfgren, since it shows that there, in general, is a lack of planning and regarding the final stage in the expatriation process. Thus, in the long run we believe that Swedish MNCs will benefit from being more transparent with information regarding the repatriation and if possible figure out a sustainable plan from the beginning. This in turn might directly or indirectly affect the accumulation of the knowledge in the company.

## **5.3 Policies and Programs**

The empirical data show a lack in the execution of programs and policies at both SKF and Skanska. Skanska's repatriation program as well as SKF's six-month policy sound good in theory, but what the respondents have previously experienced show that both companies need to be more efficient in the execution. Since several of the respondents, such as B. Johansson, explain experiencing a poor repatriation in one-way or another. Therefore, Black *et al.* (1999) stated that it is important to have strong and well-refined policies and programs in order to prevent the results of a weak repatriation. Some research also states that the efficiency of the repatriation program and policies is strongly correlated to the effectiveness of the expatriate and that, in accordance to our empirical findings, the programs and policies often are proved to be poor functioning (Harvey, 1989; Solomon, 1995). According to Dowling *et al.* (1999) this might be due to the lack of knowledge for how to design such programs and what the expenses would be.

SKF and Skanska appear to have two different approaches to the repatriation. While Skanska has a planned repatriation where the repatriate return to their position prior to the assignment, SKF on the other hand have a policy where the HR department is to provide the expatriate with three job propositions six months before the contract ends. Skanska's program is supported by Vermond (2001) and Jassawalla *et al.* (2004), who both suggested that the repatriation process should be introduced earlier in the expatriation process and optimal even before the assignment begins. However, it might



result in the repatriate returning to a job positions that is no longer consistent to their acquired competencies and experiences. While SKF's policy might not be planned, as early in comparison, it reintegrates the repatriate in a relevant position to a greater extent. Jassawalla *et al.* (2004) stated, in consent to our findings, that the final part of a repatriation program should include some sort of recognition for the repatriate's time abroad, such as offering the repatriate a new role with room for promotion and further career progression. SKF's policy, as previously mentioned, could provide the repatriates with the opportunity to receive a position in which they can advance, if it actually had been carried out in reality. However, there is only one of the SKF respondents who mentioned experiencing this six-month policy, yet after her reintegration she found no possibilities in her new position to advance or utilize her competencies or knowledge acquired abroad. The Skanska program on the other hand meant that the repatriate would return to the position he or she had before the international assignment. This does not really provide the same opportunity for career progression, however the repatriates receives a fixed position that might result in a decrease of the insecurity, which J. Andersson and C. Kylin mentioned experiencing in 5.2 Returning Home. Jassawalla *et al.* (2004) also presented that an early and adequate repatriation with actions such as: task clarity and career counselling, would reduce the uncertainty and also build trust for both employee and employer.

## **5.4 Obstacles for Repatriate Knowledge Transfer**

### *5.4.1 Company absorption of repatriate knowledge*

The empirical evidence showcase a frustration, which appears when the repatriate is not able to use the knowledge, gained during the international assignment. S. Svensson felt that it was discouraging to be reintegrated into a position, which did not represent her competencies and where she did not get use of her skillset. B. Johansson stressed that the general repatriate is proud of the accomplishments from the international assignment and is therefore willing to share and utilize it. Our findings are supported by Szulanski (1996) research about how important a successful placement of the repatriate is in order for knowledge sharing to occur. This because things such as a bad placement of returning employees, internal stickiness in the company and a rigid structure all prevent effective knowledge sharing among different departments in a company. Individuals may need some type of reassurance and acknowledgement, possibly in the form of a meaningful position, in order to feel as if they play an important part in the organisation and for the company to motivate the knowledge transfer. As mentioned previously in *5.1.3 Motivation and Shared values*, a placement where the repatriate can use the gained knowledge might not only motivate the knowledge accumulation in the company, but also increase the chances of the repatriate to maintain satisfied (Minbaeva *et al.*, 2003; Vidal *et al.*, 2007). M. Andersson, among other respondents, felt that he personally transferred knowledge at a daily basis through integrating with the people at the department. He indicated that he gladly shared his

knowledge in relevant situations and that the colleagues were keen to take part of it as well. However, he stated that an organised form of passing the knowledge forward, to his own unit and to other departments, did not exist at SKF. Previous research conducted by Szulanski (1996) highlighted that the internal stickiness of a company, meaning fairly slow absorption of knowledge by the recipients at the home office, is linked to resistance among employees. This is in contrary to the findings, which M. Andersson presented during his interview. He rather meant that the slow absorption was due to the lack of organised forms of knowledge sharing from the company. An example of such an organised form could be, as in the case of A. Linder, to hold seminars about the experience abroad and the knowledge acquired. This might be an improvement area of development that could be made in order to facilitate for knowledge transfers between departments. The research presented by Joia (2007) supports our findings and states that there should exist training whenever there is a transfer of employees between units in the company. Because the training would urge the company to prioritise spreading the tacit knowledge, which these individuals acquire abroad. This is somewhat aligned with Jassawalla *et al.* (2004), who add that the companies should invest more into the training and programs for expatriates prior to going abroad. However, our findings show that this training should also be present in the repatriation phase in order to facilitate for circulating the knowledge within the organisation.

Potentially, the companies' might explain the lack of training and organised knowledge sharing view on whom, in the context of expatriation, is the knowledge bearer and the knowledge receiver. S. Svensson problematized this in the empirical data when she explained that repatriates are only viewed as knowledge carriers when they go abroad and not when they return home. This is strengthened by Harzing and Christensen (2004) and Oddou *et al.* (2009), who both explained that the process of transferring knowledge from host country back to the headquarters is not particularly explored or understood. S. Svensson claimed that she would appreciate a change in mentality in the organisation toward viewing the repatriates as knowledge bearers but also as knowledge receivers during the assignment. This change in mentality of the organisational learning culture would, according to Kjerfve and McLean (2012), contribute to the future value creation of a company. The implications of the empirical data show that whether the knowledge acquired abroad is transferred and absorbed by the home office or not it is much of a coincidence.

#### *5.4.2 Career pathing*

The empirical data presents evidence of an obstacle during the repatriation phase to be the lack of career pathing. The repatriates often perceive that there is a lack of advancement in their career after returning home. This was described as a large problem by several of the respondents. The issue lies in

the repatriates' feeling of receiving a position upon return that are inferior to their competencies. Even though some find that their position was representative most of them still found that they would have wanted more contact and planning from the HR department. Baruch *et al.* (2002) and Black *et al.* (1992) represent a few of the scientists who presented some of the main obstacles concerning transferring the knowledge and to circulate this knowledge within the company. Baruch mentioned that a result of this lack of career pathing might be for the repatriate to be less dedicated towards the company and could even result in the repatriate leave the company. This outcome could be seen in EYs statistics presented in 2013, which stated that approximately 16 per cent of the repatriates leave the company within one year of returning home. Even though this tendency is not anything we saw during our research it could have been a possible outcome in J. Andersson repatriation, since he described that when his international assignment came to an end he was essentially given notice. We find this to be a large problem for both companies and repatriates. As the repatriates return home and lose their job, the company is deprived of a source of much experience and knowledge that could have been utilized if kept in the company. For the HR department to show support and establish contact with the repatriate before returning home is on one hand to secure a position at the home office for the repatriate and ease the anxiety that the repatriate might feel. However on the other hand, it is also a gesture of appreciation and recognition from the company that we find can lead to a more motivated repatriate. With the help from prominent repatriates and previous studies conducted within the field of HRM to support our findings, we have come to an understanding that there are no quick fixes. This is further stressed in the empirical data where C. Kylin explained that in her opinion, she cannot see any "magic solutions", how to find an ideal placement for the returning repatriate.

## **5.5 Improvements for the Repatriate knowledge transfer**

During the interviews several respondents explained some of the shortcomings regarding how the repatriates gained knowledge is transferred and absorbed in the two Swedish MNCs: SKF and Skanska. Hence, we found that there are some areas of improvement, in order to better the repatriation process both for the repatriates and the companies, revealed themselves in the interviews. After conducting this case study we present, what we found to be, the three primary areas of improvement: enhance the individual development, the development of generated knowledge and also the mapping of skills.

### *5.5.1 Individual development: career and personal*

After analysing the empirical data provided by the interviewees' one of the main concerns is the perceived feeling among some repatriates that the international assignment is equal to a pause in the career. As mentioned in the previous section, 5.4.2 Career pathing, some repatriates felt that the

position received after returning home was not sufficient and representing of their competencies. S. Svensson was one of these respondents and she described how she felt that the placement she received upon her return was not at all representing of the knowledge she acquired abroad, since she had no ability to use, share or develop them. Thus, the knowledge she acquired during three years abroad got lost. Tendencies were seen in the theoretical framework as well, where some researchers meant that one of the main obstacles within repatriation is that repatriates feel that the position received after the assignment is inferior to their skillset (Baruch *et al.*, 2002; Black *et al.*, 1992). The data is also consistent with what Black *et al.*, (1999) mentioned concerning the knowledge transfer, within the repatriation process, being poorly functioning in the aspect that the knowledge acquired abroad is not absorbed by the company. We see this as an important area of improvement, not only because the company has invested a substantial amount of money in the repatriates but also because it leaves the employee unmotivated and unappreciated. The model seen in Table 1 provided by Jassawalla *et al.* (2004) showcases an ideal for how to make the repatriation more efficient and we find that it should be viewed as guidance for future improvement. However, after conducting this case study we would argue that it is lacking some of the main areas of improvement that we found during the interviews. One of these areas are for the company and the expatriate in consensus setting individual goals for the employee prior to the assignment, where a manager or the HR department have a meeting with the expatriate and discussing the employees' personal development. A completed international assignment with a successful outcome should be rewarded, which is also supported by Jassawalla *et al.* (2004) who further stressed the importance of some sort of recognition after the assignment.

### *5.5.2 Development of generated knowledge*

The empirical data showcases a demand for the opportunity to further develop one's skills acquired abroad. In S. Svensson's case she was promoted to manager during her international assignment. However, her newly gained leadership and management competencies, as mentioned previously, were not accentuated after coming home and in our opinion this is a waste. She also stated that something she felt was missing in the repatriation process was an opportunity to evolve her new skillset and get further education within the subject in order to fully utilize what she acquired abroad. To some extent, Vermond (2001) is of the same opinion. In his publication it is explained that the repatriation process should continue after returning to the home office in order for the repatriate to get a meaningful position, where there is room for advancement. However, during our research we did not find any similar suggestions. Nevertheless, we find that an improvement would be for the company to embrace the skills and knowledge that the repatriate acquired abroad and encourage the repatriate to evolve the knowledge and not allow it to fade. With this in mind, we believe that one improvement would be for the manager or HR department at the home office to have a briefing with the returning expatriate.

This session would potentially include, a review of the employee's skillset and what the employee felt they acquired abroad and a plan for how to best utilise the competencies acquired in the future. This could be accomplished by providing the employee with training and further development courses.

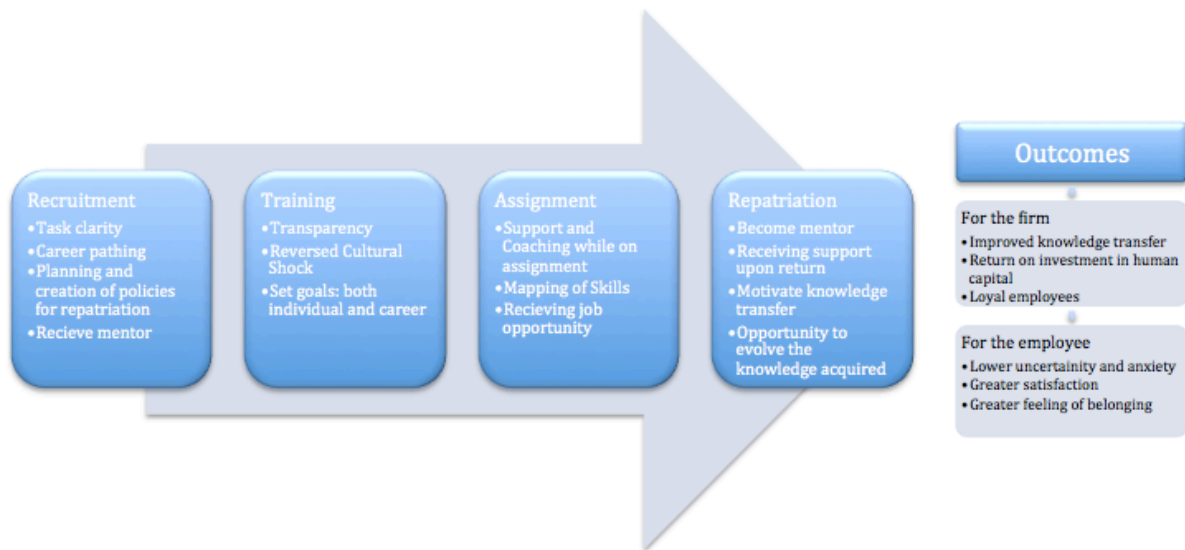
### *5.5.3 Mapping of skills*

Several of the respondents mentioned that they, at some point in the expatriation and repatriation process, felt that the company did not take the skillset they had acquired in consideration. Therefore, we recognized a need for Swedish MNCs to secure knowledge and data in some way in order for all internal organs of the company to be able to take the knowledge, competencies and experiences of the expatriates and repatriates into account. Hence we suggest that a platform, where gathered information about the employee and their knowledge and competencies would be easily accessed and presented internally. It was in a meeting with M. Andersson that we first began the thinking process of develop a digital platform to provide the companies with. This can be seen as our actual contributions to the research field of HR and more specifically the phenomenon of repatriation. The idea is to provide expatriates with an instrument through which they are able to nurture future career opportunities by making sure that their professional profile, at the HR department, will be kept up to date. Within this platform every expatriate and repatriate would have his or her own profile. The program will enable the repatriate himself to update his profile by adding newly acquired skills and diplomas from undertaking training. It is the HR department's responsibility to publish the new information in order for other departments and entities to take part of it. However, before this can be done the information needs to be authorised by one of the expatriate's responsible managers either in the host or home office. This instrument, in the design of a digital platform, allows the repatriates themselves to be highly involved in their own development as professionals. Additionally, our hope is that the platform will create a ripple effect with increased motivation and sustained attractiveness regarding International assignments.

## **5.6 Summary of Analysis**

In the Summary of Theoretical Framework we presented a model (See Figure 1) that illustrates what developments and points the previous research has found most important for the repatriation to become efficient. However, after our case study with the repatriates at SKF and Skanska we have revised the model according to our empirical findings in comparison to the findings in the theoretical framework.

**Figure 2.** Revised model of *Figure 1. Effective repatriation according to Theoretical Framework* in accordance with Empirical Data.



## 6. CONCLUSION

*This finishing chapter presents a conclusion based on the empirical findings of this conducted study. The chapter is divided into three parts, which provide insight to practical relevance and theoretical relevance of the study. These initial two parts also serve to give a solid answer to the research questions. The final part present suggestions for future research and implications for practitioners and managers.*

### 6.1 Theoretical and Empirical Findings and Contributions

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how the knowledge gained by expatriates is transferred and absorbed into Swedish MNCs. The challenges, which these companies face today within the repatriation process, are to find a way to transfer the repatriates' knowledge and utilize this in the organization. Therefore, we also seek to find what developments could be made in order to further secure the knowledge transfer.

*How is the expatriates' gained knowledge transferred and absorbed in Swedish MNCs?*

We argue that little of the expatriates gained knowledge is transferred and absorbed in Swedish MNCs. The organised form of knowledge transfer in many cases is non-existent, however the knowledge have shown to circulate in companies to some extent thanks to individuals initiative to share their knowledge to their units. The knowledge, which was gained during the international assignment, found to be most important was that of a tacit kind, such as leadership, project development and cultural knowledge. Therefore, according to our empirical findings in accordance to Hansen *et al.* (1999), it is more troublesome to transfer in comparison to explicit knowledge. Thus, we argue that it is important to manage the repatriate knowledge transfer in a suitable manner, with well-refined policies and programs, and to find an efficient way to transfer the knowledge since it will be lost otherwise. One of the main downfalls, which we found within the management of knowledge transfer, was that there were limited to no contact between HR and the expatriate either during or after the assignment. Without communication between the repatriate and the company we argue that it is close to impossible for knowledge to be transferred. At least until an efficient way to make tacit knowledge more easily transferred is developed, as Davenport and Prusak (1998) mentioned. Until then, the only way to transfer tacit knowledge is through interaction between knowledge bearer and knowledge receiver.

We have come to the conclusion that even though both companies' repatriate programs and policies might be good in theory they are lacking in the execution. In order to improve both SKF's and Skanska's policies and programs there is a need to enhance the execution of them in reality. In order for the repatriation and the knowledge transfer to become sufficient we find it crucial for the company to invest more in the preparation of the repatriation and for the planning to start earlier in the expatriation process (See Figure 2). Today there is a tendency to look at repatriation as an isolated process (Solomon, 1995). Yet, we argue that in order for it to be efficient and to encourage knowledge transfer the companies need to start appreciating it as a continuous phase that need long-term planning from the start of the recruitment. The outcome of an adequate plan for the repatriation might, according to Jassawalla *et al.* (2004), reduce the insecurity as well as result in a motivated repatriate. Hence our opinion is that if the company invest more time and finance in having a structured plan for how the knowledge transfer should be conducted as well as a change in the company's mentality, for who is knowledge bearer and receiver, it would result in more knowledge transferred between repatriate and home office.

*What routines could be developed in order to secure the knowledge transfer?*

Based on this presentation for how Swedish MNCs deal with the knowledge transfer today, we argue that there is room for improvements in the process of repatriation, which could be made in order to secure the knowledge transfer. Both SKF and Skanska have been proven to experience difficulties regarding the reintegration of repatriates into the company. Several of the repatriates showed discontent for their experiences of this part of the repatriation process. This took us by surprise since the satisfaction of the expatriates reintegration can be crucial for whether or not the employee stays with the company or not. Expatriates are, compared to their host country counterparts, expensive and therefore the company would not only lose a large investment of human capital but also all knowledge acquired by the expatriate. Therefore, to encourage companies to fully utilize the knowledge, which the expatriates acquired abroad, we present three of the main improvement areas that appeared in this thesis: development of individual goals: both career and personal, further development of generated knowledge and mapping of skills.

All three of these areas are somewhat intertwined. The individual development refers to boosting the repatriates' abilities and providing them with both personal and career goals to strive towards. In order for the expatriation to be seen as career advancement and not a career pause, which several respondents attest to. Our findings and the theoretical framework indicate that the repatriate will perform better if given a meaningful position where there exists some element of self-fulfilment. Supported by Szulanski (1996) study on successful placement of repatriates, our belief is that the



placement and reintegration of repatriates is fundamental to be able to utilise and circulate the knowledge in general. Viewing this issue in a larger perspective, how to develop and evolve the knowledge after returning home in order to fully utilize it, would require an organisation culture focused on promoting learning and development. With the discussion in mind about organisation culture backed up by Kjerfve and McLean (2012) thoughts around value creation, we argue that there is a need for knowledge transfer to become a more natural part of the organisation culture. This in turn would help avoid the knowledge transfer to be dependent on single individuals' curiosity or willingness to share information.

Our final area of improvement is the mapping of skills. Our ambition surrounding this subject is that professional information about the employees would be gathered and presented in an easily accessed manner in the form of an internal platform. This would facilitate for a smoother integration back into the company since the HR department or relevant managers would be aware of what knowledge, experiences and competencies the employee contains. We respect and understand the extensiveness of such changes and that this would be a time consuming and expensive process, however we argue that in the end it would be worth it in order to secure the knowledge transfer.

## **6.2 Practical implications**

This conducted study is directed towards Swedish MNCs. Additionally, we seek for the data provided to be of value for all companies who engages in the activity of international assignments. With a narrow perspective, the study reveals several applications to managers for how to transfer and absorb knowledge into the company. However, with a larger perspective in mind, the study is a contribution to the research field of HRM and the general utilisation of human resources. It is our belief that with an implementation of the guidelines provided in this thesis, such as mapping of skills and career pathing, Swedish MNCs has the optimal conditions to maximise the knowledge transfer as well as providing a well-refined repatriation process. However, we do acknowledge that the limited amount of companies' as well as the limited amount of respondents who participated in the study our findings cannot be generalised for all Swedish MNCs.

## **6.3 Future Research**

This thesis provides an overview regarding the area repatriate knowledge transfer and some improvements that we found to be prominent during the case study. However, with the time limitations and the limited sample in mind, a more extensive research study should be made within the subject in order to further analyse the obstacles and developments voiced in this thesis. A recommendation would be for the interviews to be a quantitative research and the sampling method to

be a probability sampling since it provides an unbiased result, which can be generalised thanks to the many respondents. This thesis was restricted to Swedish MNCs and can therefore not be compared for an international perspective; therefore a research in an international context would be a suggestion in order to see whether or not the same obstacles and improvement areas arise or if new areas are found. Future research could also be to test these improvements presented in the analysis and the conclusion to see if they are sufficient or not for improving the repatriation and the repatriate knowledge transfer in these two companies. In order to making the research more valid, it could be conducted with a wider sample of both companies and repatriates within different industries, different sizes and different countries.

Further studies could find a different reality for how repatriation and repatriate knowledge transfer is conducted and therefore also find other obstacles and areas of improvement.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **1. Interview Guide**

- How has the knowledge and skills you acquired during your time abroad been communicated back and absorbed by the company? Do you see this as something they prioritize and if so how?
- How does the knowledge transfer between you and the company take place? E.g. debriefing, evaluations, business trips
- What kind of knowledge is this? Tacit or Explicit?
- Could you explain what programs and policies exist for the repatriation if they exist?
- How much of this was planned before going abroad?
- What obstacles do you see for the knowledge transfer to be successful and what could have been done to enhance it?
- How does the company take care of the network you have built up abroad?
  - No: why? What can be done in order to take care of these networks?
- Workwise in what ways are you satisfied with how the company has supported you when you got back home and in what ways aren't you satisfied?
- What type of guidance have you had during and after your assignment, mentorship etc.?