Repatriation and (perceived) organisational support (POS): The role of and interaction between repatriation supporters

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of and interaction between (potential) repatriation supporters to develop understanding of how this affects the repatriate experience.

Design/methodology/approach - A (single) case study strategy was employed involving 21 in-depth interviews in a large UK-based institution with repatriates, home and host HR managers, International Human Resource (IHR) practitioners and line managers from both home and host locations.

Findings - Although line managers, senior managers, family members and third party providers (e.g. relocation agencies, tax advisors) are important for repatriation support, the case study evidence highlights that HR professionals are mainly responsible for the quality of the support delivered by themselves and perceived to be responsible for support delivered by other repatriation supporters. Inadequate support from the headquarters IHR department caused by a lack and unclear information about repatriation procedures and related responsibilities results in insufficient support for home and host HR managers. This negatively impacts repatriates line managers (perceptions of) HR support. Weaknesses in the support chain (headquarter IHR, home and host HR and line managers) are responsible for repatriates (perceived) limited or non-support.

Originality/value – This is one of the first studies that highlights the role and interaction of (potential) repatriation supporters (HR, line managers, colleagues, third party providers). Specifically, this study contributes to addressing three knowledge gaps. 1) It identifies a lack of communication among HR professionals and between them and line managers as a potential source of insufficient organisational support and 2) the findings highlight HR professionals' responsibility for supporting line managers and other repatriation supporters in operational repatriation management. 3) Finally, the results support the assumption that HR professionals and line managers own (non-) experience with working abroad might affect the quality of support policies and practices for repatriates.

Limitations/implications - The small size of our sample, the single case study design and the method precludes generalisation of the findings. However, the study increases our understanding of the quality of repatriation support. We identify several topics for future studies in the field of repatriation management.

Keywords - Company assigned repatriates, Perceived Organisational Support (POS), Organisational Support Theory (OST), HR professionals, line managers, repatriation policies and practices

Paper type - Research paper

Introduction

Practitioners and scholars agree that for many firms sending employees on international assignments for a set period of time (i.e. company-assigned expatriates; e.g. Tharenou, 2013; Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010) becomes more and more vital for competitive advantage. The main argument for an enhanced reliance on company-assigned expatriates is the imperative desire for an optimisation of (tacit and explicit) knowledge flows within multinational corporations (e.g. Canestrino and Magliocca, 2010; Crowne, 2009; Gonzalez and Chakraborty, 2014; Furuya *et al.*, 2009; Harzing *et al.*, 2016; Lazarova and Tarique, 2005; McNulty and Tharenou, 2004; Reiche, 2012). Company-assigned expatriates are expected to return to their home location. This process of returning home is called ‘repatriation’ and employees who have completed an international assignment for their employer are known as company-assigned ‘repatriates’ (Lazarova and Caliguri, 2001).

Studies show that in particular human resource management (HRM) plays an important role in effective repatriation (e.g. Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2001; Linehan and Scullion, 2002; Osman Gani and Hyder, 2008; Sánchez Vidal, *et al.*, 2007 & 2008). Notably, growing evidence points to HR professionals responsibility for providing organisational support in the repatriation process (e.g. Baruch *et al.*, 2002; Burmeister and Deller, 2016; Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2001; Chew and Debowski, 2008; Dany *et al.*, 2008; Furuya *et al.*, 2009; Jasawalla and Sishttal, 2009; Kelly and Morley, 2010; Kulkarni *et al.*, 2010; Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007; Martins *et al.*, 2012; Reiche, 2012; Sánchez Vidal *et al.*, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2010; Shen and Hall, 2009; Stahl *et al.*, 2009; Stevens *et al.*, 2006). However, previous research shows that HR or people management increasingly devolves to line managers and others (e.g., Dany *et al.*, 2008; Bainbridge, 2015; Gilbert *et al.*, 2011; Keegan *et al.*, 2012; McDermott *et al.*, 2015; Op de Beeck *et al.*, 2015; Perry and Kulik, 2008; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003). Many scholars

in the field of international assignment management acknowledge that the involvement of multiple stakeholders (e.g. HR professionals, line managers, third party providers, mentors, colleagues) is essential for the quality of repatriation (e.g. Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2001; Kawai and Mohr, 2014; Linehan and Scullion, 2002; Welch *et al.*, 2009; Valk *et al.*, 2013), but to date there is limited insight into their roles and interplay (e.g. Dickman and Doherty, 2010; Malek *et al.*, 2015; Ravasi *et al.*, 2015; Takeuchi, 2010). This is especially true for organisational support related to repatriation and the role of and interaction between potential repatriation supporters. Therefore our research poses the question who are the key repatriation supporters that influence the repatriation experience? To address this knowledge gap, this paper reports the results of an exploratory study that examines the role and interaction of potential repatriation supporters. It does this by applying and merging two fields of research: organisational support theory (OST) and the devolution of HR management. Our paper starts by reviewing the literature on these knowledge domains. This is followed by a description of the research methodology and findings. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the results for future research and for practitioners.

Literature review

Organisational support theory (OST) proposes that people form a generalised perception concerning the extent to which a work organisation values their contribution and cares about their well-being (perceived organisational support, or POS) (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986; Kurtessis *et al.*, 2015). Kurtessis *et al.*'s (2015), Rhoades and Eisenberger's (2002) and Riggall *et al.*'s (2009) meta-analytic reviews show that POS is related to attitudinal consequences (e.g. affective and normative organisational commitment, job satisfaction, trust, work-family balance), increased in-role and extra-role performance as well as reduced withdrawal behaviours. The aforementioned is a selection of outcomes of POS. Fairness, job conditions (e.g. autonomy, job enrichment), HR practices (e.g. rewards, developmental opportunities, family supportive work practices) and inspirational and supportive leadership seem to contribute substantially to POS. Referring to leadership, supervisors and others in leadership roles play a key role in providing the aforementioned POS antecedents (Wayne *et al.*, 1997). Other studies show that also coworkers, teams and third party providers can contribute to or erode POS related to a work organisation (e.g. Kurtessis *et al.*, 2015; Torka, 2011).

What do we know about organisational support in the context of repatriation? We start with an overview of research results on the POS repatriation-consequences link. Then antecedents of POS important for repatriation will be presented. Finally, we elaborate on the

role of HR professionals, line managers and others in providing organisational support for repatriation. At least three studies show that (perceived) organisational support is important for knowledge flows within multinational corporations, the main argument for companies' enhanced reliance on international assignments (see introduction). Burmeister and Deller (2016) and Reiche (2012) found that POS is critical for achieving knowledge benefits upon repatriation and Furuya *et al.*'s (2009) study shows that organisational support leads to higher levels of global management competency transfers and through this higher levels of general work performance and job performance. Furthermore, repatriation support is negatively related to the intention to leave after repatriation and positively to perceived career success and the repatriates' commitment to the home organisation (Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007; Menzies and Lawrence, 2007). Commitment to the home organisation also positively affects performance-related behaviors (Cave *et al.*, 2013; Lee and Liu, 2007). Finally, repatriates perceptions of supportive company (HR) practices seem to correlate positively with their levels of job attachment and job satisfaction (Stevens *et al.*, 2006).

The aforementioned research on the POS repatriation consequences relationship directly and many other studies indirectly indicate that shortcomings in organisational support can induce repatriation adjustment problems resulting in, for example, poor knowledge transfer from host to home organisation, dissatisfaction and undesired turnover (e.g. Baruch *et al.*, 2002; Black and Gregersen, 1991; Black *et al.*, 1992; Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2001; Canestrino and Magliocca, 2010; Jasawalla and Sishtal, 2009; Kelly and Morley, 2010; Kraimer *et al.*, 2009, 2012; Kulkarni *et al.*, 2010; Lee and Liu, 2007; Martins *et al.*, 2012; McNulty and Tharenou, 2004; Sánchez Vidal *et al.*, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2010; Shen and Hall, 2009). Taking the whole expatriation-repatriation cycle into account, evidence suggests that repatriation is more stressful for returnees (Linehan and Scullion, 2002) and often more ad hoc and opportunistically managed than expatriation often seems to be (Furuya *et al.*, 2007; Jasawalla and Sishtal, 2009; Stevens *et al.*, 2006). For an adequate management of the process, repatriation and in particular repatriation support should be planned in advance; planning should include a host of issues and research suggests planning should start before and during expatriation (e.g. Chew and Debowski, 2008, Hyder and Lövblad, 2007; Piéché, 2015; Stahl *et al.*, 2009; Szkudlarek, 2010).

The aforementioned host of issues relates to organisational support policies and practices highlighting what appropriate repatriation support before, during and after return should contain: Supportive supervisors and colleagues, developmental support, mentoring programs, coaching and counseling, access to formal and informal networks, reentry training, long-term career planning (including career-path information), promotion opportunities, an

attractive (i.e. customised to repatriates needs, skills and knowledge) reentry job preferable with opportunities to utilise repatriates' international experience, and returning assistance for helping with all aspects of personal, work and family adjustment. Related to the latter, research also indicates that repatriates accompanying partner and children should receive support (e.g. Baruch and Altman, 2002; Black and Gregersen, 1991; Jasawalla & Sishttal, 2009; Kraimer *et al.*, 2012; Kulkarni *et al.*, 2010; Lazarova and Caligiuri, 2001; Lazarova and Tarique, 2005; Linehan and Scullion, 2002; Malek *et al.*, 2015; Osman Gani and Hyder, 2008; Sánchez Vidal *et al.*, 2007; Shen and Hall, 2009; Stahl *et al.*, 2009; Suutari and Välimaa, 2002; Szkudlarek, 2010; Szkudlarek and Sumpter, 2015; Valk *et al.*, 2013 and 2014).

Growing evidence points to HR professionals key role in providing organisational support for the repatriation process (e.g. Baruch *et al.*, 2002; Burmeister and Deller, 2016; Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2001; Furuya *et al.*, 2009; Jasawalla and Sishttal, 2009; Kulkarni *et al.*, 2010; Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007; Martins *et al.*, 2012; Reiche, 2012; Sánchez Vidal *et al.*, 2010; Stevens *et al.*, 2006; Shen and Hall, 2009). However, in general, human resource management research shows that people management increasingly devolves: To line managers and others (e.g., Dany *et al.*, 2008; Bainbridge, 2015; Gilbert *et al.*, 2011; Keegan *et al.*, 2012; Op de Beeck *et al.*, 2015; Perry and Kulik, 2008). Purcell and Hutchinson (2007, p. 4) state that the line manager's influence is such that “poorly designed or inadequate policies can be ‘rescued’ by good management behavior in much the same way as ‘good’ HR practices can be negated by poor FLM (front-line manager) behavior or weak leadership”. Several scholars argue that HR professionals and line managers have key roles in safeguarding organisational support for repatriation (e.g. Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2001; Kawai and Mohr, 2014; Linehan and Scullion, 2002; Valk *et al.*, 2013). However, Welch *et al.* (2009) slightly downplay the HR professionals' role by arguing repatriate positions are in the domain of others, usually line managers.

Nonetheless, scholars who focus on the devolution of HRM state that value-added HR functions provide (requested and unsolicited) service for individuals and managers (e.g., Becker and Huselid, 1999; Wright *et al.*, 2001). Dany *et al.*'s (2008), Keegan *et al.*'s (2012) and McDermott *et al.*'s (2015) findings suggest that the specific knowledge and support of HR specialists is required for an appropriate devolution of HRM: HR professionals are responsible for formulating a strategic HR framework, strategy-oriented HR practices, and for providing advisory services and support for individuals and managers. Referring to the latter, the authors state that not only HR professionals and line managers are responsible for adequate operational

HRM, but also other (senior) managers and specialists. Following the authors chain of reasoning, it can be assumed that HR specialists have to take a leading role in providing support to individuals, (line and senior) managers and specialists. Additionally, Torka's (2011) research shows that HR professionals should also monitor the quality of support provided by outsourced services as this can affect POS related to the work organisation. Moreover, the quality of HR professionals support for relevant supporters might affect their (perceived) HR support and, through this, employees perceived organisational support. Also organisational support for repatriates involves the mentioned multiple stakeholders including third party providers or outsourced services such as tax advisors and replacement agencies, but scholars also point to colleagues as well as mentors (e.g. Dickman and Doherty, 2010; Linehan and Scullion, 2002; Malek *et al.*, 2015; Martins *et al.*, 2012; Ravsi *et al.*, 2015; Sánchez Vidal *et al.*, 2010; Szkudlarek and Sumpter, 2015; Takeuchi, 2010). Therefore, HR professionals should also adequately support these parties important for repatriate assistance.

However, research shows that HR professionals support for operational HRM can be malfunctioning: A lack of role clarity and collaborative decision making as well as tensions in coordination relate to differing goals of and distance between HR specialists, line managers and others involved in people management (e.g. Dany *et al.*, 2008; McDermott *et al.*, 2015; Wright *et al.*, 2001). Ulrich *et al.*'s. (2013: 459) analysis of contemporary HRM and in particular HR professionals changing nature of work delivers some explanations for these shortcomings. According to them, HR careers are more likely to be within a specialty role such as pay and reward. Thus, the number of HR generalists seems to be in decline. In addition the demographics of HR practitioners have changed with many professionals having less than 5 years' experience in HR. Both changes could perpetuate issues of continuity for repatriation in terms of holistic organisational support (i.e., support concerning all aspects of work and private life) as the current HR professionals might be less experienced and have more fragmented knowledge than previous 'generations'. Additionally, Shen and Hall (2009) address an important issue for international assignment management including the adequate management of repatriation: HR professionals and other repatriation stakeholders own (non-) experience working abroad might affect the quality of support policies and practices. Based on the previous research presented in our literature review (Dany *et al.*, 2008; Keegan *et al.*, 2012 and McDermott *et al.*, 2015), we can present a conceptual model of the organisational support responsibility and devolution chain adapted to repatriation.

*** Figure 1 ***

Research methodology

We use a qualitative methodology to explore the role of and interaction between repatriation supporters in providing (perceived) organisational support for the repatriation process (Dickman and Cerdin, 2014). Because case study research allows investigation of a contemporary phenomenon (here, organisational support for repatriation management) within its real-life context (here, home and host organisation as well as IHR; see below) (Yin, 2014), we decided to pursue a case study as a research strategy.

Case study

Our case is a large UK-based financial institution that averages 100 company initiated expatriates throughout the year; this is common of the industry sector (PwC, 2012). At the time the data was collected the institution had approximately 150 expats on a long term policy (12-48 months). Of the expatriate population, 12 to 18 repatriations take place in a year. International assignments are primarily managed in the UK by a team of International HR (IHR) practitioners with satellite IHR operating in the USA and Hong Kong. The policy is derived and driven from the UK. Approximately 50 per cent of the repatriates leave the organisation within 24 months of returning home according to the HR data reports from the company. This amount is not unusual and comparable to what Baruch *et al.* (2002) found for another financial service firm. Therefore, we can characterize our inquiry as a representative or typical single case study: The objective is to capture the circumstances and conditions of a commonplace situation (Yin, 2014, p. 52).

Research largely neglects the role and responsibilities of several organisational actors for POS related to repatriation management. Therefore, referring to the latter, we decided to utilise a multiple actor or stakeholder study investigating the phenomenon ‘organisational support for repatriation’. We involved several units of analysis: repatriates, line managers (i.e., supervisors from both home and host locations), and HR professionals (i.e., international HR practitioners, home and host HR managers). Because we involved more than one unit of analysis, we can refer to our study as an embedded case study (Yin, 2014).

Interviews

Due to the under-researched nature of the topic, the study adopts an exploratory approach through the use of semi-structured interviews. In addition to the interviews we analysed the company's repatriation policy document. The focus of the research sought to explore interviewees' experiences with support related to repatriation management. The interviews were either face to face or due to the (foreign) location conducted via telephone lasting up to 1.5 hours, we did not find any difference between the results of face to face or telephone interview. The majority of the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participant. For those respondents unwilling to be recorded we wrote detailed notes and endeavored to recount responses during the interview to reduce the possibility of memory perception. In addition we provided a copy of the transcript, upon request, to the participant in order to maintain accuracy of the data. To gain insight into organisational support for repatriates, several open-ended questions were addressed during the interview based on previous literature Linehan and Scullion, 2002; Ulrich et al., 2013; Dany et al., 2008; Stevens et al. 2006; Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2001; Kawai and Mohr, 2014; Linehan and Scullion, 2002; Valk et al., 2013; Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007; Chew and Debowski, 2008; Hyder and Lovblad, 2007; Piech, 2015; Stahl et al. 2009; Szkudlarek, 2010; Arnaez et al., 2014; Black and Gregersen, 1991; Black et al., 1992; Cave et al., 2013; Hyder and Lövblad, 2007; Suutari and Välimaa, 2002; Szkudlarek, 2010) (see, Table 1 for the interview questions).

Sample

The sample consisted of 21 interviews undertaken with repatriates (n = 11), line managers from both home and host locations (n = 4), and home and host HR managers as well as international HR practitioners (n = 6). The repatriates were aged between 30 and 49 years of age, mostly male (8 males, 3 females), and had between 7 and 21 years company tenure. Three out of eleven repatriates had multiple international assignment experiences. All of the returning assignees were based in the UK or USA and had fulfilled assignments in the USA, Hong Kong and Greece. The repatriates were either middle or seniors managers with 7 holding postgraduate qualifications, the remaining 4 were educated to secondary level. Two of the repatriates had gained promotion upon their return and 3 returned to their previous positions. The remaining 6 repatriates moved within the organization whilst maintaining the same grade of employment.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim to retain the richness of the data for further analysis. Following this transcription, we carried out a content analysis using the elements of the

conceptual model (see figure 1) as our sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954; Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013). More specifically, we built four analytical categories: (1) HR professionals repatriation support, (2) line managers (perceived) HR support for repatriation, 3) (senior) managers, specialists, colleagues, mentors, third party providers (perceived) HR support for repatriation, and 4) repatriates (perceived) organisational support for repatriation. We used these four categories for structuring our results section (see also Luring and Selmer, 2010). Moreover, in our analysis, we took the assumed relationships between these actors into account. We used the *Kernsatzmethode* (Core Sentence Method; Leithäuser and Volmerg, 1988) for text analysis, which is a method that seeks to identify the key sentences in a text. Its aim is to reduce and transform information into relevant meanings. The data were analysed according to Kluge's (2000) four analytical steps: (1) determine the relevant comparison dimensions according to theory and data material, (2) group the cases and analyse empirical regularity, (3) analyse content meanings and type generation, and (4) characterise the generated types. We used two techniques to evaluate the quality of the interpretations: *peer debriefing* (Guba and Lincoln, 1982) involving both the researchers to independently analyse the data and refer the analysis to a neutral third party (an independent academic) to review and critique our analysis (Cresswell, 2013). In addition we requested participants to check their transcript for accuracy referred to as *member check* (Douglas, 1976; Creswell, 2013).

Findings

In this section, we present the results of our study. The results will be shown in line with the four analytical categories (see research methodology, section data analysis, and Figure 1).

HR professionals: repatriation support

HR professionals, (home and host) line managers, and repatriates point to HR as primarily responsible for repatriation management: HR has to take the lead in repatriation support. The wording of the international assignment (including expatriation) policy document offered by the headquarters HR department, clearly sets out the following repatriation management objectives:

- To minimize concerns about a return career;
- To help retain internationally experienced employees after their assignment;
- To encourage others to accept further assignments;

- To transfer valuable knowledge and skills gained during the assignment to the home location.

In addition the policy outlines assistance provided in terms of career progression, relocation costs and benefits, repatriation allowances, education assistance, resignation or dismissal, temporary accommodation, termination of assignment (redundancy), and redeployment. Referring to the contents of the document, the organisational support for repatriates can be characterised as *non-holistic*: Although, all aspects of work life support are mentioned as well as an important private life aspect (i.e., temporary accommodation), family support is neglected. A home HR professional supports this conclusion: “*As we don't employ the spouse and children it's beyond our control*”. This could be explained by a lack of understanding from the HR professional with limited experience of international assignments and the impact to the wider family. Additionally, during our interviews we found consensus from repatriates that the repatriation policy did not influence the decision of the repatriate to undertake an international assignment, highlighted in the following repatriates comment ‘*coming back you just don't think about it because it's just too far ahead.*’ There was no mention of consideration regarding the support for the repatriate family.

HR managers, line managers, and repatriates can consult the international assignment policy online and HR refers to this document during the early stage of expatriation. Therefore, one could argue that the policy is presented on time, visible and understandable. However, while the policy is a general guideline on how to repatriate, *it does not explain who is responsible for what* (i.e. role ambiguity) *nor describes the processes and in particular steps within processes in detail*. In other words, the aforementioned objectives lack persons operationally responsible for the process of repatriation. These limitations seem to explain the (implementation) problems home and host HR professionals face with repatriation management. Only due to IHR's role in reporting of whom will repatriate in the forthcoming months (‘alerting return’), home and host HR seem to have a clear notion. All home and host HR managers complain about the role of IHR in the repatriation process: in particular, a lack of or difficulties in communication and support, unclear and lacking procedures, and obscurity about who is responsible for what. Two HR (home and host) managers mention that IHR (potentially) provides other repatriation services besides ‘alerting return’, but due to the aforementioned shortcomings, the number and quality of these services depends on “who you know” and “how well you know the system”. In other words, repatriation support strongly depends on personal experience rather than operational strategy. The following three statements from host and home HR managers are indicative for the difficulties they experience with IHR:

“IHR is completely separate from us ...better communication with IHR giving us better updates.”

“... The process is very broken there is no process document and no map it's all very ad-hoc...”

“It is a very unclear process as to who is responsible for what, you check in with IHR and then you're like OK, OK then what should we do?...recently I sat through a whole days meeting to understand more but it is still not clear to me who does what of the process it is very confused.”

In contrast to the home and host HR managers who expect IHR to take the lead, according to the IHR manager, after the alerting return notice, local HR managers and line managers are responsible for and have to cooperate on repatriation management and support:

“We are expecting host HR to be taking some kind of action, because the assignee is in the location. However, it does hinge a lot on the home HR perspective as well as the home line manager and the host line manager of course and the structures of the two home entities. We send out the data to host HR they either do something with it. We intend them to talk to the host line managers about it and in turn the host line manager to engage the home line manager and the home HR.” (IHR manager)

In sum, due to HR professionals role ambiguity and illegibility about (the steps of) the repatriation process – pointing to a lack of ‘translation’ from corporate repatriation strategy to operational repatriation strategy (i.e. concrete HR actions) - their support for repatriation is malfunctioning.

Line managers: (perceived) HR support for repatriation

According to HR professionals, repatriates and the line managers themselves, line managers' involvement in repatriation management is crucial. However, the above-mentioned lack of operational repatriation strategy affects line managers and their perception of HR support for repatriation. Line managers refer to obstacles HR also recognises: Inaccurate data about repatriation, not adhering to policy, and a lack of communication and support. Several line managers provide two additional, underlying explanations for these problems: 1) A decreasing

HR headcount (quote 1) and 2) HR professionals' lack of own international experience (quote 2):

- 1) *"I think it's the same problem with HR generally they've pushed it all out to the business and they've reduced their headcount to almost where there's a point that it's a self."*
- 2) *"...send the head of HR and his family on international assignment that would solve the problem".*

When discussing line managers support quality, the repatriates as well as some line managers state that not only HR professionals need their own international experience (quote 2), but also the line managers. Referring to the deficient HR (function) support for repatriation, HR professionals, repatriates and line managers point to line managers as a safety net and carrier of HR professionals responsibilities (see also Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; literature review): *"The expat is left hanging of course that happens in my cases where I have an expat returning and one extending...I'm the one here not the receiving person not anyone from HR or IHR because no-one wants anything to do with it. I'm the one here doing the.... joining of the dots because HR doesn't want anything to do with it...I'm the one here...so there is a disconnect...and the person gets left and stranded... and really feels like a second class citizen and already had difficulty coming back from an assignment anyway so that experience of the end of the process has not been good so far in the 2 cases, I don't know about once they are there."*(Line manager)

All the aforementioned shows that HR support for line managers, coordination between the latter and HR professionals and line managers own international experience are important for adequate repatriation support. However, two repatriates also refer to the relevance of and self-responsibility for coordination repatriation among home and host line managers:

"So the line manager in Hong Kong didn't have much to do with it (repatriation)...she left it to myself to organize...I had a lot of conversations with my old boss here in the UK."

"They (i.e., host and home line manager) should do (i.e., cooperate)... in reality um... they may not but they should"

(Senior) managers, specialists, colleagues, mentors, third party providers: (perceived) HR support for repatriation

While none of the interviewees mentioned specialists, home or host company colleagues or mentors as vital for organisational support, the repatriates, and only the repatriates, named several additional support sources. One repatriate mentioned a supportive senior manager and referred to the manager's international experience as important for repatriation support:

"I had an English CEO who had been through a lot of the things himself and was very helpful."

Another repatriate referred to support from people unrelated to the work organisations: He addressed the help of family members for moving into a new house. Finally, all repatriates referred to home and host company outsiders: To third party providers, in this case relating to outsourced services, as essential for support especially when they have returned to home. However, all seem to experience problems with outsourced, and in particular relocation and tax, services once they returned from abroad: They criticize the employing company for not offering outsourced services or the service quality of third party providers. This means that repatriates hold the home organisation responsible for the support quality of outsourced services. In our literature review, we have remarked that it is HR professionals' obligation to monitor such services.

Repatriates: (perceived) organisational support for repatriation

Given the problems with repatriation management as sketched by vital supporters (HR professionals and line managers), it is not surprising the repatriates do not paint a rosy picture of 'formal' HR related repatriation support. In this context, formal relates to persons responsible and clear procedures. The repatriates complain about too late returning alert, problems with and non-sufficient support for issues that affect their private life directly (finding housing and schooling as well as monetary issues including taxes when returning home), and dissatisfaction with career planning and support. The following quotes are exemplary for these difficulties:

"Initial repatriation was not discussed until two weeks before it was due to end...". (Repatriate about alerting return)

"No even to the point that when we arrived at passport control we didn't have a visa for her, as the baby was born in the US we didn't have a visa for her and they didn't want to let her in the country... the wife went mental and I stood there for five minutes calming her down. Nobody

even asked if we had a baby or what our personal circumstances were or whether they had changed.” (Repatriate about a lack of support for issues that affect private life)

“I felt cheated for having to do the same job...it didn’t feel comfortable at all”. (Repatriate about lacking career planning and support)

Referring to a lack of career planning and support, a host HR manager underlines the importance of the home HR perspective and points to the influence this perspective has on the repatriation process: Those who have a clear role/position in the home organisation seem to experience fewer problems with work-related aspects of the repatriation process than those without.

“There are 2 scenarios when we get involved with repatriates. The first scenario is when we need a person to come back for business need, that’s the easiest they are simple family, come back and they take no time at all. The second scenario is where the problems are...someone who has been out there and all their supporters are gone...there may not be an obvious role for them to come back to. The process then becomes quite difficult as there is no ownership and basically everyone has gone since they were away and it’s like we’ve all forgotten how great this person is.”

Besides the ‘formal’ HR related repatriation support, repatriates also report ‘hands-on’ support – support that has not been formally described and/or devolved by HR - provided by line managers, senior managers and family members. In general, the repatriates seem positive about these sources of support. Responding to the question of what could be improved, repatriates and line managers suggest regular HR debriefings about all aspects of work life during expatriation and before repatriation and not only information about the end of the assignment. Moreover, like the line managers, the repatriates suggest that a lack of international experience among HR professionals causes the described HR shortcomings.

Discussion

This exploratory study elucidates the role and interaction of (potential) repatriation supporters by applying organisational support theory (OST) and academic knowledge on the devolution of HR management. Our primary theoretical contribution is that we have identified further repatriation supporters: HR, line managers, colleagues and third party providers who impact upon the repatriation experience previously lacking in the literature. We also acknowledge the

influence of both home and host location and as such note that the HR, line managers and colleagues may provide and influence support from both locations. The results show that HR professionals are mainly responsible for the support quality delivered by themselves and those (intentionally or unintentionally) devolved to others. This outcome is consistent with literature about the devolution of HR management: HR professionals are obliged to formulate a strategic HR framework, strategy-oriented HR practices, and to provide (requested and unsolicited) advisory services and support for individuals and managers (e.g. Becker and Huselid, 1999; Dany *et al.*, 2008; Keegan *et al.*, 2012; McDermott *et al.*, 2015; Wright *et al.*, 2001).

Related to the aforementioned HR responsibilities, HR's insufficient repatriation support can be traced back to a missing conversion of the corporate repatriation strategy into an operational or functional repatriation strategy that should include work and private-life matters (e.g. Baruch and Altman, 2002; Black and Gregersen, 1991; Jasawalla and Sishttal, 2009; Kraimer *et al.*, 2012; Kulkarni *et al.*, 2010; Lazarova and Caligiuri, 2001; Lazarova and Tarique, 2005) as well as describes persons or functions in charge and the processes and in particular steps within processes in detail. Without such a translation from abstract strategy into concrete actions, HR support for repatriation to repatriates, line managers and others (see below) will be deficient. This points to the first element for adequate repatriation support:

Implication 1: For adequate repatriation support to repatriates, line managers and others, HR professionals have to formulate a strategic repatriation support framework and concrete strategy-oriented repatriation support practices which relate to work- and private-life.

Referring to others, like the studies of Keegan *et al.* (2012) and McDermott *et al.* (2015), the findings challenge bipartite conceptions of HRM devolution and show that (HR) support practices are carried out beyond HR professionals and beyond line managers. The repatriates mentioned senior managers, third party providers and family members as sources of support and repatriation literature shows that also colleagues and mentors can be added to this list (e.g. Dickman and Doherty, 2010; Linehan and Scullion, 2002; Malek *et al.*, 2015; Martins *et al.*, 2012; Ravsi *et al.*, 2015; Sánchez Vidal *et al.*, 2010; Szkudlarek and Sumpter, 2015; Takeuchi, 2010). Therefore, HR professionals advice, support and monitoring should go further than line managers. Consequently, the second component of adequate repatriation support implies the following:

Implication 2: HR professionals communications (i.e. advice, support and monitoring) concerning repatriation support have to go beyond line managers.

Line managers and others (such as, mentors, specialists, and third party providers) can contribute to or erode (perceived) organisational support related to the work organisation (e.g. Kurtessis *et al.*, 2015; Torka, 2011; Wayne *et al.*, 1997). Moreover, the results show that not only line managers (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007), but also senior managers, and family members rescue poorly designed or inadequate HR policies such as absent re-housing (family members) and general relocation support (line managers). However, because this support is unguided by HR and random (i.e. depends on the availability and individual knowledge and skills of supporters outside HR), *holistic* (i.e., support for all work-life and personal issues) and *consistent support* (i.e., all repatriates receive equal support) are at risk. As mentioned before, HR professionals are mainly responsible for the support quality provided by themselves and those (intentionally or unintentionally) devolved to others. Thus, fragmented and unequal support provided by supporters outside HR can be ascribed to HR. Therefore, the third implication contains a caution:

Implication 3: Inadequate HR support for other repatriation supporters can result in fragmented and unequal support for repatriates.

Furthermore, the results show that a lack of role clarity and concretely described repatriation support practices lead not only to ‘functional frictions’ between HR professionals, line managers and others involved in repatriation management (e.g. Dany *et al.*, 2008; McDermott *et al.*, 2015; Wright *et al.*, 2001), but also to coordination difficulties *among HR professionals* resulting in inadequate repatriation support. In our study, all home and host HR managers complain about the role of the IHR department in the repatriation process: in particular, a lack of or difficulties in communication and support, unclear and lacking procedures, and obscurity about who is responsible for what. Explicitly, home and host HR demand support from the IHR department concerning all repatriation issues. In contrast, the IHR manager points to the home and host HR’s self-reliant responsibilities concerning repatriation management and support. These frictions might not only be ascribed to role ambiguity and missing operational procedures related to repatriation, but also to a general lack in knowledge transfer from specialised (here: IHR) to general HR roles (here: home and host HR) (Ulrich *et al.*, 2013). Given their supposed expertise, IHR professionals should have a leading role in the development of sufficient repatriation policies and practices and actively transfer this knowledge across their lines: To home

and host HR, line managers and others involved in repatriation. However, repatriation management has to be improved by specialists *and* generalists as well as ‘field experts’ interference: IHR professionals should also incorporate the knowledge about repatriation policy and practice effects (including country- or region-specific issues) as perceived by repatriation supporters and repatriates in the (I)HR learning and adaption process. In doing so, moving towards a de facto repatriation partnership is possible: A shared purpose to improve repatriation anchored in the understanding of mutual expectations and experiences (e.g. Hunter *et al.*, 1996; Op de Beeck *et al.*, 2015; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003). Consequently, the fourth implication is as follows:

Implication 4: The quality of repatriation support can be improved by knowledge and experience exchange between IHR specialists, HR generalists and field experts (e.g. repatriates, line managers, senior managers).

From a field experts’ point of view, one question still remains open: How to explain the deficiencies in repatriation support provided by HR professionals? Line managers and repatriates point to a lack of HR professionals own international work experience as a reason for the fragile support. In doing so, they uphold Shen and Hall’s (2009) assumption and own experiences that (non-)experience with working abroad affects the quality of support policies and practices for international assignments. According to the authors, HR professionals who have international (assignment) experiences themselves have an increased awareness for (potential) support problems associated with repatriation and expatriation. Our results add to this conclusion that an individual’s own international (here: line managers and senior managers) can contribute to support quality. Therefore, in an adapted form, we take over Shen and Hall’s (p. 810) fourth implication by assuming the following:

Implication 5: The quality of repatriation support can be increased by repatriation supporters with international experiences (e.g. HR professionals, line managers, senior managers).

Practical implications

What must organisation’s offer when aiming for (perceived) organisational support related to repatriation and the multiple stakeholders involved (e.g. HR, line managers, repatriates, senior managers)? *Firstly*, repatriation policies have to reflect the role and concrete responsibilities of

multiple stakeholders including different HR professionals, home and host line managers and possible others for providing transparent, holistic and consistent support. Any changes to policies and practices require dissemination across all stakeholders. In general, social media and other IT technology can be efficient and effective tools for information transfer (from HR to repatriation supporters and vice versa) and empowerment of those involved in repatriation (e.g. O'Sullivan, 2013; Shen and Hall, 2009). *Secondly*, repatriates family has to be acknowledged as a stakeholder that has a major influence on repatriation success and failure. Excluding partners and children from international career policies has to be considered as a serious HR shortcoming. *Third*, we raise the issue of career planning. Ensuring timely information regarding return positions allays concerns for the repatriate but should form part of the organisation's human resource workforce planning. Opportunities to ensure repatriates are being considered for positions as part of the talent pool is crucial. Providing debriefing interviews upon repatriation can help to identify future roles within the organisation. *Fourth*, equally important is interviewing repatriates who leave the organisation. Exit interviews should explore if and, if so, which repatriation support experiences contributed to the decision to leave. *Fifth*, we emphasise the need to acknowledge that third party vendors are part of the repatriation process and must be considered in terms of (perceived) organisational support. The organisation should solicit feedback from the users of third party providers to ensure the services have not impacted negatively upon POS. *Finally*, organisations can consider sending those who are regularly involved in repatriation support abroad with an explicit developmental goal and plan. Such an international experience will help to raise awareness for and improve repatriation support (Shen and Hall, 2009, p. 810).

Limitations and future research

The small size of our sample is noted as a limitation. The single case study design and the method precludes generalisation of the findings (Eisenhardt, 1989). However, our exploratory study increases our understanding of repatriation support and in particular the quality of support. By linking this information to the knowledge of previous studies on organisational support and the devolution of HRM, we are able to identify several topics for future studies in the field of repatriation management. In general, scholars could use our implications as a starting point for analysing the repatriation support quality of different organisations. Moreover, the implications can serve as a guideline for the selection of cases for a multiple-case design. The evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling and robust than from a single case (Yin, 2014, p. 46). Our study was explorative and therefore we adopted a qualitative

method (i.e. interviews). Additional questionnaire research, that transforms our implications or propositions to hypotheses that can be tested, can help to explain the findings and show how causal processes work. Related to the latter, a longitudinal panel study in organisations and focused on (the development of) repatriation support over time would enable us to identify and isolate cause-and-effect relationships. Finally, four under-researched repatriation support topics deserve further investigation. First, the role knowledge dissemination from IHR to general HR and ‘field experts’ and vice versa plays for the quality of repatriation support. Second, a deeper insight into the influence of repatriation supporters own international experience for the quality of repatriation support. Third, research about mentors, colleagues and other non-managerial employees as potential sources of support is still in its infancy. Finally, the effect of third party providers for (perceived) organisational support needs further investigation.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Interview questions

1) "Could you describe your experiences with repatriation?" 2) For HR functions and line managers: "Could you describe your role in the repatriation process?" 3) "Who is involved in the repatriation process?" (Repatriates: "Who was ...?") 3a) "Could you describe your experiences with those involved in the repatriation process?" 4) "When do you discuss repatriation?" (Repatriates: "When was repatriation discussed?") 5) "Do repatriates receive support before repatriation and, if yes, what kind of support?" (Repatriates: "Did you ...?") 5a) "Do repatriates partner/children receive support before repatriation and, if yes, what kind of support?" (repatriates: "Did your partner/children ...?") 6) "Do repatriates receive support after repatriation?" (Repatriates: "Did you ...?") 6a) "Do repatriates partner/children receive support after repatriation and, if yes, what kind of support?" (Repatriates: "Did your partner/children ...?")	Linehan and Scullion, 2002. Ulrich <i>et al.</i> (2013). Dany <i>et al.</i> 2008; Stevens <i>et al.</i> 2006; Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2001; Kawai and Mohr, 2014; Linehan and Scullion, 2002; Valk <i>et al.</i> , 2013. Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007. Chew and Debowski, 2008; Hyder and Lovblad, 2007; Piech, 2015; Stahl <i>et al.</i> 2009; Szkudlarek, 2010. Arnaez <i>et al.</i> , 2014; Black and Gregersen, 1991; Black <i>et al.</i> , 1992; Cave <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Hyder and Lövblad, 2007; Suutari and Välimaa, 2002; Szkudlarek, 2010.
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<p>7) "Could you describe the effects of successful and failing organisational support for repatriation?"</p> <p>8) "What, if any, improvements would you recommend to improve the repatriation process?"</p>	
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