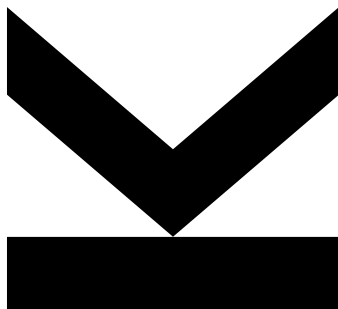


FROM EXPATRIATES TO HOMECOMING HEROES

Balancing Organizational
Interests and Support for a
Facilitated Repatriation



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Author
Alice Fuchs

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Thesis Supervisor
Henriett Primecz, Ph.D.

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List of Abbreviations

HQ	Headquarter
MNCs	Multinational Corporations
ROI	Return on Investment
IHR	International Human Resources
IHRM	International Human Resource Management
POS	Perceived Organizational Support
OST	Organizational Support Theory
CCT	Cross-Cultural Training
UAE	United Arab Emirates

Abstract

In today's globalized business landscape, multinational corporations (MNCs) increasingly rely on international assignments to drive their growth and competitiveness. However, the often-overlooked phase of repatriation, involving the employees' return from their international assignments, poses significant challenges. To address these challenges, companies must implement comprehensive support measures to ensure a successful homecoming and leverage the full potential for knowledge transfer and strategic development. This thesis explores how MNCs can align with their organizational interests while supporting expatriates during their repatriation, adopting a multi-dimensional approach that considers both organizational and repatriate perspectives.

Organizational interests in repatriation encompass enhancing employee satisfaction, managing assignment costs, maximizing return on investment, facilitating knowledge transfer, and ensuring employee retention. Achieving a balance between standardized policies and individual requirements is paramount. Budgetary constraints guide cost-effective program development, while HR professionals assess emerging employee needs for potential policy adjustments. In this delicate equilibrium, HR professionals play a central role in fostering a positive experience for both parties, emphasizing the need for continuous policy reviews to ensure fairness and cost-effectiveness. Repatriates generally perceived organizational support positively throughout their expatriation and repatriation journeys, translating into loyalty and commitment. However, some repatriates noted decreased support during repatriation compared to their foreign assignments. Professional reintegration varies, influenced by company changes, career aspirations, and organizational dynamics. Successful reintegration often requires proactive efforts by repatriates, including networking, flexibility, and career planning.

Key findings highlight the need for an integrated perspective on expatriation and repatriation, emphasizing long-term strategic talent development. The study also reveals a holistic view on organizational support, indicating that repatriates maintain a positive perception even with reduced support if substantial assistance is provided before and during expatriation. It identifies a complex network of organizational stakeholders involved in repatriation support and emphasizes the importance of collaboration among them. The research underscores professional reintegration planning, job security, and aligning repatriates' expectations with organizational realities. Additionally, it sheds light on the complexities of post-repatriation employee turnover, emphasizing transparent communication and proactive employee engagement to ensure employee satisfaction. The findings bridge the gap between organizational interests and repatriate needs, offering a roadmap for companies to navigate the challenges of repatriation successfully.

1. Introduction

The unprecedented growth of multinational corporations (MNCs) on the increasing competitive global market has led to a proportionate rise in the deployment of expatriates to subsidiaries abroad and their resulting repatriation (Chiang et al., 2018). This is the case since MNCs have recognized the critical role and competitive advantage of expatriate assignments to manage their worldwide operations in the era of globalization (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; Cave et al., 2022; Fortwengel et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2018). When home country professionals manage foreign subsidiaries, they acquire expertise in global operations, develop essential global competencies and knowledge, and aid in executing successful international business strategies, fostering international business knowledge (Cave et al., 2022; Knocke & Schuster, 2017).

Amongst others, expatriation brings promising advantages along for MNCs such as the transfer of expertise and state-of-the-art technology, the transmission of corporate cultures, the penetration of new markets and target audiences, as well as the development of global skills and mindsets within an organization's workforce. According to the KPMG Global Assignment Policies and Practices Survey (2022), the main priorities for companies making use of global mobility programs are compliance and global risk management, supporting the organization's business objectives, controlling program costs and being adaptable to changing business requirements. Moreover, expatriates contribute to the strategic value of organizations and function as trusted business advisors and collaborators (KPMG International, 2022). The acquired knowledge during foreign assignments represents a valuable enrichment for the expatriates themselves and for the companies since both parties can benefit from the gathered learnings abroad. Thus, intra-company knowledge transfer is a key source of competitive advantage for MNCs (Kim et al., 2022).

Expatriate assignments are rather cost intensive for companies and the costs in case of failures are subsequently even higher. Repatriates are an important strategic resource for MNCs due to their expertise of overseas operations, first-hand experience with foreign cultures and specific in-depth knowledge of the market to which they were allocated. As Cave et al. (2022) state, high repatriate turnover could result in knowledge and skills being lost to competitors, and repatriates' dissatisfaction may deter other employees from taking on future overseas assignments. Therefore, MNCs have to take all necessary actions in order to foster the expatriates' success and prevent failure rates. The last phase of the expatriation cycle, repatriation – a manager's return home from an expatriate assignment, is of great importance since only in this stage it can be determined whether the assignment has been successful or not. Organizations usually expect to retain repatriates with their valuable expertise and experience gained abroad, however, repatriate

turnover poses a key challenge for MNCs and “a number of studies identify high rates of repatriate turnover intentions” (Cave et al., 2022, p. 1).

Breitenmoser & Bader (2021, p.1528) found out in their research that organizational support practices in repatriation serve as a buffering effect of career derailment and increase the repatriates’ intention to stay within the company. Already past research confirmed that repatriate support practices provided by MNCs enhanced the repatriates’ general perception of their employers and increased their desire to stay within the company upon repatriation, if the offered support was perceived as relevant and important (M. Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). Retention is difficult to measure since many individual trigger factors directly influence the repatriation experience and the repatriates’ turnover intention. Therefore, a focus must be laid on how companies can properly assist repatriates in their returning phase to alleviate the challenges faced during their homecoming. Moreover, “repatriate perceptions of organizational repatriate practices have been found to induce commitment to the organization” (Cave et al., 2022, p. 3). Consequently, repatriates must receive appropriate organizational support in order to strengthen their organizational commitment, which in turn influences their willingness to remain with the company. The management of individual differences is crucial for the success of international assignments. Therefore, human resource management (HRM) should provide support for a range of individual differences and place emphasis on ensuring their effective management (O’Donohue et al., 2018; Renshaw et al., 2021).

Repatriation is a time of major upheaval, on a professional and personal level. Companies need to recognize this issue to be able to properly support their returnees by providing them with suitable career guidance and enabling them to utilize their valuable international experience. The successful management of the repatriation process represents a prerequisite to unleash the full potential and opportunities of the skills and knowledge gained by the repatriates abroad. The findings researched within this thesis should provide the international human resource management (IHRM) with the necessary support practices to facilitate the toughest and most challenging phase of expatriate assignments – the repatriation process.

1.1. Problem Statement

As more and more companies expand their operations globally, expatriation has increasingly gained significance due to the great opportunities that arise for MNCs with the transfer of employees. However, it is evident that the repatriation of managers is very critical accompanied by the high expatriate failure rates – up to 50% of repatriates leave their organizations within one year after returning home (Fischlmayr & Kopecek, 2015). Studies have shown that repatriation still remains to be a difficulty for many MNCs, thus not enough research has been done in this field (Cave et al., 2022; Knocke & Schuster, 2017). Despite significant advancements in understanding the expatriation phase of international assignments, Chiang et al. (2018, p.188) noted that the literature on repatriation is still fragmented and incomplete. They stated that repatriation is hampered by challenging re-adjustments (van Gorp et al., 2017), high turnover rates, and many other obstacles - thus it is imperative to improve the understanding of repatriation. As Hoang & Ho (2019, p. 59) emphasize the consequences about the lack of understanding of the repatriates' situations are severe and are still present today. They argue that re-entry is still perceived as challenging for repatriates which frequently urges them to look for employment in different firms. When employee turnover happens, parent companies bear the consequences of losing advanced knowledge and skills (Cave et al., 2022; Hoang & Ho, 2019). Thus, special attention needs to be laid on repatriation by providing returning expatriates with the necessary support measures to facilitate their homecoming (Howe-Walsh & Torka, 2017; van Gorp et al., 2017).

While traditionally, the emphasis was predominantly laid on the employees' contributions in the host country, there has recently been a greater focus on the potential long-term advantages of the expatriates returning to their home countries (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). These long-term advantages refer to the expertise and valuable knowledge gained abroad which shall ideally flow back into the company. When expatriates embark on international assignments, they transfer valuable technical and corporate knowledge to the host countries (outflows). Upon return from their assignments, they not only reintegrate their original knowledge but also infuse their enhanced skills and insights gained during their stay abroad, thereby enriching the home organization (inflows). However, if the repatriates leave their companies upon return, the dynamic re-expatriation brain circulation is disrupted and the valuable acquired knowledge will not flow back into the company, but in the worst case into the competitor's organization (Ho et al., 2016). Therefore, organizational support practices are vital as they positively contribute to the organizational commitment of repatriates and thus enable internationally operating organizations to make use of long-term knowledge advantages from their expatriate assignments (Amir et al., 2020; Peltokorpi et al., 2022).

In their research Knocke & Schuster (2017) conducted a systematic literature review on the repatriation of international assignees to identify research gaps and future directions for research. Based on their findings, the authors recommend that it is worthwhile to explore how organizations can optimize their support programs to successfully reintegrate employees into their parent companies. They argue that it is particularly vital to consider the organizational perspective, since only a limited number of studies in repatriation collected data on the organizational level, such as HR managers or supervisors. As Knocke and Schuster (2017) suggest both, the perception of repatriates and the actual human resources practices, strategies, and policies should be considered. Additionally, Valk's research highlights the importance of understanding the goals and motivations of companies and expatriates as the two perspectives are often not congruent (Valk, 2022). By adopting a multi-dimensional approach through considering both viewpoints, researchers can gain valuable insights into why repatriates may perceive these practices differently and how organizations can implement more effective support programs (Knocke & Schuster, 2017; Valk, 2022).

In this context, it is inevitable for the HR management of international companies to adopt adequate support practices that prepare repatriates for their impending repatriation process (Johnson, 2019). This includes providing repatriates with expedient guidance tailored to their needs when returning home (Renshaw et al., 2021). Only by doing so, parent companies can have an influence on whether their repatriates, together with their valuable knowledge, will stay within the firm. At the same time, it is crucial to include different repatriation stakeholder's perspectives (Knocke & Schuster, 2017, p. 295) to gain a holistic picture and to broaden the understanding of the delicate repatriation process. As a result, the research findings presented within the master's thesis should provide the IHRM with essential knowledge that can guide MNCs on the implementation of support practices to ease the repatriates' homecoming while aligning with its organizational interests. The effective preparation and support of repatriates through repatriation policies during their return home is of high relevance for companies to decrease this stressful transition period.

1.2. Research Questions

The central research question which is aimed to be answered within this master's thesis is the following:

Main Research Question:

How can a parent company support expatriates during their repatriation process while aligning with its organizational interests?

This question represents the central research question to be answered within the scope of this thesis. Subsequently, two further sub-research questions are formulated in order to gain a holistic understanding of the two different parties involved in expatriate management: the returning expatriate and the parent company. This comprehensive approach helps to achieve the research objective.

Sub-Question 1:

How do companies develop repatriation programs that balance their organizational interests and their expatriates' needs?

The purpose of this research question is to find out the company's perspective and the motivation behind offering repatriation support. Additionally, the question helps to detect how a repatriation program contributes to meeting the company's interests. It may also provide insights into how a company plans to increase the organizational commitment of its employees after they return from their overseas assignments.

Sub-Question 2:

How do expatriates perceive their company's organizational support practices during their repatriation experience?

The second sub-research question is of high relevance since it helps to understand the repatriates' point of view of the support measures offered and their personal evaluation of its effectiveness. With this question it is aimed to find out which support provided was effective, and in which aspects the repatriates would have appreciated more extensive guidance.

1.3. Structure of the Thesis

The structure of this master's thesis consists of six chapters and is divided into a literature review and empirical research. In the first chapter, the subject of repatriation is introduced, emphasizing the relevance and aim of the research. This introduction chapter includes the problem statement, research questions, the structure, and the goal of the thesis.

The second chapter represents the literature review which is divided into two parts. In the first subchapter of the literature review, a theoretical framework is developed, where important definitions and theoretical concepts are described. In the second subchapter, the repatriates' as well as the organizations' point of view on how repatriation support should look like are presented. Additionally, a concise preliminary concept of a repatriation support program based on existing literature is provided, laying the foundation for the empirical research in this thesis.

The third chapter focuses on the methodology used in this study. Qualitative research is conducted through ten semi-structured interviews with HR/global mobility professionals and repatriates from three companies that operate within the same geographical region. The interviews aim to assess the practical value of the offered repatriation support, to gather information on the effectiveness of the support practices and to detect areas for improvements. In this methodological chapter the research approach, research sample, data collection, and data analysis are discussed.

The fourth chapter presents the research findings of the empirical data gathered through the interviews, representing the main part of this thesis. Based on the findings, the theoretical framework of repatriation support is adapted. In the fifth chapter the similarities and differences found in theory and reality are compared, leading to a discussion of the results. Moreover, theoretical, and practical contributions of the research findings are discussed, potential limitations are mentioned, and future research is outlined. The study's outcome is presented in detail, and managerial implications in the form of a practical guideline are provided for the IHRM of MNCs.

Finally, the sixth chapter concludes with the main findings and provides answers to the research questions. By combining theory and practice, the thesis aims to advance the current understanding on repatriation and provide practical insights to HR professionals for the development of effective repatriation support practices.

1.4. Research Objective

The primary objective of this master's thesis is to explore how parent companies can provide support to their expatriates during repatriation while also aligning with their organizational interests. Thus, this research examines both the company's perspective, and motivation behind the development of repatriation programs, as well as the expatriates' experiences of the organizational support practices provided during their repatriation. By establishing a theoretical basis through an extensive literature review and by conducting empirical research via semi-structured qualitative interviews, a holistic understanding of repatriation from both theory, and real-life practices is achieved. This thesis has the aim to contribute to the existing knowledge on repatriation and to support HR practitioners in developing effective repatriation support practices. Therefore, the practical objective of this thesis is to develop a repatriation program based on the homecoming experience of repatriates for the IHRM. The overarching goal of this master's thesis is to provide MNCs with support practices that align with their organizational interests and reduce the challenges associated with the homecoming experience of their employees. The research seeks to facilitate the repatriation process for expatriates, while simultaneously assisting companies to meet their organizational goals.

2. Literature Review

A comprehensive analysis of the existing literature is a vital component of research, as it provides an overview of the current state of knowledge in the field, identifies key scholars and their contributions, and examines the theoretical frameworks and concepts applied. By linking literature to the research questions and findings, the credibility of the research is enhanced (Bell et al., 2022). The literature review of this thesis is divided into two chapters: the first chapter establishes the theoretical framework by defining key concepts, while the second chapter presents both the repatriates' and the organizations' perspectives on repatriation support. Furthermore, this chapter outlines a preliminary concept of a support program for the empirical research of this thesis based on relevant literature.

2.1. Theoretical Framework of Repatriation

This first section of the literature review provides a fundamental introduction into the subject of repatriation by explaining relevant terms, definitions, and phenomena as it offers a basic overview of the topics to be covered in this thesis.

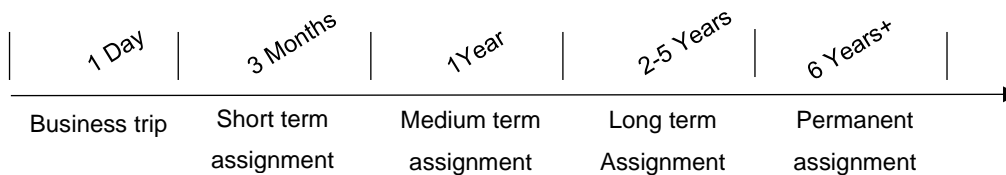
2.1.1. Expatriation

“Expatriation is sending parent company nationals to another country, or the host country to perform management duties. This staffing alternative has been one of the most frequently used means for staffing overseas assignments for Western multinational corporations (MNCs)” (Harvey & Kiessling, 2004, p. 552). A corporate expatriate may be a highly skilled employee of a business or government with unique expertise sent to a country other than their homeland, typically for a period of several years, to complete a specific task or to implement organizational goals (Aycan et al., 2000; Cave et al., 2022; Harrison et al., 2004). This means that, a suitable individual, is assigned on a temporary basis to a foreign country to perform business operations abroad, as an extension of the headquarters governance and control (Selmer, 1998). Consequently, the expatriate returns back home in order to take over another job position within the home company, so-called repatriation (Inkson et al., 1997).

MNCs prefer to hire expatriates instead of host country nationals to manage and supervise their overseas units because of the expatriates' deep knowledge of the headquarters' rules, mechanisms, and operating procedures. Additionally, expatriates are believed to have a stronger dedication to the corporation's objectives (Maurer & Li, 2006). They also foster the development of an improved understanding of the operations performed outside the home country, which in turn enables the company to stay competitive in the global market. Moreover, expatriate managers can also be employed for other purposes, such as the need to refine a manager's business abilities, to acquire international experience and to improve their capacity of successfully managing foreign personnel (Yeaton & Hall, 2008). Undertaking an expatriate assignment is particularly demanding

due to the combination of skill sets required: not only do expatriates need to have an in-depth understanding of the company's strategies and procedures, but they must also possess the capability to adapt and thrive in a foreign environment (Inkson et al., 1997).

There is no common definition of how long a typical expatriate assignment constitutes to be, since every company individually defines the duration of the assignments performed, according to its needs. An overview of the different time spans of expatriate assignments is given in the following:



Within this thesis, an emphasis is placed on assigned corporate expatriates that pursue long-term foreign assignments to fulfill specific tasks or achieve organizational goals and who consequently return to their home countries and company headquarters. This focus is driven by the need for more extensive organizational support during the repatriation process of long-term international assignments.

2.1.2. Repatriation

In the 1980s, Harvey (1982) introduced the concept of repatriation, which refers to the final phase of an international assignment in which expatriates return to their home countries upon completion of their assignment (Harvey, 1982; Sussman, 2011; Suutari & Brewster, 2003). “Repatriation, or re-entry, is the transition from a foreign country back to one's own after living overseas for a significant period of time” (Hurn, 1999, p. 224). Repatriation is the opposite of expatriation, meaning that the expatriate returns from the foreign assignment back to the parent organization in the home country (Chiang et al., 2018; Harvey, 1982; Kraimer et al., 2009).

Black and Gregersen (1999) research has played a significant role in bringing academic attention to the concept of repatriation as their study shed light on the challenges that firms encounter in retaining corporate expatriates upon the completion of international assignments. Repatriation refers to the process of reintegration into the home country with respect to professional, private, social, and cultural aspects. Companies usually do not assume the repatriation phase to be problematic since they simply perceive it as returning to a “home environment” after a foreign assignment (Heinrich, 2010). Yet, the repatriation phase poses significant challenges for expatriates in global organizations, as they and their families experience high levels of anxiety and stress upon return to their home countries which can be exacerbated by a lack of organizational support. Despite its importance, some organizations fail to recognize the critical role of the

repatriation phase in the overall success of the expatriation process (Burmeister et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2022).

Repatriation is often underestimated by MNCs due to a lack of awareness of the challenges involved. However, this process of returning home can be more difficult and frustrating for many expatriates than the assignment itself. As a result, repatriation can cause frustration and represent a significant obstacle for HR managers and expatriates (Cave et al., 2022; Paik et al., 2002). The repatriation phase is the final link in the completion of an international assignment, yet it is the most overlooked phase of expatriation (Paik et al., 2002, p. 636). Many MNCs struggle to manage this stage effectively, resulting in various difficulties for returning expatriates. Therefore, it is crucial to view repatriation not as an isolated event, but as part of a continuous process of personal and career development for the individual and organizational development (Hurn, 1999, p. 228).

2.1.3. Repatriation: An Integral Part of the Expatriation Process

While the motivations for expatriate transfers may vary, employees transitioning from domestic employment to global assignments typically go through a predictable sequence of stages, including departure from their home country and return after completing the expatriate assignment (Adler, 1997). The stages are described in various theoretical models, offering a process-oriented view (Brewster et al., 2007; Cranston, 2018). The traditional concept of expatriate assignments follows a typical international assignment cycle which is closely aligned with HRM procedures. To ensure the success and overall value of international assignments, HR professionals are not only required to follow this traditional expatriate assignment cycle, but also gain a more comprehensive understanding of value implications across the entire journey. They have to provide tailored solutions to meet individual needs of expatriates (Black et al., 1992; MacDonald & Arthur, 2005; Renshaw et al., 2021). Beyond economic obligations, companies have a moral obligation to offer support throughout the international assignment cycle (Black et al., 1999). Therefore, the success and overall value of expatriate assignments depend on a mix of: (1) careful selection and preparation of expatriates, (2) design of rewards and benefits, (3) effective performance management, (4) formulation of long-term career strategies, and (5) a well-crafted repatriation framework, all tailored to the unique goals of the expatriates themselves (Renshaw et al., 2021).

As shown in Figure 1, the international assignment cycle by Christen and Harzing (2004) portrays an idealized scenario in which the expatriate's life cycle forms an uninterrupted circle. The cycle starts with the recruitment and selection process, followed by hiring and the actual assignment and concludes with the repatriation phase, during which the expatriates either resume their former role or transition to a new position in the home organization. The process can also start all over again with the employee embarking on another international assignment (Harzing & Christensen, 2004).

In contrast, Cranston's International Assignment Model (2018, p. 632) extends the expatriation stage by including three additional steps in between, namely, relocation, adjustment, and performance.

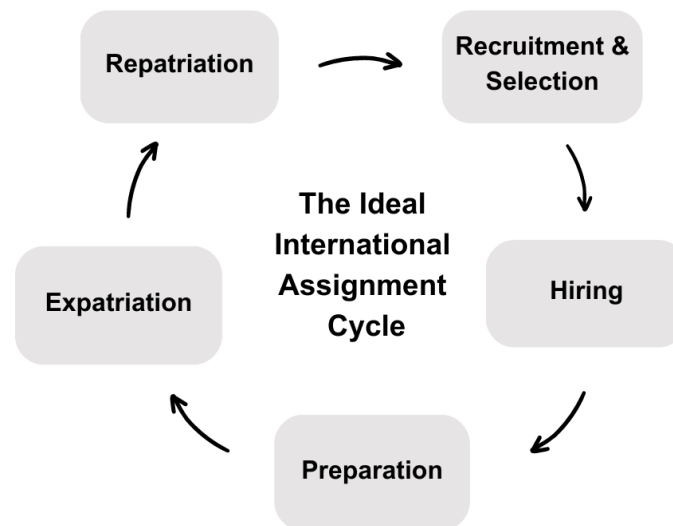


Figure 1: The Ideal International Assignment Cycle (Modified from Harzing & Christensen, 2004, p. 620).

While theoretical models of the expatriation cycle can vary, most academics and practitioners share a common idealized perception when discussing international assignments and expatriate failure. Nevertheless, in many cases reality does not conform to this perfect international assignment cycle at all (Harzing & Christensen, 2004). In reality, expatriates may terminate their assignments and move on to better job opportunities outside the organization by changing the employer. Alternatively, they could be relocated to different roles within the organization, or in some cases, they may face dismissal due to non-performance. As a result, the ideal-type international assignment cycle is disrupted (Harzing & Christensen, 2004). According to Fischlmayr & Kopecek (2015) and Johnson (2019), the repatriation process represents a decisive element within the HRM cycle that determines whether the expatriates stay within the firm or not. Therefore, MNCs need to provide adequate repatriation support practices along with international assignments and manage expatriation and repatriation as an integrated process (Wang, 2023). The thesis examines the delicate repatriation process and the support practices provided by parent companies with the aim to find out how MNCs can optimize their repatriation programs to increase their employees' commitment and to promote the repatriates' desire to stay with their employer.

2.1.4. W-Curve Model

Research indicates that expatriates often experience a culture shock when they are exposed to foreign environments, following a U-Curve pattern (Adler, 2002; Lysgaard, 1955). In 1960, the anthropologist Oberg conducted the initial investigation into the phenomenon of culture shock experienced by individuals when confronted with an unfamiliar cultural or environmental setting. This culture shock, also referred to as acculturative stress (Berry, 1970) can be triggered by various factors, such as the loss of familiar cues, support networks, and customs, as well as changes in language and dietary practices (Sussman, 2011). Initially, during foreign assignments expatriates are typically fascinated by the new culture and surroundings, also known as the honeymoon stage (Storti, 2003). However, after spending some time in the new environment, difficulties arise due to perceived disparities between the home and host cultures. This marks the occurrence of the actual culture shock, representing the lowest point of the U-Curve, characterized by feelings of frustration and confusion (Oberg, 1960). This period can be particularly difficult, as coping with the particularities of the new culture on a daily basis can be perceived as overwhelming, stressful, and frustrating (Fischlmayr & Kopecek, 2015). Adler (2002) found out in her research that a culture shock is a body's response to being exposed to a new cultural environment that can equally come into effect in similar as in dissimilar countries. The author emphasizes that the experience of a culture shock is a positive indication of becoming entirely involved in the host country, instead of being caught up in the expatriate bubble and ghettos (Adler, 2002).

To overcome the culture shock, expats typically adapt to their new environment by learning about the culture and language of the host country, and by developing a more positive attitude towards their surroundings. Expats' primary goal is to cope positively with the adjustment phase, also known as acculturation (Berry, 2008) by integrating themselves into their new surroundings and aligning their behaviour with the new cultural environment, which allows them to live a stress-free life abroad (Adler, 2002). Finally, in the mastery stage, the expatriates make minor final strides that help them to strengthen the cultural adjustment abroad (Walther, 2014). This process represents the shape of a U-Curve, which can be seen in the first left half, shown in the illustration of Figure 2.

The concept of cultural adjustment is further explored in the W-Curve Model, which outlines the stages of expatriate adaptation and readjustment upon returning home. There are two well-known models of expatriate adjustment and readjustment presented in academic literature. Initially, Lysgaard (1995) developed the U-Curve, which was consequently extended and applied to repatriation by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), resulting in the W-Curve Model. When repatriating, Gullahorn and Gullahorn detected that returnees go through the same process as expatriates during their adaptation phase in their host countries, only in their home countries.

These difficulties of the U-Curve are recurring in the repatriates' homecoming experience, indicating that repatriates face post-adjustment problems, also known as the reverse culture shock (Walther, 2014). Due to the reappearance of the cultural transition phenomenon, the U-Curve is exactly mirrored again, resulting in the W-Curve Model. As shown in Figure 2, the W-Curve Model has eight stages (4+4) (Walther, 2014).

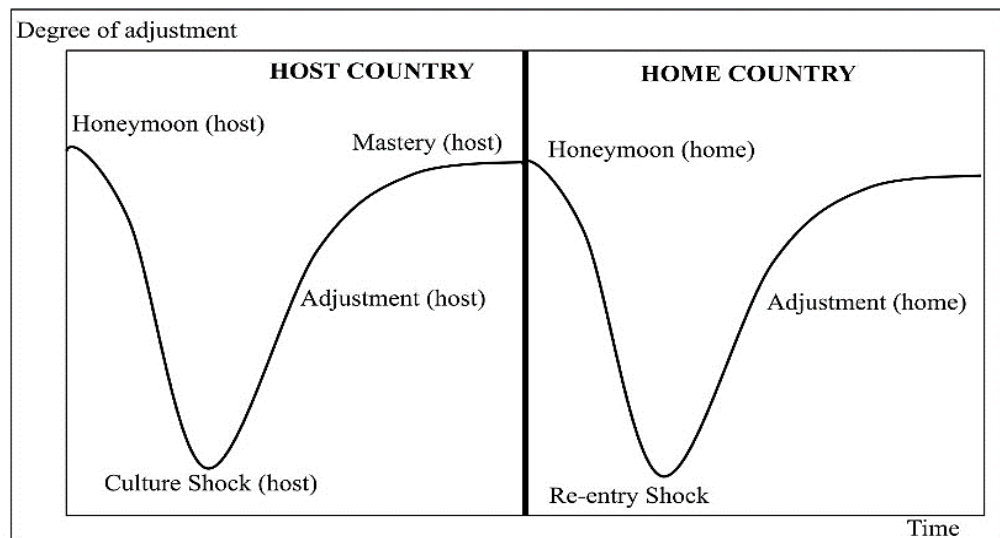


Figure 2: W-Curve Model (Walther, 2014, p. 106) Copyright by Walther 2014. Reprinted with permission.

The W-Model is of great importance, since most returnees do not anticipate a culture shock or trauma when coming home and thus expect to "just slip into" their previous life styles (Adler, 1981, p. 350). Yet, expatriates typically experience a reverse culture shock upon their return due to their assimilation to the culture of the host country. Repatriation is a difficult process, similar to their initial adjustment, and often overlooked by organizations (Paik et al., 2002; Solomon, 1995). This unanticipated reverse culture shock (Hurn, 1999, p. 225), and the consequent readjustment issues are a prevalent reason for high employee turnover rates (Chiang et al., 2018, p. 203). The adjustment process for repatriates is therefore often identified as a primary cause for a lower sense of commitment and higher rates of turnover (Cave et al., 2022, p. 5). It is crucial for expats to be aware of this challenge, and for organizations to provide support to facilitate their adaptation back to their home culture (Solomon, 1995). Therefore, to ease the repatriation process "the key is to have information and support available and to offer it in a variety of forms" (Johnson, 2019, p. 8) to be able to cater diverse preferences, as every repatriate has different needs and experiences individual challenges.

2.1.5. Readjustment Triggers in Repatriation

Repatriates may experience an emotional trauma during their homecoming, after completing an international assignment, as explained in the W-Curve Model in subchapter 2.1.5. While the readjustment phase can be challenging and stressful for returnees, it is an indispensable key factor for the successful repatriation of expatriates. The organizational approach taken by parent companies greatly influences the readjustment process and the overall success of repatriation, emphasizing the need to shorten the duration of this process in order to improve organizational outcomes (Lessle et al., 2020; Sánchez Vida, Eugenia, M. et al., 2007). To fully comprehend the process of repatriation, it is important for MNCs to analyze the influencing factors of readjustment. This understanding can help internationally operating firms to provide their repatriated employees with the necessary emotional and practical support during this difficult phase (Kimber, 2019).

The basic framework model of readjustment by Black, Gregersen, and Mendenhall (1992) was the first to provide a comprehensive perspective on repatriation adjustment in literature, highlighting its importance for repatriation. The model is divided into pre-return and post-return adjustment and covers three facets of repatriation, addressing: (a) finding work, (b) communicating with home country co-workers and friends, and (c) the general culture of the home country. The post-return adjustment is split into four categories: (i) individual, (ii) job, (iii) organizational, and (iv) non-work variables. The model considers repatriation from both the individual and organizational perspective and advocates for a practical approach in understanding each individual's situation to increase the retention rate of repatriates (Black et al., 1992).

In the light of the outdatedness of the model, the author recognized the need to propose a modified model that visualizes the most relevant factors influencing repatriation readjustment, as presented in her previous research (Fuchs, 2021). This new model is based on the original work of Black, Gregesen, and Mendenhall (1992) and identifies the relevance of a successful readjustment phase during the repatriation of expatriates. It is crucial for organizations to implement support practices that ease the transitioning phase and homecoming for their returning expatriates (Jayasingam et al., 2021). The prior research of the author indicated the limitations of the model and the need for an update. Thus, in the following a visualization of the revised version of the readjustment triggers in repatriation is shown and later a detailed explanation of these associated influencing factors on readjustment is given (Fuchs, 2021).

2.1.5.1. Overview of Readjustment Triggers in Repatriation

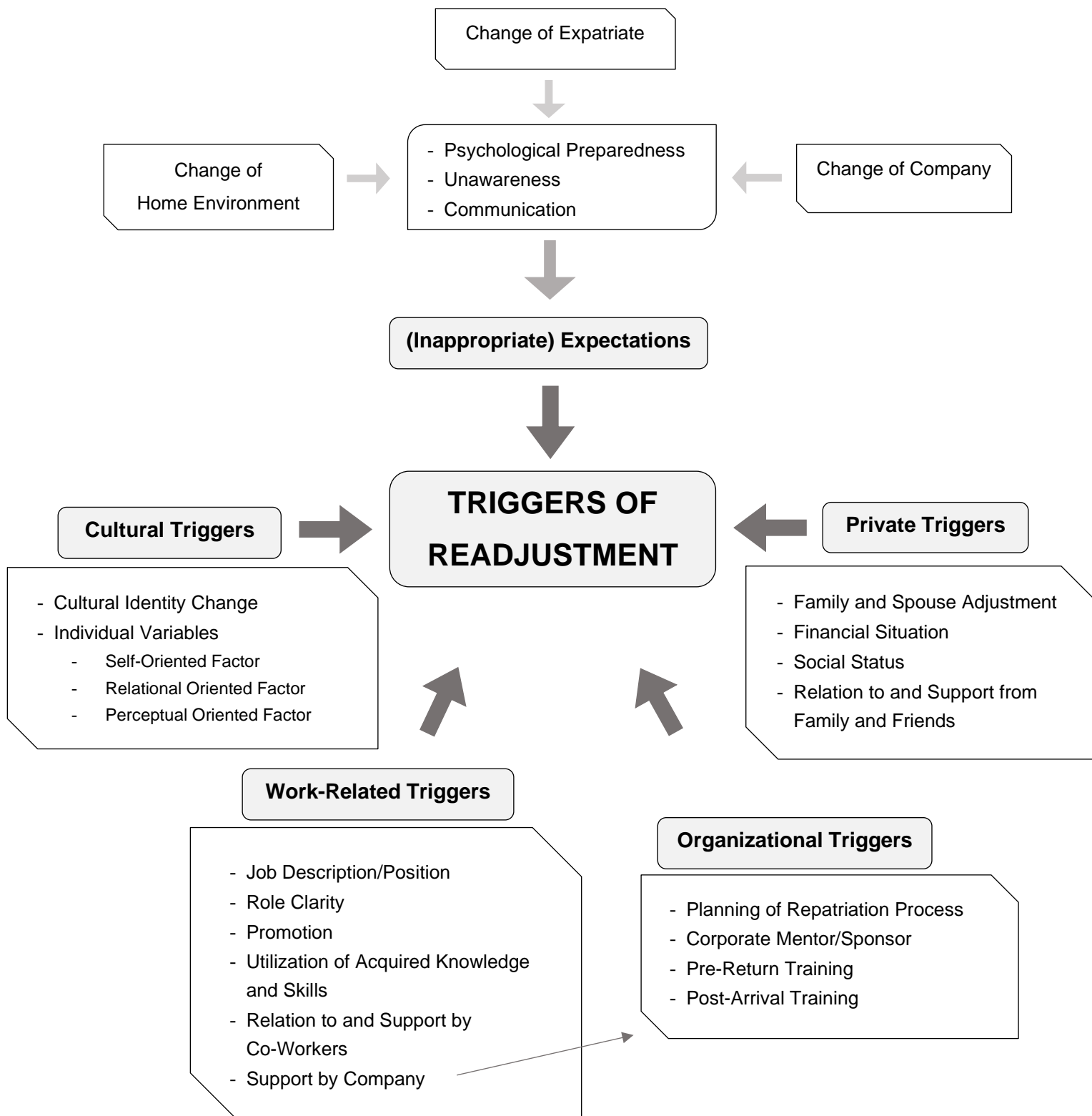


Figure 3: Overview of Readjustment Triggers in Repatriation (Fuchs, 2021, p. 43).

The process of returning to one's home country after an extended period abroad presents a significant challenge for expatriates and is crucial for the successful completion of their international assignments (Caligiuri & Bonache, 2016; Morin & Talbot, 2023). However, repatriates tend to underestimate the psychological challenges associated with readjustment, mainly due to their unawareness and unrealistic expectations, making this phase more challenging (Hurn, 1999; Naito, 2016). As depicted in Figure 3 above, the complexity of the various trigger factors significantly impacts readjustment and provides insights into the repatriate's journey. A comprehensive understanding of these factors facilitates a smoother transition for repatriates, both physically and psychologically, upon return to their home country and organization (Fuchs, 2021).

Primarily, the repatriates' expectations are critical in the readjustment process, as they are based on their psychological preparedness to return home and their (un)awareness of the various changes that have occurred (Geeraert et al., 2021; Naito, 2016). These changes include shifts in their personality and identity, home company, and social and cultural environment (Fuchs, 2021). Regular communication with co-nationals from both their personal and professional environments can increase their awareness of these changes and their consequences (Black, 1992; Wilczewski & Alon, 2022). This, in turn, helps them form realistic expectations and anticipate the challenges of their readjustment periods, ultimately reducing their uncertainty and strengthening their ability to cope (Mao & Shen, 2015; Paik et al., 2002). Moreover, the repatriation process is influenced by cultural, work-related, organizational, and personal factors as shown in the illustration. These factors may be positive or negative triggers, depending on how they are managed. Challenges during repatriation can even be transformed into positive triggers and boost repatriation success, if handled properly. By being aware of these trigger factors, companies can effectively support repatriates and facilitate the successful completion of their foreign assignments (Fuchs, 2021).

The cultural dimension of readjustment includes individual variables related to self-image (self-oriented factor), communication with co-nationals (relational factor), and understanding of cultural norms (perceptual factor) (Black et al., 1992). It also involves a profound change in one's cultural identity, affecting the repatriate thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and interactions with others (Sussman, 2000). Work-related triggers include the repatriates' job position and description, clarity of their role in the company, career prospects, and support from co-workers (Black et al., 1992; Storti, 2003). However, the most important factor is the company's support before and during the relocation process since well-organized repatriation contributes to a positive repatriation experience (Chiang et al., 2018; Herman & Tetrick, 2009; Johnson, 2019). This refers to repatriation programs and policies, support by a mentor or sponsor, as well as the offering of pre-return and post-arrival trainings, which cause a sense of appreciation among repatriates and foster

stronger relational ties, along with corporate embeddedness (Howe-Walsh & Torka, 2017; M. Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001).

Lastly, the repatriates' readjustment depends on various personal factors. These include the family and spouse's adaptation, the social ties with relatives and friends, and the changes in social status and financial situation (Black et al., 1992; Ho et al., 2016). All these private triggers can affect the repatriates' psychological well-being. To conclude, the readjustment triggers illustrated in Figure 3, have a substantial impact on the physical and psychological changes of repatriates. Identifying these triggers can enhance the repatriation experience and enable MNCs to effectively support their repatriates, resulting in a facilitated repatriation process and higher organizational commitment (Fuchs, 2021). This commitment can influence the repatriates' willingness to stay with the company (Cave et al., 2022; Chiang et al., 2018).

2.2. Organizational Repatriation Support

Repatriation is a critical aspect of international assignments and the success of the repatriation process mainly depends on the organizational support provided by the home organization to the expatriates and their families (Shah et al., 2022). As highlighted in the previous findings within the scope of this thesis, effective preparation for the repatriation phase is necessary, and the implementation of repatriation programs and policies can facilitate a smooth return home (Johnson, 2019). In particular, organizations must provide support practices to their expatriates that ease their transitioning phase and enable a successful readjustment process (Jayasingam et al., 2021). Therefore, this second subchapter of the literature review begins by introducing the concept of organizational support, perceived organizational support, and the various parties that moderate the impact of the organizational support provided. Later, the repatriates' and the organizations' perspectives on how repatriation support should look are discussed in detail. Finally, the subchapter concludes by presenting a preliminary concept of a repatriation program, drawing insights from relevant literature. This program serves as the foundation for the empirical research conducted in this thesis.

2.2.1. The Concept of Organizational Support

Organizational support refers to the practices offered by MNCs before or after repatriation to facilitate a smooth return home of former expatriates (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; M. Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; M. B. Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). Organizational support is crucial during repatriation due to the complexities involved and the challenges faced by expats trying to readjust to their home countries (M. B. Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Lessle et al., 2020). It provides practical assistance to expatriates and increases their sense of being valued and cared for by the employer (Eisenberger et al., 1986). This support is particularly important as it increases the expat's organizational commitment and reduces the likelihood of turnover intentions (Cave et al., 2022).

Moreover, it was found out that repatriation support practices reinforce the relationship between affective commitment and knowledge sharing behaviour (Jayasingam et al., 2021). Organizational support serves as a buffering effect, mitigating negative experiences such as the impact of career derailment on the repatriates' intent to stay. This is the case because, even in cases where repatriates experience a reduction in their job position and responsibilities, their sense of deprivation can be mitigated by receiving the attention and support they believe they deserve from their employer. Acknowledging the repatriates' international assignment experience is essential for decreasing the relationship between psychological contract breach and career derailment (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). Thus, organizations can play a proactive role in facilitating the readjustment process for their expatriates by ensuring a successful transition that benefits both the individual expat and the organization (Bayraktar, 2019). The results of several studies suggest that the level of organizational support provided significantly impacts repatriates' experiences (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; M. Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; M. B. Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Stahl et al., 2009)

However, despite its significance, the lack of availability of repatriation support practices in MNCs remains a critical area for improvement (Burmeister & Deller, 2016; Wang, 2023). Insufficient support provided to repatriates is usually owed to the different perspectives on repatriation success between expatriates and the parent company, highlighting the necessity of aligning expectations between both parties (Paik et al., 2002). Past research has shown that a common understanding of successful repatriation between the repatriates and the sending company is crucial for effectively meeting the expectations of both parties (Chiang et al., 2018; Paik et al., 2002). Only when there is a shared goal, proper support can be provided to facilitate a successful repatriation process. From the organizational perspective, successful repatriation involves the fulfillment of the main organizational objectives and the establishment of a strong network and business relationships in the host country (Chiang et al., 2018). Additionally, organizations consider repatriation successful when the repatriates' knowledge and acquired technical and intercultural skills from their international assignment are reintegrated into the home company (Ho et al., 2016). On the other hand, repatriates define their foreign assignments as successful when they can benefit from the knowledge gained through their professional and personal development during their expatriate assignments (Chiang et al., 2018; Herman & Tetrick, 2009; Solomon, 1995). The allocation of an appropriate job position upon return is in the interest of both parties since it allows mutual gains from the international experience. Beyond that, both parties aim to minimize the distress associated with readjustment, enabling easier reintegration into the home environment of the repatriates and maintaining good job performance (Black, 1992; Shen & Hall, 2009). Achieving a proper job position, successful knowledge infusion and reducing readjustment distress can be achieved through proactive repatriation planning (Paik et al., 2002). All these factors increase the likelihood of repatriate retention.

One form of organizational support and repatriation planning is the implementation of repatriation support practices, such as pre-departure briefings or career planning sessions (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). These practices are employed by MNCs to assist repatriates in their transition. In a separate subchapter, titled “2.2.4.1. Typical Support Practices Offered by MNCs (KPMG 2022)” a detailed exploration of various support practices that organizations provide to their repatriates is presented. It has been found that it is crucial for organizations to adapt the offered support measures to the individual needs of their employees (Johnson, 2019). Tailoring support to specific needs can enhance the effectiveness of the repatriation process and contribute to the overall well-being and satisfaction of the expatriates. Shah et al. (2022) argue that organizational support has a positive impact on the adjustment of expatriates, as well as their spouses and children, although the dynamics within the family unit may vary. Notably, the adjustment of children directly affects the expatriate spouse, while the expatriate's own adjustment is influenced indirectly. These findings underline the significance of providing direct organizational support to the entire family unit, extending beyond the expatriate alone (Shah et al., 2022). By offering these support practices, MNCs demonstrate their care and appreciation for the employees' contributions during their overseas assignments, while also facilitating a smooth transition back to their home country (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). A comprehensive approach to expatriation and repatriation management is recommended, wherein MNCs treat both phases as an integrated and holistic process (Wan, 2019; Wang, 2023). This approach ensures that international staff development assignments are coupled with robust repatriation support practices, emphasizing the importance of seamless transitions throughout the entire expatriate lifecycle. To conclude, organizational support is crucial for the success of repatriation, as it assists expatriates in overcoming challenges and facilitates their readjustments. By providing practical assistance, demonstrating care, and integrating expatriation and repatriation management, organizations can foster positive outcomes for both individuals and the organization.

2.2.2. Perceived Organizational Support

The concept of Perceived Organizational Support (POS) refers to an employee's perception of the organization's recognition of their contributions and concern for their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). POS is widely studied by organizational behaviour scholars (Choi et al., 2021; Sethi et al., 2023) and according to the Organizational Support Theory (OST) it has a considerable impact on the employees' work attitudes and behaviours as well as on their job performance (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Rockstuhl et al., 2020). According to Howe-Walsh and Tork (2017) POS is related to psychological consequences such as affective and normative organizational commitment, trust, and work-family balance. POS also contributes to higher in-role and extra-role performance as well as reduced withdrawal behaviours. Additionally, scholars have found that POS in conjunction with leader-member exchange, which represents the quality of the relationship between leaders and their subordinates, influences job commitment (Garg & Dhar,

2014). Due to all these positive effects, POS has been linked to job satisfaction, contextual performance, and employee turnover (Sethi et al., 2023). Given the importance of POS in shaping employees' experiences within the organization, it becomes crucial to examine its role in the repatriation of expatriates and their successful transitions into their home organizations.

In terms of leadership, supervisors and individuals in leadership positions play a critical role in shaping the experience of POS (Wayne et al., 1997). Studies have shown that POS can be influenced by various parties within the work organization, including co-workers, teams, and third-party providers (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Torka, 2011). These findings emphasize the multi-faceted nature of POS and the range of contributors to its formation (Howe-Walsh & Torka, 2017). Thus, in the following subchapter “2.2.3 Parties Involved in Repatriation Support” the individuals that affect the POS and the intra-organizational well-being of repatriates are elaborated to find out which protagonists can influence the repatriation experience of expatriates when coming home.

The preceding research directly highlights the relationship between POS and repatriation consequences. Insufficient organizational support can lead to challenges in repatriation adjustment, resulting in poor knowledge transfer from the host to the home organization, dissatisfaction, and undesired turnover (Howe-Walsh & Torka, 2017). This further highlights the importance POS plays in the repatriation process. POS represents a key success factor for the reintegration of expatriates into the home organization. It appears that the provision of support, characterized by empathy and care, is the primary means through which a company can facilitate the challenging repatriation process. Notably, support stands out as the primary factor within a company's control that has an impact on retaining its valuable workforce.

2.2.3. Parties Involved in Repatriation Support

A study conducted by Howe-Walsh and Torka (2017) on repatriation and POS suggests that HR professionals bear the major responsibility for ensuring the quality of support provided to repatriates. They are responsible for assisting returning employees and coordinating support from various stakeholders involved in repatriation, such as line managers, senior managers, family members, co-workers, teams (Kurtessis et al., 2017) and third-party providers like relocation agencies and tax advisors. Inadequate support from the headquarters' International Human Resources (IHR) department is characterized by a lack of clear information about repatriation procedures and can result in insufficient assistance for HR managers in the home and host countries. This lack of support along the chain of stakeholders, including the headquarters' IHR department, home and host HR managers, and line managers, contributes to the perceived limited or non-existent support experienced by repatriates (Howe-Walsh & Torka, 2017).

Moreover, research indicates that HR specialists have a crucial role in the effective delegation of HRM (Dany et al., 2008; Howe-Walsh & Torka, 2017; Keegan et al., 2012; McDermott et al., 2015).

They develop strategic HR frameworks, implement strategy-oriented HR practices, and offer advisory services to senior managers engaged in strategic decision-making and to line managers responsible for directly managing employees and teams (Howe-Walsh & Torka, 2017). Beyond that, Torka's (2011) study emphasizes the need for HR professionals to monitor the quality of support provided by outsourced services, such as tax advisors and relocation agencies. These outsourced services play a specific role in offering expertise related to tax regulations, relocation logistics, and administrative tasks relevant to repatriation. The quality of support given by HR professionals to all stakeholders, including senior managers, line managers, and outsourced service providers, has an impact on their perceived HR support, which ultimately affects the repatriates' perceptions of organizational support (Torka, 2011).

According to the KPMG 2022 Global Mobility Report, the primary stakeholders involved in the pre-assignment cross-border risk review and selection process include responsible business managers (67%), external immigration counsel (60%), and external tax services providers (48%). Other key stakeholders such as corporate tax (45%), talent management (35%), C-Suite/Executive Level (28%), and finance (28%) also play important roles in supporting expatriates on their international assignments. Therefore, HR professionals are key protagonists in offering comprehensive assistance to the returning employees, not only ensuring their support but also overseeing other parties involved in the repatriation process (Howe-Walsh & Torka, 2017; Linehan & Scullion, 2002; Ravasi et al., 2015). By fulfilling this role, HR professionals contribute to creating a supportive organizational environment for repatriates.

In conclusion, organizational support plays a crucial role in the repatriation process, assisting expatriates in overcoming challenges and facilitating their successful readjustment to their home organizations. By providing practical assistance, demonstrating care, and integrating expatriation and repatriation management, organizations can foster positive outcomes for both individuals and the organization. POS further enhances the repatriation experience by ensuring that expatriates feel valued and appreciated. HR professionals, alongside various stakeholders such as line managers, senior managers, and third-party providers, have a significant responsibility in delivering comprehensive support to repatriates. This chapter highlights the importance of organizational support and POS, setting the stage for a comprehensive exploration of repatriation from both organizational and repatriate perspectives in the upcoming chapter. This holistic examination is essential for establishing a comprehensive repatriation program to ensure a successful transition into the home country and organization.

2.2.4. Organization's Perspective on Repatriation Support

Repatriation support holds significant importance for MNCs as highlighted by the researchers Knocke & Schuster (2017). They emphasize that the utilization of repatriate social capital remains an untapped resource that can be beneficial for both employees, and organizations. To effectively address this issue, MNCs should prioritize the development of repatriation support programs that are adapted to the unique needs of individual repatriates (Johnson, 2019; KPMG International, 2022). Such programs should consider the perspectives of various stakeholders involved in the repatriation process (Knocke & Schuster, 2017). Therefore, within the following chapters the organizational perspective and the repatriates' perspectives are explored, offering a comprehensive examination of repatriation support. By delving into these perspectives, the relevant knowledge and insights are uncovered which are essential for optimizing support programs and facilitating successful repatriation transitions.

The rise of global organizations has led to a substantial increase in international assignment, making expatriate management a major research area within the IHRM literature (O'Donohue et al., 2018). IHRM encompasses three broad domains; (1) recruiting and retaining international employees, (2) aligning HRM policies to support international competitive requirements, and (3) developing global professional competencies within organizational HRM functions (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016). The development of global professional competencies is closely tied to the increasing use of expatriate assignments by MNCs for developmental purposes, with the aim to support the overall business and talent development objectives (KPMG International, 2021). However, it is surprising that global mobility programs are not always aligned with the organization's broader talent management initiatives, as highlighted in KPMG's Global Assignment Policies and Practices Survey (KPMG International, 2022). This misalignment can be attributed to the inherent complexity of IHRM, which involves greater organizational involvement in employees' lives, heightened considerations of security and risk, and significant influences from external factors such as national culture and legal differences (O'Donohue et al., 2018).

Given these complexities, international staff development assignments become a critical and delicate issue for MNCs. Hence, companies need to make increased investments into IHRM practices to be able to leverage the promising advantages of international assignments. By aligning global mobility programs with overarching talent management initiatives and addressing the complex challenges posed by international assignments through appropriate support practices, organizations can effectively exploit the promising benefits they offer for their workforce (KPMG International, 2022). However, it is important to note that a higher use of developmental assignments has been associated with increased organizational repatriate turnover. Nonetheless, this relationship becomes insignificant when MNCs implement higher levels of repatriation support practices (Wang, 2023). Therefore, organizations should design global mobility policies that cater

to the needs of expatriates while aligning with the company's talent management strategies and global business goals.

From the organizational perspective, repatriation support refers to offering practices before and after repatriation with the aim to facilitate the homecoming of repatriates (M. Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; M. B. Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). MNCs want to create a feeling of belonging towards the company by providing practical assistance to its returning employees. A parent company's primary motivation is to deteriorate the negative experiences upon return in order to increase the repatriates' intent to stay with their employer and to avoid career derailment, by losing the valuable workforce to their competitors (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). Failing to meet the repatriates' expectations and losing them to competitors is not a wise investment. Thus, improving repatriation support practices becomes critical for MNCs to maximize the benefits of developmental assignments and ensure global competitiveness (Haslberger & Brewster, 2009; Wang, 2023). Therefore, MNCs invest significant effort and resources in expatriation and repatriation processes. These investments include selecting suitable candidates for expatriate positions, providing compensation and motivation through various intrinsic and extrinsic incentives, and preparing employees for future top management roles through developmental assignments (Wang, 2023). It is crucial for MNCs to capitalize on the benefits of developmental repatriates by integrating repatriation support practices, such as providing career planning sessions, facilitating communication about the repatriation process, and signaling the organization's appreciation for international experience (M. Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). These support practices help organizations to maximize the benefits of developmental assignments and ensure global competitiveness (Wang, 2023).

In the context of repatriation support, it is crucial to consider the evolving trends in talent mobility and the changing landscape of international assignments. According to KPMG International (2022), there has been a shift in mobility types over the past five years, with traditional longer-term international assignments decreasing in volume. Instead, shorter-term assignments and permanent/indefinite transfers are becoming more prevalent. Additionally, talent mobility is being coupled with domestic and global virtual assignments, and flexible work options such as hybrid and fully remote work arrangements are continuing to be offered by employers (KPMG International, 2022).

While these changes may result in a more agile workforce and lower program costs compared to traditional expatriate assignments, there are still associated costs, corporate and employee compliance risks, and an ongoing HR duty of care for employees under these alternative mobile work arrangements (KPMG International, 2022). These considerations highlight the need for organizations to adapt their repatriation support practices catering to the specific challenges and requirements posed by these emerging mobility trends. Furthermore, from an organizational

perspective, it is important to acknowledge that not all international assignments have a managerial development or career purpose. Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001) identify three distinct purposes of assignments beyond managerial development, namely functional, technical, and strategic assignments. As a result, career development may not always be a primary focus in the repatriation agenda of MNCs (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021).

2.2.4.1. Typical Support Practices Offered by MNCs (KPMG 2022)

In addition to understanding the evolving landscape of international assignments, it is essential to examine the typical support practices offered by MNCs in the context of repatriation support. By aligning with the changing trends in talent mobility, organizations can tailor their support programs to effectively address the unique needs and challenges faced by repatriates. According to the KPMG 2022 Global Mobility Report. As already touched upon in chapter “2.2.3. Parties Involved in Repatriation Support” multiple parties are engaged in supporting the expatriates on their international assignments; however, the global mobility team plays the most important role in supporting the repatriates. According to the statistics provided by KPMG International (2022), global mobility professionals offer various provisions and services to support employees on short-term and commuter assignments as well as on permanent transfers, which are elaborated in the following.

Home leave is provided for 78% of short-term assignments but only nine percent of permanent transfers, highlighting the disparity in support between the two groups. Host-location housing is offered to a higher percentage of short-term assignees (76%) compared to permanent assignees (27%), underscoring the differential level of support provided for accommodation. Similarly, host-location transportation, excluding what is covered in the allowances of cost-of-living, is extended to 78% of short-term expats but only seven percent of permanent transfers, emphasizing the discrepancy in transportation assistance. A miscellaneous relocation allowance, which covers various relocation-related expenses, is provided to 44% of short-term expats and 65% of permanent transfers, highlighting the contrasting levels of financial support offered. Per diem, a daily allowance to cover additional expenses, is granted to a higher percentage of short-term assignments (83%) compared to permanent transfers (three percent). These statistics show that short-term assignees are rather compensated with daily living expenses, whereas long-term assignees rather receive the financial support in form of miscellaneous allowances. Pre-assignment consultation is provided for a slightly higher percentage of short-term assignments (68%) compared to permanent transfers (64%), illustrating the similarity in support provided for consulting services before assignments. Security briefing is offered to 78% of short-term assignments but only 39% of permanent transfers, emphasizing the discrepancy and the lack of security-related support for long-term expats. Tax consultation and tax return preparation services are provided to both short-term assignments and permanent transfers, with slightly higher

percentages for short-term assignments (61% and 64%), indicating comparable levels of tax-related support. Travel to assignment locations is supported for 67% of short-term assignments and 49% of permanent transfers, suggesting that short-term expats receive more assistance with travel arrangements (KPMG International, 2022)

These statistics reveal a significant difference in support provisions between short-term expats and permanent transfers across various aspects. Short-term assignments receive higher rates of provision for home leave, host-location housing, host-location transportation, per diem, and security briefings. On the other hand, permanent transfers receive more support in terms of a miscellaneous relocation allowance and have similar levels of support for tax-related matters and pre-assignment consultations. It becomes evident that MNCs neglect the support offered to long-term expatriates which represents an urgent need for improvement. To ensure the successful transition and well-being of long-term assignees, it is crucial to focus on enhancing support practices specifically tailored to their needs.

Furthermore, throughout the survey, it was found that a significant percentage of MNCs outsource various aspects of relocation management to external service providers. This includes services such as relocation management (82%), destination services (70%), tax consulting (91%), tax return preparation (89%), and immigration (84%). By outsourcing these services, global mobility professionals can direct their focus towards improving the overall employee experience, engaging in strategic talent planning, and shaping the future workforce. In conclusion, outsourcing different services not only helps organizations achieve successful assignment completions and post-assignment retention but also allows them to demonstrate a return on investment by effectively managing employee mobility costs (KPMG International, 2022).

2.2.4.2. Tailoring Repatriation Support to Individual Needs

Organizations typically face challenges in providing beneficial repatriation support due to the diversity of individuals attending international assignments and the emergence of non-traditional expatriates (McNulty & Hutchings, 2016). The IHRM of MNCs need to pay greater attention to providing support for a range of individual differences, which is of great importance for the success of international assignments (O'Donohue et al., 2018; Renshaw et al., 2021), as already pointed out multiple times within this thesis. It is evident that there is no standard approach to addressing the employee experience during repatriation. What may be stressful, confusing, or necessary for one employee could be irrelevant to another, depending on factors such as age, experiences, and expectations (Johnson, 2019). Thus, while providing repatriation support, organizations should recognize the importance of accommodating individual differences and preferences. The availability of comprehensive information and support, offered in a variety of forms, can contribute to a more successful and satisfactory repatriation process for employees.

According to the KPMG Global Mobility Report 2022, organizations are increasingly adopting the core versus flex policy trend/approach to address this challenge. In fact, 51% of multinational companies currently follow this approach, which involves providing a set of core support provisions while allowing flexibility for individual preferences and needs. In contrast, only 11% of internationally operating companies favor the cafeteria policy trend, which offers a range of choices for either the assignee or the business, and only three percent adopt a points-based approach (KPMG International, 2022). Moreover, the survey participants of the Global Mobility Report highlighted the importance of offering choice and flexibility in support provisions. 52% percent of respondents mentioned that they already include core versus flexible provisions, while 18% indicated a growing trend towards adopting a cafeteria/menu/points-based approach, expanding the range of choices available to assignees or the business. This shift towards enabling expatriates to develop assignment and transfer packages that suit best to their personal needs reflects the increasing prominence of improving the overall employee experience. This is the case since the formation of a positive and tailored experience is crucial for attracting, engaging, developing, and retaining key talent on a global scale (KPMG International, 2022).

Policy flexibility plays a vital role in providing choice and support to mobile employees during relocations and assignments. It allows parent companies to offer compensation and benefits packages that align with the personal needs and expectations of employees, particularly the millennial and Gen Z demographics, who prioritize the overall employee experience (KPMG International, 2022). By recognizing the importance of tailoring repatriation support to individual needs, organizations can optimize their support programs and facilitate successful transitions for repatriated employees. This approach not only enhances global competitiveness but also contributes to the overall satisfaction and well-being of repatriates.

2.2.4.3. Impact and Opportunities of Technology and Analytics

Incorporating technology and analytics into repatriation support practices holds significant potential. Organizations recognize the value of adopting technology and analytics to streamline processes, improve data management, and offer self-service options for employees. Key insights from the KPMG 2022 Global Mobility Report emphasize the impact and opportunities which technology has on global talent mobility. Companies taking part in the survey, seek technology solutions for assignment cost projections, automated initiations, and supporting documents. They value fully integrated platforms as a single source for data, often collaborating with external partners. Mobility analytics contribute to talent retention, speed of deployment, and employee satisfaction. Despite its significance, 63% of organizations do not rely on talent mobility technology. Those leveraging technology focus on administration, data management, cost estimation, compensation collection, and tax calculation tools for global compliance (KPMG International, 2022). Beyond that, considering the expatriates' perspectives, the utilization of

mobility analytics is perceived as a positive contribution to talent retention, speed of talent deployment, and employee satisfaction. Approximately 30% of MNCs reported that they make use of analytics to guide their global talent mobility policy and decision-making. The strategic partnership between global talent mobility and the business is emphasized as the primary value that mobility analytics can bring to organizations, providing a foundation for policy and process decisions (KPMG International, 2022).

From these findings it becomes apparent that the incorporation of technology and analytics into repatriation support practices offer significant potential. Technology solutions enable organizations to enhance the efficiency, accuracy, and accessibility of support services for repatriated employees. Streamlining administrative tasks, providing real-time data and information, and offering self-service options through digital platforms contribute to a smoother and more satisfying repatriation experience. The integration of technology and analytics in repatriation support brings along significant opportunities for companies as well as for expatriates. By tailoring support services to individual needs, streamlining processes, and fostering a supportive environment, organizations can enhance the repatriation experience and decrease turnover. The combination of personalized support practices and technological advancements strengthens organizations' ability to maximize the benefits of global talent mobility initiatives.

2.2.5. Organizational Interests in Repatriation

The importance of repatriation to organizations extends beyond the individual experiences of their repatriated employees. Companies increasingly recognize the value of repatriation support as it directly influences key organizational drivers, such as knowledge transfer and employee retention. These factors motivate companies to invest in comprehensive support programs to facilitate successful repatriation transitions. Before delving into the drivers of organizational interest in repatriation, it is essential to consider the top five operational or assignment-related metrics of importance to internal stakeholders, as outlined in the KPMG 2022 Global Mobility Report. These statistics provide insights into the outcomes that organizations prioritize in relation to repatriation efforts:

1. **Assignment costs:** 84% of internal stakeholders consider tracking and managing assignment costs as a top priority. This metric reflects the financial implications associated with repatriation and the need to optimize resource allocation.
2. **Budget vs. actual costs:** 61% of stakeholders emphasize the importance of monitoring and comparing budgeted costs with actual expenses. By doing so organizations can assess the accuracy of their financial planning and identify areas for cost optimization.

3. **Employee satisfaction:** 57% of stakeholders value measuring employee satisfaction during and after repatriation. This indicator gauges the effectiveness of support programs and the overall well-being of repatriated employees.
4. **Attrition and retention rates after repatriation:** 41% of stakeholders focus on tracking the rates of employee attrition and retention post-repatriation. This provides insights into the success of repatriation efforts in maintaining talent within the organization.
5. **Assignment return-on-investment (ROI):** 39% of stakeholders consider assessing the ROI of assignments as a meaningful measure as it helps organizations to evaluate the value and effectiveness of their investment in global mobility initiatives.

Understanding these top five key performance indicators provides a foundation for comprehending the desired outcomes that organizations seek to achieve through their repatriation endeavours. They serve as a foundation for comprehending the desired outcomes that organizations seek to achieve through their repatriation endeavours. Beyond these outcomes, two principal factors emerge as key drivers from the research conducted within this thesis: knowledge transfer and retention. By conducting a thorough examination of these drivers, organizations can optimize their support programs and foster an environment conducive to successful repatriation transitions. The following section explores the significance and implications of knowledge transfer, organizational commitment, and retention in the context of effective repatriation support.

2.2.5.1. Knowledge Transfer

The transfer of knowledge within MNCs is crucial for gaining a competitive advantage (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Peltokorpi et al., 2022). Knowledge flows in MNCs involve exchanges between headquarters and among different foreign units (Yang et al., 2008). Expatriate assignments play a significant role in facilitating knowledge transfer in internationally operating companies (Adler, 1981; M. B. Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). In the context of repatriation, knowledge transfer emerges as a critical success factor, closely linked to the return-on-investment metric highlighted in the statistics mentioned before. Successful repatriation is achieved when the skills and knowledge acquired overseas are fully utilized and leveraged (Paik, Segaud, and Malinowski, 2002). Sending employees on expatriate assignments fosters their professional development through knowledge acquisition, which can be transformed into a competitive edge if effectively transferred back to the parent company (Herman & Tetrick, 2009; Peltokorpi et al., 2022; Solomon, 1995).

Creating an encouraging organizational environment and implementing supportive practices throughout the expatriation and repatriation process substantially facilitate successful international knowledge transfer (Burmeister & Deller, 2016; Oleškevičiūtė et al., 2022). Offering organizational support before, during, and after expatriation enhances the transfer of knowledge possessed by

repatriates (Burmeister & Deller, 2016; Furuya et al., 2009). Moreover, the international assignments policy indirectly contributes to knowledge transfer by enhancing repatriates' capacity to disseminate knowledge (Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2018). This is the case since MNCs that have well-designed policies foster an environment that enables repatriates to share their acquired knowledge with others in the organization (Oleškevičiūtė et al., 2022). Therefore, organizations have to prioritize support practices that encourage repatriate knowledge transfer to fully make use of the knowledge acquired during international assignments. Research by Burmeister and Deller (2016) shows that knowledge-related debriefing sessions after repatriation and targeted internal communication mechanisms are crucial enablers of repatriate knowledge transfer. In contrast, selection and financial rewards are not considered relevant facilitators of knowledge transfer.

To conclude, the transfer of knowledge gained during international assignments characterizes a crucial driver for organizations' interest in providing repatriation support. By encouraging the professional development of employees through expatriate assignments and ensuring the utilization and effective transfer of acquired knowledge, organizations can gain a competitive advantage in the market. This underlines the significance of understanding the value of knowledge transfer and implementing supportive measures, ultimately enabling businesses to successfully exploit their knowledge assets, which in turn results in improved repatriate empowerment (Knocke & Schuster, 2017).

2.2.5.2. Retention of Repatriates

The repatriation policies and support practices offered by IHRM are crucial for ensuring the retention and attrition rate of repatriates. As previously indicated in the statistical analysis of the key metrics, 41% of internal stakeholders place considerable importance on the retention and attrition rate of repatriates. This interest arises from the understanding that these figures indicate a direct reflection of the effectiveness of the repatriation policies and support practices implemented by IHRM. Furthermore, these metrics are closely associated with the overall satisfaction levels of employees within the organization. Thus, understanding the importance of repatriate retention is essential for organizations aiming to maximize their human capital and achieve long-term success.

For MNCs the continued presence of repatriates within their organization is vital to take advantage of their knowledge, skills, and competencies (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; Herman & Tetrick, 2009). Repatriation serves as a critical stage in the international assignment process because the successful integration of the repatriates' human capital becomes essential for the future success of MNCs (Oddou et al., 2013). However, it is important to acknowledge that individuals ultimately possess ownership of their own skills and abilities (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). Therefore, organizations must prioritize the attraction and retention of talented individuals to achieve their long-term growth objectives. In fact, the Global Mobility Report by KPMG International in 2022

identifies the retention and recruitment of necessary talent as a top operational priority in aligning with three-year growth objectives. While traditionally, the focus was primarily laid on the employees' contributions in the host country, there is a growing recognition of the long-term benefits that repatriates bring upon their return to the home country (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). Retaining repatriates facilitates knowledge transfer, sustains two-way knowledge flows, and preserves the investment made in expatriate assignments and talent management programs (Wang, 2023). Thereby, effective support practices play a critical role in reducing repatriate turnover and its negative consequences. According to research, organizations that offer limited repatriation support practices are more likely to see higher turnover among repatriates, whereas organizations with high levels of support practices act as a buffer, reducing turnover rates (Wang, 2023). By providing comprehensive support throughout the repatriation process, organizations can enhance repatriate satisfaction, engagement, and commitment, thereby reducing turnover and promoting organizational success.

Furthermore, it is important to note that organizational repatriate turnover not only affects the retention of repatriates but also influences the willingness of other employees to embark on international assignments (Wang, 2023). High turnover rates may signal to employees that the organization does not fully value and leverage the expatriate assignment experience and competencies (Wang, 2023). Consequently, repatriation support practices offered by MNCs not only affect the retention of repatriates but also the expatriation willingness of other employees making the provision of support a crucial issue for the IHRM.

2.2.6. Repatriate Perspective on Repatriation Support

Building on the organizational perspective discussed earlier, it is essential to understand the repatriates' viewpoint on support practices to develop a comprehensive understanding on the significance of repatriation support and its implications. This section aims to shed light on how expatriates perceive their companies' organizational support practices during the repatriation processes.

Repatriation poses numerous challenges for expatriates, including personal, professional, and socio-cultural aspects. According to earlier research, Fuchs (2021), these challenges typically arise from changes in personal identity, cultural and social environments, as well as organizational changes. They can lead to a weakened link between repatriates and home companies, resulting in a misfit and reduced career opportunities. Further challenges include the loss of specialized corporate knowledge, job depletion, strained corporate relationships, reduced living standards, and cultural identity change. If these difficulties are not addressed properly, they can lead to high turnover rates, loss of valuable workforce, and decreased organizational performance (Fuchs, 2021). Given the potential consequences of ineffective repatriation support, it is crucial for companies to understand the repatriates' perspective and provide them with suitable assistance

throughout their repatriation experience. Organizations can achieve maximum benefits from international assignments and enhance long-term organizational success by ensuring that repatriates are satisfied, reducing attrition, and effectively utilizing their knowledge and skills. Therefore, in the following sections, the repatriates' perspective on various aspects of repatriation support is elaborated in more detail, including career success and career derailment, the role of organizational policies, readjustment, the influence of money and career prospects, and strategies for optimizing support programs.

2.2.6.1. Career Success vs. Career Derailment

To further explore the repatriates' perspective on support practices, it is important to consider various factors that influence their perceptions of organizational support and their decision to stay or leave the organization. One significant factor associated with career success is job embeddedness, which captures the contextual and perceptual forces that bind individuals to their job and organization (Meuer et al., 2019). Job embeddedness reflects a sense of connection, commitment, and fulfillment in an employee's career, containing factors such as organizational fit, social connections, and job satisfaction. In opposition, the factor that can be associated with career derailment is turnover intention, which refers to the likelihood of repatriates voluntarily leaving the organization (Cave et al., 2022; Hom et al., 2012). High turnover intention indicates dissatisfaction, disengagement, or a lack of alignment with the organization, highlighting a potential derailment in an employee's career. Studies have shown that repatriate turnover intention is influenced by causes such as the organization's value of international assignments, availability of career planning, and occurrence of significant changes within the organization (Stroh, 1995).

To further examine the interplay between support practices and career outcomes, past research by Cave et al. (2022) and Hurn (1999) has shown that repatriates who experience disappointment in their treatment upon return, such as lack of promotions or unclear job positions, often express negative feelings, and low satisfaction levels. Moreover, repatriates may feel a loss of autonomy and independence, commonly referred to as "micromanaging" of expatriates (Storti, 2003). Building on the research on career success by Gaio Santos and Martins (2021), the researchers have identified career-push motives which increase the repatriate turnover intention including (1) lack of developmental career opportunities, (2) financial and employment insecurity, and (3) breach of recognition and affection (Gaio Santos & Martins, 2021). These findings emphasize the importance of aligning organizational support practices with repatriates' career goals and aspirations.

The concept of job embeddedness in contrast can be seen as a representative factor for career success as it provides a comprehensive understanding of the forces that bind individuals to their work environment. Job embeddedness accounts for both contextual and perceptual factors that influence the repatriates' commitment to their jobs and organizations (Meuer et al., 2019). It

encompasses the extent to which individuals feel connected to their work location, colleagues, and work-related issues. Job embeddedness theory suggests that the perception of support from the organization can serve as a buffering effect on career derailment (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). Thus, if organizations demonstrate care and provide support, repatriates are less likely to be affected by career derailment. Even if returnees perceive that their position and responsibilities have decreased, their feelings of deprivation can be compensated if they receive the attention and support they think they deserve from the organization (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). Additionally, the acknowledgment of repatriates' international assignment experience by the organization can mitigate the negative relationship between psychological contract breach and career derailment (Ren et al., 2013). Psychological contracts refer to the unwritten expectations, beliefs and obligations between employees and their organizations (Rousseau, 1995). Beyond that, research on career success by Gaio Santos and Martins (2021) identified repatriates' career-pull motives that encourage repatriates to stay with their employer namely; (1) recognition and affection, (2) financial and employment security, (3) developmental career opportunities, and (4) career advancement (Gaio Santos & Martins, 2021).

Considering the concepts of job embeddedness and turnover intention as representative factors for career success and career derailment, provides an understanding of the dynamics that influence the repatriates' perspectives on repatriation support. These influential factors highlight the importance of aligning organizational support practices with repatriates' career goals and aspirations, as reflected in their job embeddedness. By developing a sense of connection, commitment, and fulfillment, organizations can mitigate turnover intention and enhance repatriates' career success.

2.2.6.2. Organizational Support Policies

In the preceding chapter, titled "2.2.1. The Concept of Organizational Support", the significance of organizational support in facilitating a smooth return home for repatriates has already been extensively discussed (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; M. Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; M. B. Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). The chapter highlighted practical assistance, care, and integrated expatriation and repatriation management as crucial components of organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Wan, 2019; Wang, 2023). Building upon these insights, this subchapter is focusing on the specific role of organizational policies in shaping repatriates' perceptions and the subsequent impact on their homecoming experience.

Organizational policies and practices have a big influence on repatriates' perceptions of whether their psychological contracts have been fulfilled or breached upon their return. The findings of Aldossari and Robertson (2018) highlight the importance of well-defined and explicit HR policies and practices, particularly in terms of career development and promotion, to ensure that repatriates perceive that their psychological contracts are fulfilled (Aldossari & Robertson, 2018).

Transparency and clarity in HR policies throughout all stages of international assignments are vital in managing repatriates' expectations and fostering a sense of fulfillment upon their return. Moreover, the effectiveness of repatriation support practices is influenced by repatriates' perceived importance of such practices for successful repatriation (Wang, 2023). Tailoring support programs to the needs and expectations of repatriates can enhance their effectiveness and facilitate a smoother reintegration process (Wang, 2023). Considering individual differences in motives, cultural identity, and personality traits when designing and implementing repatriation support programs is essential (Knocke & Schuster, 2017). This aspect has been previously discussed in chapter "2.2.4.2. Tailoring Repatriation Support to Individual Needs". By optimizing support programs based on these factors, organizations can successfully reintegrate valuable employees into their organizations.

Additionally, it is important to be aware of the holistic aspects of repatriation beyond the logistical move. Neglecting factors such as the employee's career, onboarding, family adjustment, and utilizing international experience can have detrimental effects on employee retention, morale, and productivity (Johnson, 2019). Thus, to leverage the international experience of repatriates, companies should design and implement organizational policies that provide career development opportunities, foster attachment to the parent company, and moderate stress levels upon return. Considering the different perspectives on repatriation success between assignees and the organization, as highlighted by Paik, Segaud, and Malinowski (2002) and Chiang et al. (2018), allows the IHRM to align their policies with individual aspirations and organizational objectives. This includes aspects such as retention, performance, network, and relationship building, and knowledge transfer. Effective organizational policies and practices, guided by the principles mentioned above, contribute to managing psychological contracts, meeting repatriates' expectations, and facilitating successful repatriation and international assignments. Transparency, clarity, and a comprehensive understanding of repatriates' needs and expectations are crucial in managing their psychological contracts and enabling a positive repatriation experience.

2.2.6.3. Readjustment

Organizational support is essential for facilitating repatriates' readjustment after international assignments. This involves the establishment of support systems and policies that address the various challenges repatriates face during their readjustment process. Organizations can significantly enhance repatriates' work satisfaction, commitment, and retention by actively supporting their psychological and socio-cultural transition, leveraging their valuable skills and knowledge (Paik et al., 2002). It is crucial to recognize that repatriation adjustment plays a pivotal role in reducing repatriates' intention to leave, ultimately contributing to their long-term retention within the organization (James & Azungah, 2020). Figure 3 in chapter "2.1.6.1. Overview of Readjustment Triggers in Repatriation" provides a visual representation of the numerous triggers

that influence repatriates' readjustment, highlighting the importance for organizations to be aware of these factors.

In understanding the various readjustment triggers, it is important to recognize the significant role of the overall organizational approach to the repatriation process. This includes aspects such as planning the physical transfer, providing financial compensation packages, offering support through corporate mentors or sponsors, and delivering pre- and post-return training programs that aid in the psychological transition of repatriates (Chiang et al., 2020; Herman & Tetrick, 2009). These organizational triggers greatly impact repatriates' work readjustment, career satisfaction, and workplace retention (MacDonald & Arthur, 2005; Sussman, 2011). Moreover, socio-cultural adjustment also plays a key role in repatriates' work readjustment. To ease this aspect, the provision of cross-cultural training, as part of the pre- and post-return training programs, is highly recommended (Lo & Nguyen, 2023; Osman-Gani & Hyder, 2008). These trainings help repatriates in readjusting to their home country and enable corporate trainers to understand individual concerns and expectations, promoting alignment with organizational realities and easing the transition process (Howe-Walsh & Torka, 2017; Hyder & Lövblad, 2007). Recognizing the significance of readjustment to the home country's socio-cultural environment, organizations should encourage active interaction between repatriates and their home-based sponsors/mentors, co-workers, families, friends, and the local compatriot community (Jayasekara, 2021; Mao & Shen, 2015). Maintaining and strengthening repatriates' connections to their home culture facilitates their post-repatriation experiences and reduces stress (Fischlmayr & Kopecek, 2015; Paik et al., 2002). Furthermore, trainers should be mindful of the importance of cultural identity change and its consequences for self-concept, work satisfaction and work performance among repatriates (Lo & Nguyen, 2023; Sussman, 2001). Overall, the IHRM must be aware of all the different readjustment triggers shown in Figure 3, to be able to provide expedient support to its repatriates and to positively contribute to their repatriates' POS. Subsequently, adequate preparation, planning, and support are crucial to ensuring a smooth and successful readjustment, thereby serving as positive triggers for organizational readjustment.

2.2.6.4. Career Prospects

The career prospects of repatriates hold significant importance in the overall repatriation support process. Research suggests while compensation alone might not be a comparable measure due to variations in expatriate salaries, changes in responsibility emerge as a critical factor for repatriates (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; Suutari & Tornikoski, 2001). Former expatriates commonly expect career development as a reward for their efforts overseas. However, many repatriates experience career derailment, where their positions may have less hierarchical value and responsibility compared to before or during their international assignments (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; Kraimer et al., 2009; Suutari & Brewster, 2003). To address the

effects of career derailment, MNCs should ensure that repatriates perceive better promotion opportunities, autonomy, and compensation compared to their colleagues without international assignment experience. By creating a positive social comparison for repatriates, organizations can mitigate the negative impact of career derailment on their perception of organizational practices (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). It is crucial for repatriates to perceive a competitive advantage and improved prospects compared to non-expatriate peers, as international assignments are viewed as an investment into long-term career prospects (Bader, 2017; Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; McNulty et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the positions held by repatriates during the international assignment often become the reference point for evaluating their career development (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2009; Kraimer et al., 2009). Consequently, organizations must consider the discrepancy between these positions and the roles offered upon repatriation to address potential feelings of career derailment. Failure to do so can result in repatriates perceiving their positions as inadequate, leading to lower job satisfaction and reduced commitment to the organization. However, research suggests that the career of former expatriates rarely evolves as expected upon their return (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021) often resulting in career derailment (Aldossari & Robertson, 2018).

Career derailment can be examined from subjective and objective perspectives. Subjective career outcomes relate to individual career satisfaction, whereas objective career outcomes include tangible aspects such as organizational rank, compensation, and responsibility (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). A multifaceted assessment of career outcomes allows organizations to identify areas where derailment may occur and implement strategies to reduce its negative effects (Shaffer et al., 2012; Wanniarachchi et al., 2022). Considering that repatriates expect career development and may feel entitled to it due to their international experience and knowledge acquisition, experiencing career derailment can lead to negative feelings (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). Hence, MNCs should provide comprehensive repatriation support, including career planning sessions before and during the repatriation process. Continuous communication can help decrease insecurities and facilitate agreement on the repatriates' positions prior to their return (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; Burmeister & Deller, 2016).

In addition to career development, monetary acknowledgment also plays a vital role in repatriates' perception of their career prospects. While protean careers are increasingly value-driven, monetary acknowledgment upon repatriation remains important to express recognition for repatriates' contributions. Higher compensation can acknowledge their efforts without creating new job opportunities (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; M. Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). Therefore, organizations should consider both career development opportunities and appropriate compensation as integral components of repatriation support to effectively address repatriates'

career prospects (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). Thus, it can be concluded that career prospects of repatriates significantly impact their perception of repatriation support. By addressing career derailment, providing career planning sessions, and considering compensation, organizations can improve repatriates' job satisfaction, commitment, and intent to stay.

2.2.7. A Literature-Based Repatriation Program

The examination of the organizations and the repatriates' perspective made it evident that support practices play a crucial role in ensuring the successful repatriation of expatriates from their foreign assignments. It is important to note that repatriation does not solely begin upon the expatriates' return home. Previous research (Fuchs, 2021) has revealed that repatriation should be considered throughout the entire process to increase the intention to stay with their employer. Therefore, a well-planned repatriation process should already start prior to departure. Organizations should provide support to their repatriates during their stay abroad, with particular emphasis given on the period briefly before the expatriates' return home, as well as after their return. The visual illustration depicted in Figure 4, indicates the recommended extent of repatriation support in which the sending company should accompany their repatriates. This four-phase funnel serves to facilitate the repatriates' readjustment to their home country and company by providing comprehensive support throughout the entire repatriation process.

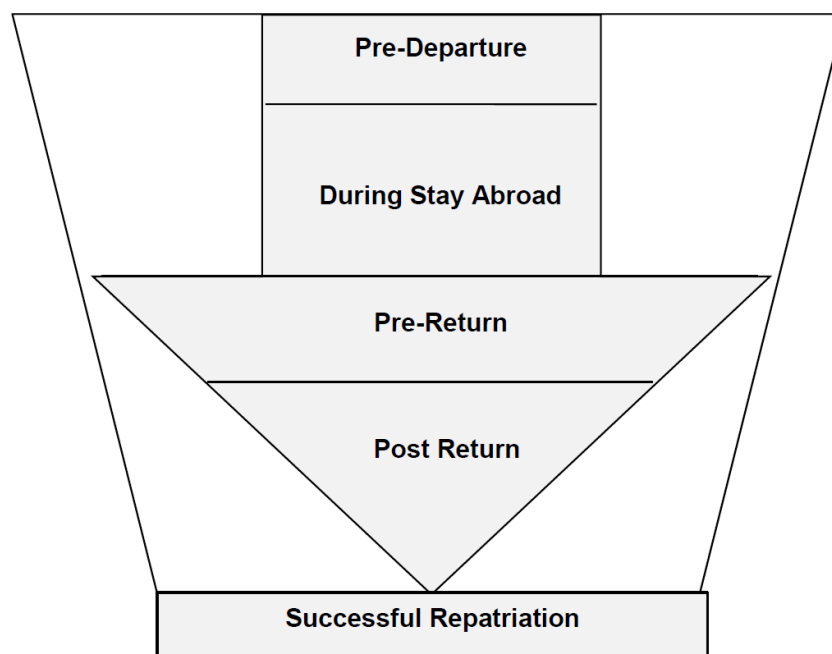


Figure 3: Four-Phase Funnel for Enhanced Repatriation (Fuchs, 2021, p. 59).

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, a preliminary repatriation program is presented, informed by the findings of the conducted literature review within the thesis. The suggested repatriation program is based on the four-phase funnel illustrated in Figure 4, which aims to

enhance the repatriates' homecoming through the implementation of holistic and thorough support measures. By adopting this program, organizations can actively contribute to the smooth readjustment of their returning expatriates, fostering their seamless integration back into the home country and company.

2.2.7.1. Prerequisites for Repatriation Support

A successful repatriation process largely depends on the support provided by the home organization to expatriates and their families. To ensure a smooth and facilitated return home, organizations must implement a repatriation program that eases the transition phase and enables a successful readjustment process. Effective preparation for the repatriation phase is paramount, which involves the implementation of repatriation policies. By ensuring clarity and a comprehensive understanding of repatriates' needs and expectations, organizations can create a positive repatriation experience that increases the expatriates' organizational commitment and reduces turnover intentions. Moreover, offering support to repatriates allows organizations to take a proactive approach in assisting their readjustment process, ensuring a smooth transition in terms of psychological and socio-cultural aspects. This successful transition benefits the repatriates and the organizations. This is the case, since such support positively contributes to employees' perceived organizational support, fostering commitment, a sense of belonging, trust, positive work attitudes, improved work performance, job satisfaction, and reduced employee turnover. However, the lack of availability of repatriation support practices in MNCs remains a critical area that requires improvement. Considering this, in the following Table 1, a preliminary repatriation program is established based on extensive literature research. The program aims to enhance the support provided by organizations to their repatriates and bridge the gap in existing practices. In developing the suggested repatriation program, it is important to note that it should be tailored to the individual needs of each repatriate and formalized through a written agreement between the expatriate and the company. Flexibility in support provisions is crucial, enabling expatriates to design assignment and transfer packages that best suit their personal needs while accommodating individual differences and preferences. Additionally, it is important to mention that HR and global mobility professionals play a vital role in providing assistance to returning employees. Ideally, the HR manager and the assigned mentor accompanying the returning employee should possess experience with international assignments. Other important stakeholders, such as line managers, senior managers, mentors, and third-party providers, also have significant responsibilities in delivering comprehensive support to repatriates. Typically, HR managers often delegate important administrative tasks to third-party providers, such as immigration counsel, tax advisors, or relocation agencies. The suggested tailored repatriation program based on existing literature, as seen in Table 1, aims to support expatriates during their repatriation process and contribute to the long-term success and competitiveness of organizations.

2.2.7.2. Preliminary Repatriation Support Program

Repatriation Support Program	
Prior Departure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alignment of motivations and expectations between company and expatriate - Agreement on career development and assurance of job position upon return - Informing expatriate about content of repatriation support and formal policies - Assignment of home-base mentor - Tax consultation
During Stay Abroad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continuous communication - Home-base mentoring - Perceived support provided by company (communication, home-visits, networking opportunities)
Pre-Return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased contact (with mentor and assigned HR manager) - Reintegration interview (including establishment of tailored repatriation program) - Career counselling/job planning - Pre-return training for repatriate and family (including cultural training) - Planning of physical relocation (financial and organizational support services) - Pre-return tax consultation
Post-Return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Temporary working hour reduction - Re-introduction welcome event at home company - Debriefing interview between repatriate and HR manager - Post return repatriation training (including cultural training) for repatriate and family - Re-entry knowledge debriefing - Assignment of job position (career promotion) where repatriate can use acquired knowledge

Table 1: Preliminary Repatriation Support Program (Modified from Fuchs, 2021, p. 72).

3. Methodology

After an extensive insight into the existing theoretical literature, the next step of this master's thesis is to gather empirical data. The purpose for collecting empirical data is to gain a thorough understanding of the research topic of repatriation by supporting the theoretical literature with real-life practices. With the empirical research, this thesis shall contribute to the existing research on repatriation and expand the knowledge of repatriation support for researchers and HR practitioners in MNCs. Thus, the empirical part of this thesis has two main objectives. On the one hand, it aims to investigate how international companies develop repatriation programs that align with their organizational interests while meeting the needs of their employees. On the other hand, it aims to find out how expatriates perceive the repatriation support provided by their companies. The following chapter covers the overall research approach of the empirical research, including the chosen target population, sampling technique, data collection method, and data analysis process.

3.1. Research Approach

Empirical research aims to systematically apply procedures to develop theories, gather evidence, and address problems (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). The process of moving from problem identification to producing reliable outcomes relies on empirical research. The data collection in research can be conducted through either qualitative or quantitative methods. Quantitative research examines the relationship between theory and research and generally adopts a deductive approach to test theories. In contrast qualitative research follows an interpretivist epistemological approach, seeking to understand and interpret the social world. It employs an inductive, descriptive, and holistic approach (Bell et al., 2022). Through inductive research, theories are generated based on collected observations to identify patterns, and to develop a conceptual framework (Saunders et al., 2019). This framework is tested in the business world, providing practical insights and theoretical generalizations.

In the context of repatriation, the quantitative approach has been prominent in the past, but in recent years the qualitative research has increased (Knocke & Schuster, 2017). Since repatriation is a rather sensitive and personal topic, using quantitative research would bring along the risk of low response rates and inaccurate responses, thus the qualitative approach seems to be more promising for this thesis. To gather primary data, the research method of qualitative interviews is chosen for this thesis as they provide descriptive detail and help to understand social behaviour and contextual understanding of repatriation (Bell et al., 2022). This approach enables to fully focus on the needs of the returnees and to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. Additionally, qualitative interviews can capture respondents' attitudes and emotions which allows a more detailed investigation of their perspectives and more comprehensive and valuable

responses (Bell et al., 2022). In the field of qualitative research methods, the use of semi-structured interviews is the most widely used empirical approach in repatriation literature (Knocke & Schuster, 2017). Therefore, this thesis uses the well-established method of conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews as they provide a flexible way to capture rich and contextual information. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to adapt the questions based on the respondents' answers which enables a deeper exploration of their perspectives while covering the key elements of the research questions through an interview guideline.

3.2. Research Sample

The research sample of this thesis consists of ten interviewees from three companies operating in Lower Austria. The research objective of this thesis is to find out how parent companies can support their expatriates during their repatriation while aligning with their organizational interests. This points out the relevance of examining both, the company's perspective to learn about the organizational and strategic importance of repatriation support, as well as the expatriates' experiences of the organizational support practices provided to them. Thus, to be able to answer the research questions it is crucial to explore the often-diverging perspectives of the two parties involved (Valk, 2022). An effective support system can only be established if companies can meet the expectations and needs of the repatriates, enabling a smooth return home. Therefore, to gain a holistic understanding, it is necessary to conduct empirical research with repatriates as well as with organizational stakeholders (HR/ global mobility experts/managers) that oversee the planning of the entire repatriation process. Moreover, the researchers Knocke & Schuster (2017) confirm the necessity of including HR professionals into the research sample, as past studies in repatriation predominantly focused on the individual-level data collection. By adopting an interpretivist view, this study aims to explore the experiences of the returnees and the organizational perspective on repatriation support. The research sample consists of ten interviewees and is designed to include at least one HR professional and one repatriate from each of the selected companies. Precisely, the sample includes four HR/global mobility professionals and six repatriates, all linked to companies that maintain a presence in Lower. A more detailed overview of the companies represented within the research sample is described in subchapter "3.2.1. Overview of Participating Companies".

With the aim of the study in mind, the guidelines for purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) were followed, which is a type of non-probability sampling. This approach involves the deliberate selection of individuals that possess specific characteristics, experiences, or qualities relevant to the research objective. This sampling technique was chosen due to the small sample size, as it allows to select cases that are particularly informative (Saunders et al., 2019). The interviewees, in particular HR or global mobility professionals, were identified through a public search on LinkedIn, focusing on individuals whose job profiles indicated that they work for companies

operating in Lower Austria. This approach facilitated to consequently apply the snowball sampling technique to develop a sample that could address the research questions. The HR professionals who were interested in participating in the master's thesis built a bridge to the repatriates who had completed expatriate assignments within their respective companies. The snowball sampling technique proved valuable in this study, as it is commonly used when identifying participants from the desired population is challenging, particularly in cases like this, where the researcher had a limited personal network. Additionally, the sample size was determined based on theoretical saturation, meaning that additional interviews did not generate new theoretical insights (Bell et al., 2022).

3.2.1. Overview of Participating Companies

In the following, a brief overview of the three participating companies is provided. These companies were the primary sources from which the HR/global mobility professionals and repatriates, who represent the target sample of this study, were selected. The objective of this section is to present a concise description of each company, highlighting their industry, global operations, and the length of their expatriate assignments.

Company A: is a major Austrian industrial player operating in the oil, gas, petrochemistry, and recycling industry. The MNC is located in Lower Austria and employs about 22,300 employees. It serves customers in over 120 countries through its extensive network of approximately 130 subsidiaries worldwide. The company is operating in the Middle East, North Africa, Asia-Pacific, the Americas but has its major focus on the European market. In July 2023, the organization had a global network of about 350 expatriates. Most of the international assignments typically span from one to five years. However, the company occasionally provides expatriates the opportunities to go on foreign assignments that last less than one year, with a minimum of three months.

Company B: is a plastics manufacturer operating in the petrochemical industry and also located in Lower Austria. The global player is represented across five continents in 120 countries, has 62 subsidiaries and employs about 7,600 employees. It is important to note that Company B operates as a subsidiary of Company A. However, following a recent merger and acquisition, their operations are not harmonized yet. As a result, the management of expatriates and repatriates within the two companies differs and therefore, the two firms are treated as two different legal entities within this thesis. In July 2023, the company had a network of 95 expatriates worldwide. The international assignments in company B typically have a standard duration between three to five years.

Company C: is a well-established plant equipment manufacturer in the food processing industry. Its headquarters is located in Switzerland, but a very important strategic location is situated in Lower Austria. With an extensive global presence, the company is represented in over 140

countries, holds around 50 subsidiaries, and employs around 12,500 individuals worldwide. The company's extensive network, consisting of 100 service stations, over 30 manufacturing sites, and 25 application centers, highlights its significance in the industry. The widespread global presence implies the importance of sending expatriates on international assignments, both short-term and long-term. The short-term assignments last between four months up to one year and the long-term assignments between one to five years. Company C currently employs around 120 expatriates around the world.

Furthermore, these three companies were chosen for this thesis due to their extensive global presence and their equally significant network of expatriates abroad. The selection of companies with comparable characteristics, such as industry and size, was made to create a context within which the nuances of repatriation support can be explored. This context provides a foundation for the data collection process, which allows a more focused and meaningful investigation of the repatriation support within their organizational settings.

3.3. Data Collection

In preparation for the formal interviews, a pilot interview was conducted with a female repatriate from another company operating in the communication and information systems sector. This was done to ensure the precision and clarity of the interview questions. This preliminary interview served as a validation process before starting the formal interviews with participants from the target research sample, as described in the previous chapter. Importantly, her experiences diverged significantly from the other repatriates in terms of received support, making her insights valuable. Her unique perspective sheds light on the ramifications of lacking a support structure during repatriation, enriching this study with fresh insights into the challenges encountered. The inclusion of the female repatriate highlights a central theme of the thesis: the critical role of repatriation support. Therefore, her responses are included in this thesis as a contrasting example, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of repatriation support across various organizational contexts.

Following the pilot interview, the main data collection process took place. The data for the empirical research was collected through a total of ten semi-structured interviews in English, which served as the working language for the interviewer and most of the interviewees. However, two interviews were conducted in German as the interviewees felt more comfortable talking in their native language. This increased the respondent's comfort and confidence, resulting in increased engagement and more exact responses. The author translated the direct quotations from the German interview which are used within this thesis into English. The interviews followed an interview guideline that ensured consistency and relevance to the research objective, as outlined by Saunders et al. (2019). The qualitative nature of the research involved the use of open-ended

questions, allowing participants to share their perspectives in a narrative format. The interpretive paradigm underpinning this thesis focused on understanding specific situations and experiences, rather than seeking to establish general laws (Primecz, 2020; Welch et al., 2011). The interview guideline included both the organizational perspective, represented by HR professionals, and the perspectives of the repatriates. This enabled a greater correlation between responses and the identification of disparities between perceived organizational repatriation support and performed repatriation practices. The guideline, which can be found in Appendix A, was structured around six main topic areas, which included (1) employees' motivations and expectations, (2) organizational goals, (3) organizational planning of the repatriation process (HR) / received organizational support practices (repatriate), (4) repatriates' homecoming experiences, (5) organizational career planning (HR) / expatriates career prospects and satisfaction (repatriates), and an (6) evaluation of the repatriation program based on the preliminary findings from the literature review (Table 1).

To ensure anonymity, only necessary data about the interview participants is presented in this thesis which can be seen in Table 2. The sample comprises in total four female and six male interview participants. Specifically, three female and one male HR professional(s), and one female repatriate, and five male repatriate(s). The majority of the repatriates in the sample are male which is most probably owed to the chosen industries of the research sample. The interview participants come from the following countries: Austria, Germany, Romania, Scotland, and Switzerland. Four interviews have been conducted with HR professionals, specifically with an HR Business Partners, an HR Manager from the headquarters, a Senior Expert in Global Mobility, and a People and Culture Manager based in the host country. These HR professionals provide multifaceted insights into the HR workforce involved in the entire expatriation cycle. Additionally, the sample includes six interviews with repatriates, drawn from three repatriates of the gas and oil industry, two from the food processing industry, and one participant who served as a pilot interviewee from the communication and information systems industry. The repatriates have completed assignments in the following countries: Brazil, China, Iran, Romania, and USA. Most of the repatriates undertook their international assignments without their spouses and children, except for two, whereby one relocated with his partner and a second one whose partner joined at a later point in time. The average years spent in the host country is two years and eight months. The repatriates hold diverse positions ranging from Senior Geophysicists, Senior Project Managers, and Senior Process Engineers to Leaders in Customer Support and Regional Managers. Data saturation was achieved after conducting ten interviews over a period of nine weeks, indicating that no new information or themes were emerging. The interviews were conducted using the digital platform Microsoft Teams and audio-recorded to facilitate accurate transcription. The average duration of the interviews was 50 minutes ranging from 39 to 59 minutes. All personal data mentioned during the interviews was anonymized to ensure the confidentiality of the interviewees.

Information about Interviews and Participants

Interview Participant	Interview Perspective	Gender	Industry	Job Position (after Assignment)	Destination	Start of Assignment	End of Assignment	Interview Length
1	Repatriate	Female	Communication and Information Systems	Regional Manager	USA	01/2019	02/2021	53 mins
2	Repatriate	Male	Food Processing Industry	Senior Process Engineer	Brazil	02/2020	01/2023	53 mins
3	Global Mobility	Female	Oil and Gas Industry	Senior Expert Global Mobility	-	-	-	39 mins
4	HR	Female	Food Processing Industry	HR Manager	-	-	-	59 mins
5	Repatriate	Male	Food Processing Industry	Team Leader Customer Support	China	01/2018	07/2022	53 mins
6	HR	Female	Oil and Gas Industry	People and Culture Manager	-	-	-	53 mins
7	Repatriate	Male	Oil and Gas Industry	Senior Project Manager	Romania	09/2019	09/2021	45 mins
8	Repatriate	Male	Oil and Gas Industry	Senior Expert Geoscience	Iran	12/2017	11/2018	49 mins
9	Repatriate	Male	Oil and Gas Industry	Senior Exploration Geophysicist	Romania	05/2018	05/2023	49 mins
10	HR	Male	Oil and Gas Industry	Senior Expert HR Business Partner	-	-	-	56 mins

Table 2: Information about Interviews and Participants. Own illustration.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data collected within this research was analyzed using the thematic analysis which followed the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). The thematic analysis was chosen for this thesis as it is a widely used systematic, but yet flexible method for analyzing qualitative data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The preferred analytical approach is particularly useful in qualitative research since it involves searching across a data collection to identify, analyze, and report on repeating patterns that are relevant to answering the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, it allows to understand experiences, thoughts and behaviours across a data set (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). It is a data description approach, but at the same time requires interpretation through selecting codes and generating themes. The thematic analysis framework follows a six-step approach, as shown in Table 3 below, which serves as a roadmap for researchers who are identifying themes and patterns in their qualitative data set. Furthermore, it is important to note that these steps are not strictly linear, but rather concurrent and recursive which involves revising the analyzed data, refining codes, and discovering new connections (Bell et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2019).

Six-Step Framework for Thematic Analysis	
Step 1: Familiarizing Yourself with the Data	Step 4: Reviewing Themes
Step 2: Generating Initial Codes	Step 4: Defining and Naming Themes
Step 3: Searching for Themes	Step 6: Producing the Report/Manuscript

Table 3: Braun & Clarke's Six-Step Framework for Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first step is getting familiar with the data which was achieved through transcribing the interviews and actively reading through them multiple times. During this process the data was also refined by removing transcription errors. Additionally, already during the conduction of the interviews, notes were taken which helped in the later data familiarization and data analysis process. Altogether, 129 pages of typed interview material were analyzed.

In the second step the codes were created. A code is the most basic element of raw data which can be evaluated in a meaningful way (Boyatzis, 1998). The complete coding process comprising two phases, the basic coding, and the fine coding cycle, which facilitated the labeling and categorization of the interview data from the interviews, can be found in Appendix B. This process was done by using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. The coding followed a mixed-method coding approach through deductive as well as an inductive reasoning (Strauss, 1987) which is a combination of research driven and data driven approaches (Boyatzis, 1998). First, the deductive approach was applied by adding codes to the data that were arising from the knowledge gained of the literature review, primarily from the interview guideline and the established

preliminary repatriation program from Table 1. Examples of deductive codes are “Tax consultation”, “Planning of job position” or “Cultural training”. Later, the inductive approach was followed by adding open codes as new themes emerged from the conducted interviews. Some examples for inductive codes are: “Proactive job search”, “HR committee” or “Repatriate insight network”. This resulted in 48 first order categories which were organized into six main categories in the basic coding process.

In the third step, the fine coding cycle, representing the second coding phase, was conducted. This phase involved reviewing the previously coded data and interview transcripts to ensure that all newly introduced codes were consistently applied across every transcript. The first-order categories were then organized by examining the relationships, similarities, and differences among the code categories. Through an iterative process known as interpretive coding, codes with similar meanings were grouped together to determine potential themes. A theme represents a “patterned response or meaning” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82) which is derived from the data and contributes to answering the research question. To identify these themes, the before defined codes were analyzed, combined, and compared by drawing hand-written maps to visually show cross-connections among main themes and subthemes, as suggested by Kiger and Varpio (2020). In this phase, all the themes that represented a potential significance for the thesis were included. Additionally, a theme was created which includes interesting codes that are not as relevant for the research questions. This process resulted in the emergence of five second-order themes and 29 subthemes deducted from a total of 769 codes. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that semantic and latent coding was used to analyze the data. The first coding phase primarily involved semantic coding, the analysis of surface-level meanings. In the final analysis the latent approach was adopted to identify underlying meanings, concepts, or ideas that are not immediately obvious and allowed to delve into deeper interpretation of the data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

The fourth phase consisted of a two-level analytical process (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In the first level analysis, all the codes and data extracts under each theme were analyzed and removed if perceived irrelevant. In the second level analysis, it was evaluated whether the individual themes are well aligned within the dataset and if the thematic map accurately reflects the scope of the data. This evaluation was crucial for establishing the connections between themes and how they relate to the underlying subject of interest. Therefore, the entire dataset was reviewed again to reconsider themes, and to apply additional coding to any new or adjusted themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After the fourth phase, five primary themes and 24 subthemes were left.

In the fifth step, definitions, and descriptions for each theme of the thematic map were created. The names of the final themes were revised and reworded again to make sure that the final definition was matching with the relationship of the subthemes. Additionally, short brief descriptions were assigned and overlapping themes as well as subthemes were identified and

reorganized for the last time. The empirical material was finally organized around four major topics and 16 subtopics which can be seen in Table 4.

In the last and sixth step, the final analysis and presentation of the findings was written up, which can be seen in the next chapter “Chapter 4: Research Findings and Analysis”. This narrative analysis supplemented by data extracts in form of direct quotations has the aim to explain the collected data from the primary research by providing arguments for answering the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Overview of Themes and Subchapters

Organizational Aspects of Expatriate Management	HR Role in Global Talent Management	Organizational Repatriation Support	Expatriates Repatriation Journey
Overview of Expatriate Population and Assignment Durations	HR-Professionals: Tasks, Experience, and Expertise	Expatriation Guidelines, Contracts and Support Measures	Perceived Organizational Support
Purpose and Motivation of Expatriation	Parties Involved in Repatriation Support	Family and Spouse Support	Professional Reintegration
Organizational Interests of Repatriation Support		Communication During Stay Abroad	Homecoming Experience: Social and Cultural Adaptation
Design of Repatriation Policies		Pre-Return Support: Career Path and Job Planning	
Global Mobility Software and Outsourced Solutions		Post-Return Support: Professional Reintegration	
		Contrasting Example: Lack of Support	

Table 4: Overview of Themes and Subchapters. Own illustration.

4. Research Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the findings derived from the qualitative research conducted within this master's thesis. It introduces new concepts and theories of organizational repatriation support that have emerged from research. By incorporating direct quotations from research participants, meaningful connections between the gathered data and theoretical frameworks are established. The chapter highlights and summarizes the core ideas within each of the identified themes obtained from the empirical research. The following four overarching themes resulted from the collected data of the qualitative interviews:

1. Organizational Aspects of Expatriate Management
2. HR Role in Global Talent Management
3. Organizational Repatriation Support
4. Expatriates Repatriation Journey

Additionally, both commonalities and disparities between the identified themes within the data are explored, offering discussions on the underlying themes. The central focus of this chapter is how parent companies can support their expatriates throughout the repatriation process, with the dual objective of enhancing the homecoming experience for expatriates while aligning with its strategic interests.

4.1. Organizational Aspects of Expatriate Management

To gain a comprehensive understanding of how the interviewed companies manage their expatriates, this section begins by examining their expatriate population and the duration of their international assignments. Subsequently, the organizational objectives and the employees' primary motivations for embarking on expatriate assignments are explored, to get an insight into the driving forces behind both individual and organizational endeavours. Additionally, this segment examines the organizational interests of providing repatriation support and how repatriation policies are designed within the research sample. Lastly, the technical integrations and outsourced services employed by the interviewed companies to facilitate their organizational planning and operations are described.

4.1.1. Overview of Expatriate Population and Assignment Durations

The three companies examined in this thesis share a comparable expatriate presence around the world, with their expatriate communities ranging from 100 to 350 individuals. To be more accurate, Company A takes the lead with a strong global presence employing 350 expatriates. In contrast, Company B counts 95 expatriates and Company C has a similar-sized expatriation population of 120 employees, including 20 short-term assignments. Although all three companies offer short-term assignments, the predominant nature of expatriate assignments across these organizations

is long-term, typically spanning durations of one to five years. In fact, one HR professional involved in the organization of expatriate assignments within the European Union mentioned that expatriates are generally not allowed to stay longer than five years in a country. Consequently, her organization plans for a maximum assignment duration of five years. Typically, the standard duration of international assignments is between one to five years, with few short-term assignments lasting less than one year.

Furthermore, it was found out that the assignment length is usually determined by organizational requirements rather than immigration considerations. Occasional variations in assignment durations can arise due to factors such as regulatory requirements and the organization's strategic objectives in each host country. This is the case because durations of international assignments often align with specific business needs in the host countries, which can be influenced by various factors, such as local employment targets or regulations. For example, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), there is a policy known as Emiratisation. This policy aims to increase the participation of Emirati citizens in the country's workforce, especially in higher-level and leadership positions. Emiratisation requires foreign companies operating in the UAE to employ a certain number of Emirati nationals in managerial roles. To meet these targets, assignments for non-Emirati nationals may intentionally be kept shorter, allowing local talent to take on critical roles and fulfill these objectives. Consequently, such specific requirements could affect the duration of assignments and the selection of assignees.

Looking at the duration of expatriate assignments within the research sample of this thesis, it was revealed that the duration of expatriation among interviewees ranged from 11 months to five years, with an average assignment length of approximately two years and eight months. Thus, the interview sample falls into the range of the expatriation standard duration. After repatriation, individuals spent varying time periods at home, ranging from three months to five years. Specifically, three out of the six interviewees had recently repatriated, with durations between three months to 11 months. One interviewee had repatriated two years ago, and another five years ago. Therefore, the average time spent at home after repatriation is approximately 1.22 years. It is worth noting that one interviewee stated that it typically takes about one year to settle in and establish a routine after repatriation, further reinforcing the consistency of this average time frame.

4.1.2. Purpose and Motivation of Expatriation

International assignments are a dynamic interplay between organizational needs and employees' personal goals. To initiate an expatriate assignment, two key factors must align: a business need and an individual's desire to engage with foreign cultures and the challenges of working abroad. Only if these two conditions harmonize, an expatriate assignment becomes reality. Hence, the purpose of expatriate assignments is twofold: addressing an immediate business need, such as project demands or cross-border task transfers, while simultaneously investing into an employee's

development. Within this chapter the organizational and the employees' objectives behind expatriation are explored.

4.1.2.1. Organizational Purpose of Expatriation

Expatriate assignments ideally strike a balance between meeting organizational strategic needs and the development of future leaders to make the most out of an assignment. Through empirical research of this thesis, it was found out that the organizational purpose behind offering expatriate assignments can be classified into four categories: (1) business need, (2) skill-based assignment (3) talent development, and (4) experience-seeker assignments. While the specifics of these assignments may vary across different organizations, these four categories emerge as main drivers for sending employees abroad. Typically, at least one of these categories must be fulfilled so that an assignment can take place. However, MNCs usually strive to achieve multiple objectives at the same time by carefully selecting their expatriate employees.

Business Need: The primary and foundational reason behind international assignments, as emphasized by all interviewees, is the existence of a clear business need. Expatriate assignments are often initiated to address specific business requirements, such as fulfilling project demands, overcoming skill shortages, or handling international market expansions. These assignments are essential for the effective functioning of the organization and the successful execution of its strategic objectives. They typically occur when there is a specific business requisite, such as transferring activities from one country to another or fulfilling a particular need within the organization.

Skill-based Assignments: Skill-based assignments, which constitute the majority of assignments, are focused on quickly filling specialized roles, transferring essential knowledge, and addressing specific project demands. These assignments always represent a business need and are initiated to meet the organizations' needs for specific skills, ensuring operational efficiency and the availability of the right talent. They also serve as a recruitment strategy to identify suitable candidates for projects requiring specific skills, particularly in skill-demanding industries. Usually open positions are posted, and interested employees are free to apply. This approach allows organizations to find the best resources and allocate employees to projects where their skills are needed most. As emphasized by a global mobility senior expert:

Most of the situations are occurring when there is an opening, and it's just a recruitment process, people are free to apply for this position. And it is used especially for finding suitable candidates in projects where specific skills are required. In energy fields we need engineers, drilling engineers or some specific skills that are required, and this is the only way to identify the best resource to allocate to a project. (Interviewee 3)

Talent Development: Expatriation also serves as a valuable tool for employee development, especially for individuals in management positions. It provides employees with unique opportunities to broaden their horizons, adapt to new mentalities, and develop exceptional cultural awareness – experiences often unattainable when staying in the home country. Such assignments are widely viewed as career development opportunities, enabling employees to enhance their skills through exposure to international work environments and boosting their professional growth. This career development approach is adopted in all three companies studied and confirmed by the following quotes:

Sometimes there are cases where managers are foreseeing a development need for their top performers and then they are proposing an international assignment to develop those to expose them to an international environment. Then they usually come back and proceed to other positions. (Interviewee 3)

I feel it's always appreciated if people in management positions have broadened their horizons a little bit by working abroad for some time. [...] It's just a once in a lifetime experience when it comes to cultural awareness, to adapt to completely new mentalities. (Interviewee 4)

Experience Seeker Assignments: In response to the evolving desires of the younger employees, one organization has introduced an assignment called "experience seeker". While these assignments are not primarily driven by a business need, they cater to employees seeking unique life experiences, personal growth, and adventures. The focus is on providing opportunities for employees to gain diverse experiences beyond their regular roles, aligning with talent attraction and retention strategies, especially for younger generations. The HR manager explains the reason for introducing this new type of assignment in the following:

We recently also rolled out the experience seeker assignment. So, for people, mainly the younger generation, that really seeks for sort of an adventure, where maybe the business need is not necessarily the main reason why somebody wants to go abroad. But we still want to push them a little bit and give them the chance to experience something new. So, then we're talking a little about the business and giving the people the opportunity [...] employees that are proactively seeking for it. That's like a win-win situation for both [...] I think nowadays, especially with the younger generation, you have to be creative, you have to find a way and really listen to their needs, to what they require to really find an employer attractive and to stay loyal to the employer. (Interviewee 4)

The interplay between business needs, employee development, skill-based requirements, and experience-driven motivations reveal the many reasons for organizations to send their employees abroad. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for organizations aiming to seize the full potential of their global talent and achieve sustainable growth.

4.1.2.2. Employee's Motivation for Expatriation

The employees' motivations for engaging in international assignments are shaped by individual aspirations, encompassing both personal and professional goals. In the context of this research, a spectrum of motivations among employees have been identified, ranging from seeking new experiences to career development and financial incentives. A thorough examination of the employee motivations has revealed five major themes. These are presented in order of their frequency and significance as expressed by the repatriates and are discussed in more detail in the following.

Cultural Immersion and Personal Growth: The predominant motivation, shared by five out of six employees, was the desire to immerse themselves in new cultures, learn different languages, and broaden their horizons. These individuals viewed international assignments to step out of their comfort zones and achieve personal and professional growth. The majority of the employees had a strong interest in the culture of their assigned host country. Even those without prior personal connection through previous business or personal travels, were curious and eager to learn about their new host country. As expressed by one interviewee:

For me, South America was simply appealing in terms of culture and everything that comes with it, right? You inevitably have to learn a new language... And for me back then, it was actually less about money; it was quite clear that it was a personal fulfillment or a part of my bucket list. (Interviewee 2)

Career Advancement: Career development was another prominent motivation which was mentioned by four out of six interview participants. Employees saw international assignments as a way to advance in their careers, gain valuable international experience, and take on roles with increased responsibilities. These assignments were seen as opportunities to enhance their skills and progress within the organization, which effectively aligned with their career goals. One participant elaborated:

So, one reason was the country itself, which interested me quite a lot. And then of course also as a part of my career. It's also good to have this experience to be in a branch office. And not only in the head office. (Interviewee 8)

Unique Opportunity and "Now or Never" Mentality: Two employees saw their expatriate assignments as a unique "now or never" opportunity. They believed that taking on such assignments early in their careers was essential, as family responsibilities or other commitments could potentially hinder such opportunities in the future. These employees perceived foreign assignments as exceptional chances that that might not appear again. This "now or never" mentality was a significant motivator. One interviewee perfectly described this sentiment:

In the end, after my apprenticeship I started to be a service engineer. So, I was myself travelling around the whole world, installing machines, repairing machines, and giving some small training. After that I changed to the office because I thought about doing some part-time university and then they offered me the chance to go to China. It's a chance you don't get every day. And I had to say, if you want to do something like this, do it now. Because later, who knows, maybe you will have a family or something and it gets more and more difficult. So that was originally my main motivation. If you want to do it, do it now. (Interviewee 5)

Financial Incentives: Monetary factors also played a role in motivating employees to take on assignments, as expatriation usually entails more generous financial compensation packages. The prospect of higher salaries, housing allowances, and additional financial benefits made these assignments financially appealing. As mentioned by interview participant 9: *“I think it was for career and financial reasons. I thought it would be a good opportunity career wise [...] And also, I thought financially speaking would be a good, sensible thing to do, and pays more money”*.

Proximity and Convenience: Another motivational factor for certain employees represented the geographical proximity of the assignment location to their home country. Assignments that were relatively close, yet still international, were seen as convenient, allowing for easy travel back to their home country within the EU. This wish for proximity is perfectly captured by one interviewee:

Also, specifically with Romania, it's quite close. It's only 1 1/2 hours flight away, so it's not too far away and yet you still go as an expat and still within the EU. Well, for me it was very appealing from that perspective. So, I could easily come back to Austria when I want to. (Interviewee 9)

In summary, there is a significant overlap between the organizational reasons for sending employees abroad and their motivations. Organizational purposes encompass meeting business needs, skill-based requirements, fostering employee development, and maintaining an attractive employer. Employees' motivations are diverse, including cultural immersion, career advancement, unique opportunities, financial incentives, and proximity to international markets. Not all employees are equally enthusiastic about international assignments as cultural barriers can discourage expatriates from specific locations. Some individuals, as mentioned by HR professional Interviewee 6, may hesitate to accept assignments in regions like the United Arab Emirates due to significant cultural differences. Recognizing and understanding the employees' concerns and motivations is vital for organizations to attract and retain talent for international assignments by aligning individual aspirations with global organizational objectives. Furthermore, the influence of these motivations on the design and management of expatriate assignments will be explored in the following sections, shedding light on the practical implications of these findings.

4.1.3. Organizational Interests of Repatriation Support

International assignments represent a significant investment for organizations and are undertaken with the aim of achieving benefits in terms of employee development and corporate objectives. The process of supporting returning employees from their assignments is a critical phase that demands careful management and plays a central role in maximizing the ROI of expatriation. A ROI can only be achieved if the assignee stays within the company and in a role that allows them to use their valuable experience gained during the assignment. In the light of these considerations, this section discusses the research findings of the organizational interests that drive the provision of repatriation support for employees returning from their international assignments.

Empirical research within this thesis has revealed the significant costs associated with expatriate assignments. Typically, an expatriate costs at least twice as much as a regular employee staying in their home country. The costs of an assignment depend on various factors including the position grade and the family status of an expatriate. Higher-level positions imply greater salary and wage expenses, while employees with families, especially those with children, incur substantially higher costs due to the support needed for schooling. Specific figures have not been provided, however an HR professional emphasized that retaining an employee in their home country costs at least half as much as sending them on international assignments. But international assignments can potentially be even more expensive. Consequently, adhering to allocated corporate budgetary constraints represents an important aspect in expatriate management. This equilibrium ensures the efficient utilization of the organization's resources while also fostering employee satisfaction. At this point it is essential to recognize that employee turnover, a natural occurrence within any organization, can influence these costs. Hence, effective management of employees' expectations regarding career progression and their intentions to stay or to leave is integral to balancing organizational interests in repatriation support.

4.1.3.1. Enhancement of Employee Experience

According to one HR manager, the main goal of providing support during international assignments is to enhance the employee experience. The complexity of an international move, especially for those doing it for the first time, can be overwhelming. The challenges related to taxes, immigration, and insurance can add significant stress. To alleviate these burdens, the organization's aim is to enable employees to focus on their roles and responsibilities, fostering a more positive and productive work environment. In the words of interviewee 4 *"we really want to support them as much as we can and make their lives easier so they can really focus on the job and don't have to worry too much"*. This is achieved through comprehensive support, designed to create a more *"carefree experience"*, allowing employees to adapt quicker to new environments and reduce stress during repatriation. Interviewee 4 sheds further light on this by commenting the following:

They should really feel that they have somebody that's next to them that makes sure that we take care of them. And I feel this gives them just like a little bit of a better feeling knowing that they are in good hands. That's usually what we try to do in the assignment process. (Interviewee 4)

Moreover, another important aspect of support is the presence of dedicated contact, as emphasized by interviewee 4. This dedicated person represents “a contact they can talk to share their concerns with, especially people that are coming back with family, you know, that can sometimes be very stressful”. All these provided support measures not only contribute to a smoother transition but also align with the organizations broader objectives of maximizing the benefits of international assignments.

However, as emphasized by another HR professional, repatriation is the most challenging and most delicate phase of expatriate management. The success of repatriation not only depends on careful organizational planning in terms of logistics and vacancies, but also on the employees' initiative, flexibility, and timing. In the interview with participant 10, the complexity of repatriation has been highlighted pointing out its intricacies and intangible challenges. Thus, participant 10 stressed the need for flexibility and employee engagement throughout the repatriation process:

Planning and carrying out an assignment are one story; when it comes to returning, it requires a certain flexibility on the part of both, the employees, and the organization. Returning involves timing, which is part of that flexibility [...] Ideally, upon return, we have a win-win situation – the company benefits from the experiences the employees gained abroad, can offer them a position that meets their expectations, and the contractual relationship continues for a long time. However, this is not something set in stone; you can't guarantee anything. (Interviewee 10)

Furthermore, the element of timing proves to be a critical component of this flexibility. It is emphasized that due to a variety of factors, including organizational changes and individual considerations, the return date does not always match exactly with the originally defined assignment duration. Therefore, the HR professional highlights the significance of proactive repatriation planning, also involving employees in this process. As interviewee 10 explained:

It really depends on whether there's a position available or not, because the organization changes over that period, and the intervals of change are getting shorter. So, it also strongly depends on the employees themselves to be proactive; otherwise, it won't work, or it won't work well in all cases. (Interviewee 10)

This underlines the need for early discussions and the importance of maintaining connections. Flexibility is key, as the return date can be influenced by various factors, and a one-size-fits-all

solution for repatriation success remains elusive due to its complexities. In the words of interviewee 10, talking about repatriation *“it is an exciting topic, but in my over ten years of experience in global mobility, I have not yet encountered a company that had a patent solution to cover it in a way that satisfies all parties involved.”* Consequently, careful monitoring, early communication, and a continuous commitment to flexibility are critical to successfully meeting the challenges of repatriation.

4.1.3.2. Managing Expectations and Employee Turnover

Clear and open communication regarding career ambitions and repatriation plans plays a pivotal role in managing employee expectations and turnover. Interview participant 10, an HR business partner, emphasizes the significance of aligning expectations during repatriation. Mutual respect and appreciation between the organization and the repatriates are crucial, as the employees bring valuable insights from their assignments. Ideally, the organization tries to find a higher-level position with appropriate financial compensation for returning expatriates. As it has been pointed out by interviewee 10 money cannot be the sole motivator in the long-term. Instead, fostering an environment that values the experiences of repatriates positively contributes to employee motivation. Open communication supports a successful repatriation experience and acknowledges the efforts and learnings gained abroad. As the HR professional explains in the following:

I have also experienced in my career, where [...] self-image and external perception don't align. That means expectations are completely different from how they are perceived. And then, paths will eventually diverge. But then, this phase of frustration comes... I believe it's important, no matter how it is, to have transparency and open feedback, and clear perspectives... I think that's the key. (Interviewee 10)

Despite the intentions of aligning with employee expectations they cannot always be met, leading to natural fluctuations in the workforce – an inherent part of global mobility. Personal circumstances, such as partners leaving the country or changing motivations, can sometimes lead to employee turnover that organizations cannot control. As emphasized by another HR manager, interviewee 4, meeting the repatriates' expectations *“is always our intention”* as internal policies and processes strive to retain their valuable workforce, however it is not always in their hands. As mentioned by interviewee 10, providing returning expatriates with a clear path within the organization upon their return is crucial to avoid feelings of uncertainty that can lead to workforce fluctuations. Ultimately, effective communication and aligning expectations are essential strategies for managing both employee expectations and turnover. These efforts promote mutual understanding, minimize frustration, and contribute to successful careers and harmonious working relationships.

4.1.3.3. Balancing Organizational Interests and Employee's Needs

The repatriation phase, marking the most delicate stage of the expatriation cycle, involves careful planning, adaptability, and monitoring. It operates within a larger framework where organizational interests and employee needs intersect, sometimes causing tension. Striking the right balance between these factors is essential for the success of international assignments and repatriation. In this section, the valuable experiences of the HR professionals interviewed are explored who shared their insights on how their organizations navigate this equilibrium.

Interviewee 4, an experienced HR manager, expresses the challenge of balancing organizational objectives and employees' needs. She describes this balance as an ongoing juggling act, acknowledging that these two perspectives often *"diverge and collide"*. Employee expectations can widely diverge, yet there are budgetary constraints in place which are firmly established by the business to set boundaries. The HR professional sincerely recognizes this complexity by noting, *"to be honest this is something that is always in our head, and we also receive pressure from our management or our head of HR."* Policies can be adjusted to a certain extent by offering individual support; thus, the organization has the aim to address employee needs but at the same time tries to avoid drastic changes based on individual requests. This creates a nuanced interplay where HR offers support to the diverse employee demands, while staying within the firmly set budgetary limits by the company. As interviewee 4 explains, *"that's the exact thing that you always need to balance somehow because of course some of the employees would wish for a lot of things and you just can't provide everything"*. Participant 4 emphasizes that HR has an advisory role in discussing whether the arising employee needs should be addressed in the assignment policy. They ensure that the case is completely understood, consulting stakeholders accordingly, and providing recommendations such as advising against or for certain benefits due to specific reasons. Ultimately, the organization holds the decision-making power and the responsibility of ensuring that the allocated budget for an assignment aligns with its associated costs. Within this framework, HR retains some degree of flexibility. Adjustments can be made based on broader trends and general requirements instead of catering to individual requests. Thereby, the overarching goal is to focus on what is truly essential and valuable to most of the expatriates while avoiding unnecessary expenses. As Interviewee 4 states:

We constantly try to balance both sides a little bit. I think that's also what we try to do in HR in general. Hear the employees, hear their requested desires, but on the other hand, always stay focused on the company side on what can be adapted and where we are going overboard with cost. It's challenging, but it also makes sure that you stay up to date with your policies. It forces us to review our policies and processes over and over again. (Interviewee 4)

These continuous policy reviews are important as they ensure fairness while managing organizational costs. This ability to harmonize the often divergent organizational and employees'

perspectives, is crucial for the success of international assignments and repatriation support. Moreover, interview participant 6, a People and Culture Manager operating in the host country supporting expatriates during their assignments on site, emphasizes that organizational needs are overseen by the headquarters which ensures that local policies and procedures are in alignment. In case of inconsistencies or concerns regarding specific allowances, the local HR manager collaborates with the colleagues at the company's headquarters to address issues like outdated allowances. She mentioned a suitable anecdote from her professional life elaborating the communication between the offices and the establishment of policies between the headquarters and the local hubs in the host countries:

Whatever we are having in our policies and procedures must be aligned with the headquarters. If something doesn't work out for us, if we see a discrepancy [...] we have to make sure that the employee needs are met. I'm having now this week an alignment meeting with all the colleagues from the headquarters who are dealing with mobility to discuss this allowance topic.
 (Interviewee 6)

She also states that it is important to maintain fair payments and support measures by regularly reviewing the allowances and expatriation policies, to ensure that assignees are properly supported, especially during dynamic situations like the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the headquarters handles organizational interests, the local HR managers in the host country hubs ensure that employee needs are met and align with the broader organizational objectives. The local People and Culture Manager also mentioned her initiative of supporting the employees needs by the following quote: *"What I see in my company, and I like a lot is that I'm not saying no by default to the employee [...]. Here we are a bit more people oriented in this sense"* (Interviewee 6). As seen, the delicate balancing act between organizational interests and employee needs, represents a central challenge within the context of international assignments and repatriation. HR managers play a central role in maintaining this balance, contributing to the success of these efforts.

4.1.4. Design of Repatriation Policies

The development of repatriation policies within organizations is a complex process characterized by a delicate equilibrium between standardization and personalization. The research findings from various interviews with HR and global mobility experts revealed the varied strategies that companies adopt when developing these policies. It has been found within this research that a standardized approach forms the foundation of repatriation policies across all three organizations. Interview participant 10 described their company's policy as comprehensive and detailed, encompassing approximately 25-30 pages. Within this standard policy benefits, principles, and approaches are specified, covering phases such as pre-assignment support, assignment duration, and repatriation. This standardized, non-customized approach has proven successful considering

low post-repatriation turnover rate, as it allows equal support to all employees and ensures consistency and fairness. However, standardization also brings challenges along, as interview participant 10 noted *“The population of effective returnees is manageable, and there is no need to standardize everything down to the last detail. I'm not a fan of that because every person is different.”* This insight highlights that companies with manageable expatriate populations might prefer flexible policies to accommodate diverse individual needs. As also emphasized by interviewee 3: *“So, we are not forcing anyone to take some benefits. We are quite flexible, and we are trying to be as supportive as possible to help them to reintegrate back in their home country.”* This is where the concept of direct contact and personalization comes into play. Many organizations place a strong emphasis on direct, one-on-one interactions with employees, as it enhances the overall employee experience and builds trust between the company and its expatriates. As emphasized by interviewee 4, personal contact is appreciated by the majority of their expatriates:

If I had to sum up the feedback that I got so far. I feel most really appreciate the personal contact and the feeling that they could ask anytime if they have something in mind or want to discuss [...] we always try to make sure that people are alright. (Interviewee 4)

Notably, it has been found out that Company B and C, employing around 100 expatriates, prioritize personal contact when supporting their employees in order to provide a high-quality standard employee experience. It has become evident that repatriates enjoy the personal touch of receiving direct and personal support from dedicated contact persons, as it strengthens their connection with the organization. In contrast, larger companies, such as Company A employing over 350 expatriates, do not always have the capacities to provide extensive personal support. Therefore, they often invest into global mobility software to offer a comprehensive support which satisfies its employees and streamlines internal processes at the same time. As perfectly summarized by interview participant 4: *“I think global mobility is a job which can differ sometimes, from company to company [...]. So, it can be either very technical or very personal.”*

Companies recognize the challenge of balancing policy uniformity with individual requirements, as pointed out by one interviewee:

Our approach is always to stick to the policies as much as we can, as this is also our tool to make sure fairness is there. [...] especially when we talk about compensation. I'm pretty sure in a few years transparency is not something that is getting less, it's getting more and more [...] that's sometimes, you know the paradox behind it, because the more standardized, the fairer you are usually. But nowadays the trend goes into more flexibility and the individual... and if you're always looking at the individual then you can't standardize anymore. So, this is again this constant balance between how standardized we can be and still consider the individual

needs and make sure that each single person is still happy without going overboard
(Interviewee 4)

Consequently, transparency plays a crucial role in the effective implementation of policies, to ensure fair treatment among the employees. Yet, strict adherence to policies may not always be feasible. Sometimes, it is necessary to step outside the policy to meet employees' needs. Some organizations, like interviewee 6's, adopt a standardized repatriation approach while considering individual circumstances like the employees' position grade, family size, and destination country. This approach ensures fair treatment by taking individual circumstances into account, aligning with organizational standards, and ultimately contributing to a positive repatriation experience. The choice between different policy design approaches depends on the organization's size, the nature of its global mobility roles, and the unique needs of its employees. Balancing uniformity with individualization is essential to ensure fair and effective repatriation support.

4.1.5. Global Mobility Software and Outsourced Solutions

As discussed in the literature review, technology integration in global talent management is a growing trend offering attractive opportunities. These integrated platforms often collaborate with external partners to incorporate outsourced solutions, maximizing the technology's value and increasing operational efficiency. Among the organizations interviewed, two out of the three have adopted a global mobility software. Therefore, this chapter delves into the use of outsourced service providers and the employment of technology.

4.1.5.1. Current Use of Technology in Global Talent Management

Company A and B both make use of technologies which help them with the organization of expatriate management. Company A currently uses software for managing assignments, tracking their progress, calculating assignment packages, performing cost estimations, and generating reports. However, this existing technology is outdated, having been in use for 15 years, and is not capable of keeping up with modern cloud solutions and technology integrations. To address these limitations, Company A plans to implement a new, more contemporary software in October of the current year, offering enhanced capabilities in global talent management.

In contrast, Company C already introduced a more advanced mobility management platform about two years ago. This software supports task reminders, provides comprehensive information about host countries, allows employees to track their assignment's progress, and centralizes document access and case management. While technology assists as a supportive tool, personal contact remains essential for effective communication and trust in international relocation. Interviewee 4's company lives a family culture where direct contact is part of their corporate DNA, as emphasized in the following:

We have a tool that is supporting us, but it would never erase the personal contact...We get really good feedback on that and that's what is appreciated. Or on the other hand, what is criticized probably the most if the communication wasn't as good. So, I really feel people are making a lot for this direct contact as relocating internationally is a very sensitive topic, it's a very personal topic. You really get to know the employee from a very private side. [...] I feel it really makes sense to have personal discussions and this personal contact. (Interviewee 4)

This platform serves as a guide for employees, offering reminders for various tasks, such as de-registering their residence, transferring funds, and coordinating with relocation partners. In essence, the global mobility tool functions as a comprehensive checklist that guides the entire expatriation process, with the focus on using technology to support expatriate management while maintaining personal communication.

Unlike the other organization, the company of interviewee 6 who works for Company B in Abu Dhabi, has chosen not to implement technology for global talent management. They operate with a small team responsible for overseeing a substantial number of assignees. While they use SAP for payroll, they lack comprehensive HR tools, resulting in a heavy workload, including a large volume of emails from expatriates seeking assistance. Although there is an intention to implement a group-level tool, it does not align with the unique situation of expatriates from their parent company. Thus, Company B in Abu Dhabi currently relies on a more labour-intensive but personalized approach instead of utilizing technology for global talent management.

4.1.5.2. Potential of New Global Mobility Software

Company A is in the process of implementing a new software, scheduled for launch in October 2023 which is acquired from an external software provider and tailored to the company's needs. The software covers the entire expatriation cycle, including immigration processes, notifications, to-do lists, and pop-up reminders to assist expatriates in managing their tasks. Throughout the assignment, it facilitates interactions like salary reviews and adapts to life changes that could impact package calculations, like marriage or having a newborn. In the repatriation phase, the software facilitates tasks like cancelling work permits and closing bank accounts, providing a checklist for the expatriates before leaving the country. As emphasized by interviewee 3: *"we are trying to enhance the employee experience using the technology provided by the company. We are trying to make their life easier."* Moreover, another key feature is that the software seamlessly integrates with the company's HR information system and generates cost estimates for assignments, including factors like company taxes. HR business partners can access the tool to review the expatriate population and perform cost assessments without manager involvement. Likewise, the software positively impacts the global mobility team's workflow by streamlining contract generation through user-friendly templates. As interviewee 3 explains: *"It will be a huge relief for my colleagues who sometimes must draft 5 contracts in a day and then they will have the*

possibility to just hit the button and get the contract.” Additionally, the software offers a personalized expatriate portal with valuable information about host countries and an application for expatriates to access their assignment package and benefits, promoting convenience and transparency. Furthermore, the software incorporates data analytics to track expat interactions, guiding decisions on content improvement and enhancing the employee experience. Overall, the software streamlines assignment management corporate strategic planning, provides transparency, and empowers expatriates with self-service tools to better prepare for their assignments.

As can be seen, technology integration provides significant opportunities for expatriate management. Larger organizations prioritize efficiency, transparency, and improved employee satisfaction through cutting-edge technology, whereas smaller companies maintain a strong emphasis on personal contact. As highlighted in the previous chapter, the importance of personal contact and its value to repatriates is evident, making it an indispensable aspect of the process. Despite the benefits that technology brings, personal contact remains essential due to the complexity and diverse personal issues faced by expatriates.

4.1.5.3. Outsourced Solutions

All the organizations within the research sample make use of outsourced service providers to simplify the organizational burden for the global mobility team and ease the transition for expatriates by providing them with necessary resources and information. It has been found that MNCs in the interview sample make use of relocation services which helps them with moving support, house search, immigration processes such as visa applications and work permits, as well as logistical support in the moving of personal belongings between countries. Depending on the host country destination, legal experts, such as lawyers or legal consultants, are engaged to facilitate various aspects of expatriate management, ensuring compliance with local regulations and agreements. Moreover, they employ leading tax consultancy firms to assist with tax-related matters and utilize comprehensive online resources to obtain data on cost of living and housing benchmarks used in their software solutions. Additionally, insurances represent another critical service provider in expatriate management. Lastly, one repatriate, interviewee 1, mentioned that an external coach trained on professional topics was commissioned, assisting the employee in personal hardships during the time abroad and coming home.

Relocation Services: The utilization of relocation services by MNCs emerges as a common practice among interviewees. These services encompass a range of tasks, including school and apartment searches, work permit applications, and pre-departure orientation tours. Organizations often collaborate with external providers specializing in relocation services. It is notable that the extent of outsourcing varies, depending on the host country's specific conditions and the existing network of providers. In some cases, as observed in the United Arab Emirates, personal networks

established by colleagues can be more effective than external relocation providers. However, for more extensive expatriate populations, outsourcing remains a valuable strategy.

Insurance: Insurance services also play a critical role in expatriate management, ensuring the well-being and security of employees during international assignments. Companies usually provide medical insurances including worldwide health coverage, as well as air freight insurances. Health insurance, including medical evacuation and coverage in foreign countries, has initially represented a major concern for interviewee 2: *“That was a source of uncertainty for quite a while”*. The availability of specialized insurance tailored to the unique needs of expatriates and the host country's regulatory requirements is a common feature to ensure they are taken care of. Despite initial concerns, all the repatriates perceived the provided support as very positive as underlined by interviewee 5: *“We got the special insurance, private coverage worldwide, the best you can get... which now I would have loved to keep [...] but this is only for expats a special solution”*.

Tax Consultation: Tax consultation services emerged as a critical and consistently recognized aspect of expatriate support within the research sample. All ten interviewees emphasized its pivotal role in assisting expatriates as they navigate complex tax considerations in both their home and host countries. The companies usually allocate a predetermined budget for tax consultation services, which include tax briefings with experts to help sort out taxation matters, ensure compliance with tax laws, optimize tax benefits, and avoid legal issues. As stated by repatriates, this service is highly valued as it helps them to alleviate the tax concerns of international assignments: *“I was just happy that someone supported there”*. (Interviewee 7), and *“Everyone is struggling with taxes when going abroad.”* (Interviewee 8). Moreover, interviewee 1 highlighted the challenge of independently finding knowledgeable international tax experts due to the complexity and high costs involved, and therefore appreciated the company's support in this regard.

Generally, the provided tax support has been perceived as positive by the majority of the interviewees. However, it is important to note that one employee shared a negative tax-related experience during his international assignment. He faced unexpected tax rules in Austria when exiting and entering the country, resulting in financial losses upon departure and return. The lack of information and advice on this matter was a disappointment to the repatriate. Interview participant 9 believed that the company's tax guidelines lacked information on these critical tax rules and emphasized the need for better tax consultation before, as well as after the assignment. He suggested that his employer could have guided him better in this regard or encouraged him to seek individual tax consultation, which he plans to do for any future assignments. Despite this negative experience, he acknowledged that the tax consultancy provided efficient and professional services but highlighted the importance of understanding that the company primarily prioritizes its interests in minimizing tax losses, not individual support.

4.2. HR Role in Global Talent Management

In global mobility HR professionals play a key role in managing the entire expatriation cycle. They have a major impact on how MNCs manage their employees as they are responsible for shaping the overall organizational framework. This includes strategic planning, seamless operational execution, assignment of individuals to suitable job positions, and the overall well-being of the employees throughout their international journey. Therefore, it is crucial to clarify the different parties involved in repatriation support, outline their specific duties, and explore their experience in international matters. Understanding their professional background helps to comprehend their motivations and capabilities in supporting expatriates before, during, and after their international assignments.

4.2.1. HR-Professionals: Tasks, Experience, and Expertise

Expatriate management involves various stakeholders whose roles may differ across companies due to unique organizational structures. This research involved four HR/global mobility professionals, each occupying distinct roles and offering different perspectives on expatriate management. They all share extensive expertise within the field of global talent management and have been involved in expatriate management for a long time. Interviewee 4, for example, has seven years of HR experience, while interviewee 3 brings over 28 years of experience, including the establishment of an expatriate management department two decades ago.

Examining the job positions of the interviewees reveals diverse roles in expatriate management, including an HR Business Partner responsible for the strategic aspects of expatriate management, a Global Mobility Senior Expert overseeing the operational tasks of international assignments, a local HR Manager situated in the headquarters, and a People and Culture Manager working as regional HR in the host country hub. Additionally, it is important to note that these HR professionals bring significant personal international experience. Their backgrounds highlight the importance of their personal experience in international environments, positively shaping their roles in HR support for expatriates. As perfectly described by interviewee 3:

We are always saying it's easier to understand the employees' needs when moving abroad if you are trying to step into his or her shoes. And if you land into this situation at least once in your life, then it's easier to empathize. (Interviewee 3)

Elaborating more in detail on the international experience gained, two HR professionals were expatriates themselves in the USA and France, one holding a leadership position and the other one working as an HR generalist. Interviewee 6 currently works as an expatriate as a People and Culture manager in Abu Dhabi, while interviewee 3 relocated from Romania to Vienna four years ago under a local contract. These diverse experiences underscore how firsthand exposure to

international environments enhances the capabilities and perspectives of HR professionals in expatriate support.

4.2.1. Parties Involved in Repatriation Support

The successful repatriation of employees demands a collaborative effort among various stakeholders within an organization. Each party plays an essential role for the seamless reintegration of the expatriates. In this section, the different stakeholders involved in repatriation support are explored, highlighting their roles and responsibilities, supported by insights from the interviews. Since job titles and the degree of stakeholder involvement can vary from company to company, the following chapter introduces standardized terms for these stakeholders and provides detailed explanations for those mentioned in the interviews.

HR Business Partner: The HR business partner acts as a bridge between the overall HR strategy and the operational needs of the business unit. This role represents the primary point of contact for HR-related matters within corporate functions. This strategic focus often positions them alongside business leaders, enabling direct contributions to business strategies and personnel planning. Their responsibilities include expatriation and repatriation and providing guidance on strategic decisions including the timing and locations of personnel movements. They work closely with line managers to ensure employee motivation and the effective implementation of HR tools and programs. While HR business partners play a crucial role in HR strategy, the day-to-day business is handled by HR managers and the global mobility team. This segregation of responsibilities ensures an efficient and effective HR support structure within the organization.

Interviewee 10 works as an HR Business Partner and serves as the first point of contact for executives in various HR matters. His role involves addressing HR issues, finding solutions, and coordinating matters across different functions including Audit, Compliance, Communications, Legal, Security and HR. While these corporate functions usually have fewer expatriates due to cost and regional factors, the HR business partner is in charge of strategic aspects such as identifying potential expatriate positions and aligning with business needs. Moreover, he advises business units on potential expat positions, initiates expatriations when suitable, and monitors certain aspects of repatriation.

Base Company HR/Global Mobility Manager: The local HR manager located in the headquarters of an organization serves as a key figure in the repatriation process, overseeing the entire assignment lifecycle. This includes managing assignment-related documents like packages, contracts, and calculations, as well as handling logistics for the expatriate's departure and return to the home country. The base company HR and global mobility manager orchestrates the repatriation process, ensuring the smooth progress of repatriation, considering notice periods and potential job openings.

Interviewee 4 holds the position of an HR Manager in the center of excellence based at the headquarters and is responsible for global mobility matters within her organization. She leads a team that oversees global mobility policies and processes, providing guidance to regional mobility experts in hubs worldwide, like Southeast Asia or South America. Her responsibilities span the management of comprehensive policies and providing guidance in complex cases, and actively supervising her own cases. In her organization, repatriation planning typically begins at least seven months to a year before the assignment concludes, and interviewee 4's task is to proactively engage various stakeholders to plan together for the expatriate's future after the assignment ends.

Global Mobility Specialists: The global mobility team is a specialized unit within the HR department that manages the movement of employees across international borders. This team is responsible for handling various aspects of global assignments, including expatriation, repatriation, and cross-border transfers. Global mobility specialists like Interviewee 3 are indispensable in managing international assignments as explained in the following:

In global mobility we are more operational, and we are looking to have everything in place and that the entire process works as smoothly as possible to assure that the employee is supported regardless of how many family members he has or what his family situation is. (Interviewee 3)

These specialists leverage technology and operational expertise, while collaborating with stakeholders to create a seamless experience throughout the entire assignment process. Although they are not the primary decision-makers, they provide essential tools and programs to help line managers and HR business partners to keep employees motivated and well-supported throughout their assignments. Moreover, the global mobility team supports the expatriates in coordinating logistics such as booking flights and managing shipments. They also organize tax briefings and handle taxation issues, ensuring expatriates comply with tax regulations. Furthermore, they actively engage in repatriation planning, ensuring that expatriates receive the necessary support when returning to their home countries or transitioning to their next international assignment. This support extends to matters like schooling for their children and spousal support.

Interviewee 3 as a Global Mobility Senior Expert manages both technical and operational aspects of global mobility. She supports her colleagues with a specialized software that manages assignments, calculates packages, and produces cost estimations and reports. Her responsibilities are concentrated on Central and Eastern Europe within a team structure organized by countries. Additionally, she is leading a project of implementing a new, cloud-based global mobility software, demonstrating her involvement in operational and technical tasks.

Regional HR Specialists in Country Hubs: Regional HR managers in host countries play an essential role in ensuring consistent treatment of expats from various locations. They are actively engaged in organizational expatriation planning, establishing initial contact with expatriates before their assignments start, and serving as the first point of contact throughout their stay. They also provide comprehensive assistance during the repatriation phase, including returning company assets, terminating visas and residency in the host country, assisting with housing issues, providing repatriation allowances, arranging flights and shipping personal belongings, and providing tax preparation services through outsourced tax consulting firms. At this point it is important to mention, that it has been found out that employees are expected to manage the reintegration process with less assistance, once they return to their home country, as it is assumed by their employer that they are well aware of local procedures.

Interviewee 6, a People and Culture Manager in Abu Dhabi, holds responsibility for HR activities in Abu Dhabi and Singapore, with limited involvement in China. Her role involves various aspects such as recruitment, onboarding, and managing the expatriate's integration into the region. Her colleague on the other hand, is primarily managing the repatriation of expatriates. Interviewee 6's core focus is ensuring that expatriates align with the company's policies and procedures throughout their assignment.

Line Managers: Line managers are the immediate supervisors of employees and responsible for overseeing positions, tasks, and the day-to-day work performance within their team. They play a vital role in the repatriation of the expatriates, especially when it comes to job search and the overall success of the expatriate's return. Throughout the repatriation process their main responsibility is to communicate with the employee about the potential job position upon repatriation and discuss any changes in responsibilities. By doing so the manager collaborates with the HR business partners and the global mobility team to facilitate a smooth transition for the returning employee. The HR business partner and the line manager jointly take strategic decisions related to talent management, long-term incentive plans, turnover impact analysis, and future positions for repatriates. They are also responsible for motivating employees, which is integral to their successful reintegration. Additionally, the line managers address any concerns or expectations the employee may have about returning to their home country and resuming work. They provide feedback and support to the employee as they reintegrate into their role and team, contributing to the successful professional reintegration.

Career Managers: In Company B, a separate role exists for managing the employee's career development. The career manager is typically positioned at the level of a head of or above and guides the employee in his professional journey within the organization. They maintain continuous contact with employees throughout their assignments, preventing them from being "forgotten" during their time abroad. Regular discussions take place to explore the employee's plans upon

repatriation and assess available positions within the organization, which is often done in conjunction with the line manager. Furthermore, a crucial task of the career manager is to integrate the opportunities and experiences gained during international assignments into the employee's long-term development plan. This strategic approach ensures that employee's future career paths align with the organization's broader goals. Interviewee 6 provides insight into this role:

They set up a position in each business unit which is like a senior advisor who takes care of the persons who are expatriated. [...] They are having regular discussions like "Hey, would you like to come back? Where would you see yourself when you come back? And these are the positions that we are having now available if you wanted to shorten your assignment and return". [...] And I heard that it is working. But it always depends in the end with how much your line manager is interested in ensuring a suitable position for you when you come back and how much that person is willing to fight for it. (Interviewee 6)

Thus, career managers focus on aligning employees' career trajectories with the organization's strategic objectives. They ensure that international assignments contribute to the employees' long-term development plans and play a vital role in the repatriation process by promoting collaboration and communication within the organization.

HR Committee: In contrast to the career manager approach, Company C established an HR committee with the aim of improving the repatriates career transitions. This collaborative initiative, involving HR business partners, HR managers, and line managers, was recently introduced to enhance communication and coordination among these key stakeholders on the career prospects of expatriates after their assignment. The HR committee meets quarterly to actively engage multiple stakeholders, including employees, in discussions about job vacancies, potential career moves, and repatriate transitions. This proactive initiative aims to create a collaborative environment and address the needs of expatriates in their professional reintegration. As explained by interviewee 4, Company C is actively working on the improvement of internal communication to create a supportive and growth-oriented environment for repatriates.

We're still doing a lot of work to create this community that really exchanges a lot. We started mainly now in the HR community [...]. That's why we created this committee that is now sitting together, I think every quarter, where we really talk about all the expats that we have, and mainly about the ones that are coming to an end within the next year. So that we really make sure that we start talking about them... "Oh, that assignment is ending in your region. I could really use that person in my region now and he's apparently open for reassignment." So that we really make sure that this communication is taking place. So that's something that we really need to improve but we already started working on that. (Interviewee 4)

Interviewee 10 representing Company A underlines the practicality of this approach in his organization as well by explaining the importance of considering vacancies and potential fits for returning employees. These collaborative efforts integrate the repatriates' experiences into the company's future planning, ensuring a more holistic approach to the repatriates' career transitions.

In summary, the HR business partner acts as a bridge between HR strategy and business needs, the global mobility team handles logistical and administrative aspects of repatriation, and the line manager is responsible for reintegrating the employee into their team and responsibilities. These parties collaborate to ensure a smooth repatriation experience for the returning employee. Moreover, one company employs a career manager to secure a suitable job position that aligns with the repatriate's future professional aspirations, while the other two organizations emphasize internal communication through engagement with various stakeholders, such as HR committees, to achieve the same goal.

4.3. Organizational Repatriation Support

The interviewed repatriates received comprehensive support from their parent companies when expatriating, however this support significantly diminishes during repatriation, as already confirmed by existing research. Even though expatriates receive limited repatriation support, especially in terms of job search, which represents a major re-entry challenge, they generally feel well-supported during their assignments. Since repatriation is an integral element of the expatriation process, which is seen as a continuous circle, repatriates often view the received support measures as a holistic support system throughout their international assignments. It is important to point out that the interviewed repatriates mentioned receiving more support before and during their expatriation and less before and after their repatriation. This underscores the need for MNCs to invest more efforts into providing expedient support during the often-underestimated repatriation phase. As already discussed in the literature review, repatriation does not only start with the repatriate's actual return; it must be considered during the entire process. It should already start prior to departure to increase the repatriate's intent to stay with their employer, which is reflected in the research findings of this chapter.

Therefore, this chapter begins by introducing the received support measure and discussing family and spouse support. Subsequently, it covers support measures during the pre-departure phase, throughout the assignment, and the post-return phase. It is important to note, that the discussion of support measures in this chapter is based on the experiences of repatriates from companies A, B, and C. Additionally, in a separate subchapter titled "Contrasting Example: Lack of Support" the organizational support received by a repatriate from the communication and information systems industry is examined, who had a totally different repatriation experience due to the lack of support received by her employer. This contrasting experience points out the unique challenges faced

during repatriation and showcases the consequences of the absence of a support structure. These differences underscore the importance of repatriation support in addressing the challenges faced by repatriates and increasing employee satisfaction. This contrast serves as a powerful reminder of the hurdles associated in repatriation and the need of well-rounded support to reduce these challenges.

4.3.1. Expatriation Guidelines, Contracts and Support Measures

Expatriates receive important expatriation guidelines also known as “Country Briefing Notes and Host Company Conditions” which serve as a critical navigational tool for their international assignments. These documents offer employees a comprehensive step-by-step guidance covering all the aspects of assignments and the repatriation process. As explained by interviewee 6 from Company B:

We have a document that is called Country Briefing Notes and Host Company Conditions and it's practically our working Bible. When you are going on an assignment you have step by step written down what needs to be done. [...] What happens to our employees when they are assigned in this country and for the repatriation process. (Interviewee 6)

HR professionals working for Company A and B emphasized the importance of these comprehensive documents during the interviews. In Company A, expatriates receive two documents alongside their contracts to clarify the rules and policies. Expatriates are equipped with an international working standard document which provides information on salary computation, allowances for partners' training, budgets for flights, holiday policies and many other relevant details. The second document offers detailed information on tax-related matters. In both cases, these documents are vital resources, ensuring that employees are well-informed and prepared for their international assignments, covering a wide range of practical and contractual aspects for expatriation and repatriation.

4.3.1.1. Guidelines and Expatriation Support Overview

The expatriation guidelines include an extensive support program which is categorized into three distinct phases: pre-expatriation, during the assignment abroad, and throughout the repatriation process. These comprehensive documents, spanning up to 50 pages, provide detailed information, including financial allowances and task-oriented checklists.

Before going abroad, employees are equipped with in-depth insights into their responsibilities, host company details, assignment remuneration calculations and essential rules and regulations. They receive guidelines and documentation for their assignments, including information on salary computation and tax standards. In addition to personal support, employees are informed about family and spouse support services. This encompasses guidance on migration topics including working visa and residency permit, flight allowances and the financial support for moving

expenses. The expatriation guidelines broadly cover practical aspects of relocation and were consistently provided to all interviewed repatriates. They all received dedicated budget allocations for their pre-departure and repatriation flights along with defined allowances. Particularly, in Company C, the relocation assistance can be individually chosen between a full shipping container or a cash allowance, depending on the employees' personal belongings. Beyond that, employees are often offered a pre-visit allowing them to familiarize themselves with the host country, gain insights into their assignment's objectives, and assess living conditions before making relocation decisions. While all the interviewed repatriates had the opportunity for such a visit, only one took advantage of it. This look-and-see-trip helped the interviewee to immerse himself into the culture of the host country, clarify job expectations, and explore living conditions.

Moreover, they are provided with information regarding their stay abroad which includes housing, medical insurance, and various organizational tasks like opening bank accounts. Additionally, details about allowances, such as company car and furniture allowance are communicated. Information about holidays and provision of home-visits are also mentioned. Finally, the guidelines outline necessary tasks related to repatriation, whereby the majority of these bureaucratic and administrative responsibilities are supported. These tasks include provision of tax consultants, termination of housing contracts, bank accounts, insurances, cards, phone contracts, as well as cancelling visas, returning cars, paying fines, and deregistering from authorities. Financial support for repatriation includes relocation assistance similar to the support received before returning, including a cash allowance for moving costs and a return flight home. However, it is important to note that all these benefits cease once employees repatriate, as underlined by interviewee 6, who expresses concerns about this aspect:

However, when they are repatriating, they are not benefiting of anything from this. So, all these allowances, entitlements and benefits are stopped once they repatriate. I think this is one of the issues that expatriates experience when they come home. (Interviewee 6)

Interviewee 10, who is responsible for strategic expatriate management of Company A expresses a viewpoint which contrasts with that of interviewee 6 from Company B, who is directly involved in supporting the repatriate. He suggests a reduced need for support upon returning home:

The benefits during an international assignment are more substantial at the beginning and less during the repatriation phase. The list of support is much shorter during repatriation, primarily offering basic assistance. However, this is based on my experience, as you don't really need as much support at that stage. The tax filing process continues for two more years afterward, and once you've completed your affairs locally, you eventually return to your familiar environment where you don't really require much support anymore. (Interviewee 10)

These quotes emphasize the divergent opinions within the parties involved in expatriate management and the varying support measures provided by different companies. Furthermore, Company B's guidelines mention the necessity for expatriates to maintain continuous contact with their career managers and global mobility specialists throughout their entire expatriate journey to facilitate their relocation and professional transition. It is explicitly communicated within these guidelines that repatriates should maintain regular contact with their career managers at home to stay visible by proactively engaging in the search for their future job role. In contrast, in Company A, the necessity of repatriate's initiative in their future job planning is not explicitly communicated, as interviewee 10 stated.

4.3.2. Family and Spouse Support

Expatriates and their families receive various forms of support during international assignments, ensuring a smoother transition and successful experience abroad. When an employee embarks on an international assignment with their partner and family, the dynamics of the experience change fundamentally. Thus, the significance of family support cannot be overstated when it comes to the effectiveness of an assignment. As highlighted by interviewee 10: *"an assignment can only be successful if the employee has the family support for it."*

Within this research, two out of six repatriates mentioned attending their assignments as couples, while the rest were single based. Interviewee 9 stands out as a unique case, being the only employee who started his assignment together with his partner from the beginning on. Due to the partner's ability of working remotely, he could accompany the expatriate on his assignment to Romania. However, the partner faced difficulties with integrating himself into the Romania culture and lifestyle which not only strained their relationship, but also resulted in the partner's early departure. Furthermore, another repatriate shared that he initially started his assignment alone in Brazil because his spouse was completing her studies. She later joined him, but language barriers and health concerns due to her pregnancy led to an earlier departure and physical separation.

Having flexibility in one's personal life, such as not having children or a partner who can work remotely, can facilitate international assignments. Even though organizations usually offer extensive support to family members accompanying the employee, including increased financial allowances, language courses, educational opportunities, and schooling for children, partners may still struggle to integrate into the new communities. Long working hours can also create stress in relationships, as mentioned by interviewee 9:

I was very busy with work at the beginning. It was a new job for me, so I had to work quite long hours. So, I was coming home quite late, and I think that created some stress there. And he was not so super happy with that. (Interviewee 9)

Since the success of an international assignment depends on the support the employee receives from their family, MNCs recognize the importance of providing assistance to their families. In more detail, organizations offer partner support programs that provide financial assistance for accompanying partners, acknowledging the partner's potential career sacrifices involved. However, it is worth noting that this support is not frequently used, as many expatriates attend their foreign assignments alone, as reflected within the results of this research. Company B offers spousal support of up to €7,000 per year for education or pension funds, while Company C provides €4,000 for partner education and an additional € 2,000 upon return. For the expatriates' children, the organizations cover tuition fees of high-quality international schools or private institutions, ensuring continuity in their education. To facilitate integration into the host country, organizations often offer language courses for the family members, and in Company B children additionally receive mother tongue support. Lastly, family members also receive healthcare coverage and insurance benefits as well as relocation assistance.

4.3.3. Communication During Stay Abroad

Effective communication serves as the key success factor for international assignments and must persist throughout the entire assignment. Maintaining contact with the home company is paramount for mitigating the "out-of-sight-out-of-mind" phenomenon. This is achieved through continuous communication which emerged as a major finding within this thesis, consistently emphasized by all the interviewees including HR professionals and repatriates. Strategies for fostering this contact and communication include assigning a home-based mentor to the expatriates and organizing home-visits, which serve to keep the assignee visible within the headquarters and connected with their family. Additionally, personal contact and networking opportunities have been mentioned as a valuable mechanism for building trust and addressing concerns. The significance of this communication should be ongoing and not just limited to the pre-return period, a point that is elaborated upon in this section. The research findings reveal several critical aspects of communication that significantly contribute to the success of assignments.

One central theme revolves around transparency and open feedback. Interview participants consistently highlighted the importance of clearly communicating expectations, career prospects, and potential challenges from both employee and employer perspectives. This transparency ensures a shared understanding of the assignment's objectives, preventing misunderstandings that can lead to dissatisfaction. Moreover, interviewee 8, a repatriate underlined that communication should not solely rely on the employer. Expatriates should proactively initiate and engage in communication, particularly with mentors or HR personnel, as this nurtures connection and represents vital support. In addition, establishing a sense of community among expatriates and with the headquarters emerged as another central element. HR professionals as well as

repatriates suggested regular meetings and discussions to share expatriate experiences, job vacancies, and collaboration opportunities, effectively fostering engagement and open communication channels.

One repatriate, interviewee 2, suggested that communication could function as a risk mitigation strategy. Keeping expatriates informed and motivated aligns with the organization's goals and ensures their commitment to tasks abroad. While interviewees acknowledged that communication may naturally decrease over time, many expressed the need for periodic check-ins to retain ties, maintain connections, and provide a platform for expatriates to share their positive and challenging experiences. This sentiment is expressed by interviewee 5:

The communication is getting less and less. And I mean that's, I would say a natural thing. It happens with your friends as well. But it would somehow still be nice if the communication would be just from time to time to say "Hey, how is it going on over there? What did you experience?" Instead of just when you hear something bad then you act. (Interviewee 5)

Lastly, HR professionals and repatriates recognized the need for improving communication processes, particularly in preventing miscommunication and ensuring that all stakeholders are involved and informed, as stated by an HR manager in the following:

The whole repatriation only works out if really all the necessary stakeholders are involved, if everybody is up to date, if everybody is sitting in the same boat. So, if sometimes it doesn't work out to repatriate the person as we plan to, it very often is owed to miscommunication. (Interviewee 4)

In conclusion, effective communication during international assignments is indispensable and requires proactive engagement from both expatriates and organizations. It plays a pivotal role in aligning expectations, maintaining trust, and enhancing the overall success of assignments.

4.3.3.1. Home-Base Mentor

A home-base mentor is an employee, often a former expatriate, who has as a trusted relationship to repatriates, offering guidance and support during their international assignments. Ideally, this mentor possesses in-depth knowledge concerning the repatriate's future field of activities within the company and has firsthand experience with international assignments. This role can be fulfilled by someone from HR or a former expatriate, functioning as a guide for upcoming expatriates, similar to a buddy system. Home-base mentors are perceived as contributors to the overall employee experience, offering insights and practical guidance that may not be covered during pre-assignment visits. This is the case since mentors can offer valuable tips and advice based on their own experiences. It has been found out that the interviewed repatriates appreciate the idea of having a structured system, such as a buddy system or alumni expat support system, where

individuals who have recently completed assignments can offer guidance and advice to new expatriates. This support is particularly valuable for employees returning from longer assignments abroad, as the assigned buddies can help repatriates navigate the company's dynamics and adapt to any changes that may have occurred during their absence. Participants expressed the importance of having someone to talk to and receive information from. In contrast, one repatriate acknowledged the need to keep balance and avoid overwhelming employees with too much information.

While the interviewees did not have a specifically assigned mentor, they were able to seek guidance from colleagues or their own mentors within the company. It has been found out that the concept of home-base-mentors is not formally established in any company yet, however HR professionals and repatriates equally expressed positive feelings and interests in this kind of buddy system. Notably, five out of six repatriates and two out of four HR professionals favour the idea of implementing home-base-mentors. Repatriate 7 expressed his enthusiasm by stating: *"Home based mentor: this I would have liked. It would have been great to have someone that I could continuously talk to. Maybe someone that also had a similar experience?"*

While formal mentorship systems are not always in place, organizations often rely on informal networking and communication among employees. Just one company has provided external coaching services allowing employees to confidentially discuss professional and personal matters with external coaches. It offers employees a confidential platform to seek advice and support during their assignments, especially during challenging times. Interviewee 1 noted, *"It's very useful because you know that this person will never talk to anybody."*

4.3.3.2. Home-Visits

According to the research findings, home-visits are integral to supporting expatriates during their assignments. These visits are typically organized to help expatriates maintain a connection with their home country and family. Companies allocate budgets for regular home visiting flights for expatriates and their family members. In Company B repatriates can make use of two home-visits per year to spend time with their families and reconnect with their home country and home company. Some companies integrate home-visits with business trips, providing expatriates with the opportunity to combine professional responsibilities with personal visits. While the provision of home-visits is appreciated, one repatriate, interviewee 9, mentioned the desire of more frequent visits to encourage expatriates to maintain contact with their home countries. However, the use of home-visits also depends on individual preferences. Interviewee 7 expressed an opposing preference by mentioning his interest of staying in the host country to fully immerse in the international experience. Nonetheless, it is recommended for companies to offer the opportunity and financial support for home-visits, enabling their employees to stay in contact with their home base and loved ones.

4.3.4. Pre-Return Support: Career Path and Job Planning

The pre-return phase of the expatriation cycle represents a critical stage, as it involves most of the planning for repatriation and professional reintegration. This phase is characterized by proactive communication from the employee's side, increased interaction with the parent company, and intensive job search. Research findings reveal that job and career planning represents the biggest challenge in the repatriation process, as highlighted by both HR professionals and repatriates. Specifically, four out of six repatriates and three out of four HR professionals mentioned facing challenges in job planning. This is the case as job planning during the repatriation process is often plagued with uncertainty and can even result in employee turnover, as reported by one repatriate.

4.3.4.1. Initiation of Repatriation Process

The research findings suggest that initiating the repatriation process and assigning appropriate job positions that satisfy both expatriates and the organization are crucial for a successful return. However, the time frame varies among the interviewed organizations. In Company A, HR receives an alert nine months before an expatriate assignment concludes, however two repatriates mentioned that their repatriation was initiated six months pre-return. In contrast, Company C begins planning between seven months up to one year before the end, while Company B initiates repatriation almost a year in advance. As Interviewee 4 emphasizes: *"One of the main parts is definitely to sort of kick off the whole repatriation process at the right point in time. [...] we even start now maybe one year ahead of time."* This timeline allows for communication with all stakeholders, including HR managers, regional HR heads, and supervisors. The goal is to ensure that job positions are prepared and that there are no missed opportunities. In essence, the consensus is clear: initiating the repatriation process at an early stage is pivotal. As perfectly described by an HR professional, *"the earlier, the better."* (Interviewee 6)

In Company A, where about 150 expatriates return home each year, some opt for consecutive assignments, rather requiring a smooth transition than traditional repatriation. There is a spectrum of attitudes towards repatriation. Some expatriates are eager to return home within a few years, while others choose to remain abroad indefinitely. This diversity in repatriation timelines can pose challenges for organizations, especially in terms of succession planning and staffing, as the parent company cannot always count on the immediate reintegration of employees sent abroad. Additionally, the case of repatriate 2 in Company C illustrates the consequences of delayed job planning. Although he initiated his repatriation one year before the end of his assignment, serious discussions about job positions only began six months before his return. Unfortunately, this delay forced him to seek external job opportunities, resulting in employee turnover. This experience resonates with the perception of the HR professional, interviewee 6 in terms of the employees' initiative and difficulties faced in repatriation:

What I see is, the employee has to work for that a lot... in the sense that he/she has to be in touch with the line manager in the home country. The employee also has to look for a position in the home country. It can be the case that they repatriate, wait for a couple of months in a low position or in the same position that they left from and then they find a better position.
(Interviewee 6)

Elaborating on another repatriation experience, interviewee 7 proactively searched for a job within his home organization, Company A, which aligned with his career aspirations, leading to an earlier return. Nevertheless, he expressed the hard work of planning for this job in the home company in the following:

These jobs did not come to me automatically. Unfortunately, and this is maybe a bit of a critique, there's no real structured process where a skilled person or HR approaches me [...] to see what or where I can work when I return. So, I knew this upfront, and I started half a year before the end of my assignment to get in touch with a lot of department managers that I knew. To indicate "Look, I'm coming back. Do you have something here for me?" Because I know the internal processes take some time. And this helped me a lot. (Interviewee 7)

This proactive approach enabled interviewee 7 to avoid the uncertainty and potential dissatisfaction of being placed in a role that did not align with his skills or career goals. He mentioned cases of colleagues who faced similar challenges, including unfulfilling roles, and some employees even chose not to return due to the perceived lack of appealing opportunities. Similarly, in Company B, repatriation also often requires proactive employee involvement. However, a successful approach involves assigning each employee a career manager who engages in early discussions with the repatriating employee about individual plans and skills, helping identify suitable positions within the home organization. This strategy fosters communication between departments and management levels, facilitating a seamless transition upon repatriation. The desire of such a career manager has also been highlighted by interviewee 7, working for Company A: *"Career counselling as well, job planning I would have much appreciated."*

Sometimes repatriation already occurs earlier than originally planned due to external factors. In Company A, two such instances occurred. One employee, interview participant 8, planned to spend three to five years in Iran as per his contract but had to leave due to the United States withdrawing from a nuclear treaty with Iran and imposing sanctions. Another employee, interview participant 9, had to return prematurely due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

Overall, early initiation of the repatriation process, proactive employee involvement, and structured career planning are essential elements for a successful repatriation experience. Despite the ambitions of HR professionals to initiate the repatriation process between seven months and up

to one year before the employees return, repatriates reported that their repatriation planning only began six months prior to their return, often owed to their proactive engagement.

4.3.4.2. Job Planning

Job planning at the end of an international assignment forms the core of the repatriation process. This complex phase has a significant impact on the effective reintegration of expatriates into their home organizations. As interviewee 10 describes: *"I believe what's important is that when someone is sent abroad, they fundamentally know that they won't return completely empty-handed and that they have a feeling of security."* This feeling of security upon return can be provided to repatriates through a job upon return. Yet, the allocation of a suitable job position represents a challenging task for HR personnel as emphasized by interviewee 6: *"I think having the certainty that you have a position in the home country and that it is a position where you can apply whatever you learned in the assignment. That's something that still needs to be to be fine-tuned."* In larger companies, organizational restructuring is common, which can even complicate the process of finding suitable job positions for returning expatriates. In such scenarios, the organization may struggle to find vacancies which match with the returning employee's skills and aspirations. This is the case since organizations are bound to personnel budget restrictions and thus *"cannot make up new jobs"* (Interviewee 4), that accommodate to the needs of their returning workforce.

Job planning is reliant on the presence of open positions within the company and often involves uncertainty, as the timing of job offers can experience delays. This uncertainty can lead to frustration for returning expatriates, as noted by interviewee 2, who changed to a different employer due to the ambiguity experienced and divergence between the organizations and the employee's expectations. Therefore, managing this uncertainty requires timely communication and transparency throughout the planning process. Effective communication can result in a positive experience even though the exact job position upon return is not known yet, as mentioned by interviewee 5: *"They always give you the feeling... 'No matter what, we will take you back and put you somewhere, at least for the beginning that you have something'".* The contrasting experiences of these two repatriates, both employed by Company C, provide clarity when considering the challenges faced by the HR professional within the same organization:

I think about finding the right job after the assignment and really do this career planning in a way that satisfies the employee but also still that it is realistic to the whole organization. I think that's a huge challenge. I don't think there's like the solution, you know, a scheme that you can always apply. (Interviewee 4)

Navigating the expectations of returning expatriates presents a delicate balancing act. Many expatriates hope to return to higher positions; however, this is dependent on the job availability. It is crucial for employees to stay flexible while organizations certainly try to meet their expectations.

Therefore, matching the employee's aspirations with the company's opportunities is a key objective. However, returning to the same role as before the expatriation might not be welcomed by all expatriates, causing some to search for other opportunities. Interviewee 7 operating in the oil and gas industry perfectly describes this idea:

If we don't have consistency and are not transparent then people go and look for something else. Because nowadays our generation, yours and mine, I think they look for purpose as well. Not only their money, [...] but also beyond that and then they leave. And it's more and more difficult nowadays to get skilled people, particularly people with five, six or seven years of experience. So, one really has to take care of these, I think. [...] "We run out of good people before we run out of oil." This really is a problem in my opinion. (Interviewee 7)

Effective job planning requires seamless communication with various stakeholders, including HR, line managers, and the repatriating employee. HR and line managers play essential roles in monitoring job vacancies and assessing how returning employees fit into the organization. Moreover, it is critical to clarify all details related to the expatriate's return, such as contracts, onboarding, and return dates. This clarity ensures that *"everyone is on the same page"* (Interviewee 4). The absence of clear communication can lead to misunderstandings and can hinder the repatriation process. Interestingly one HR professional, interviewee 3, expressed a contrasting perspective on the support system provided to repatriates in their job planning upon return: *"I don't know if career counselling, job planning is needed. Because, you know, every employee should also feel responsible for his own career development."* Consequently, while support and guidance are available, employees should proactively seek out opportunities and actively take responsibility in planning their own career development.

In essence, job planning during the repatriation process demands proactive engagement from both employees and organizations. There are no guarantees, but the need for early communication, flexibility, and proactive involvement. Participants unanimously acknowledge that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for job planning during repatriation. Each case is unique, influenced by factors such as assignment duration, organizational changes, and individual career goals. The interviews with expatriates and HR professionals underline the necessity of a well-defined company strategy, individual initiative in job searching, and impact of HR personnel in this process. As described by interviewee 4, an HR professional: *"Even though we're probably not in the main driver seat, I'd say we're really overlooking the whole thing. [...] to make sure that we find good solutions for the expats."* Job planning within the repatriation process is a collaborative journey, navigating through the ever-evolving landscape of organizational change and individual aspirations.

4.3.4.3. Employees Proactive Job Search

As previously highlighted in the findings, an employee's proactive initiative in finding a job in the pre-return phase is a key factor in the repatriation process. It can even be said that the success of organizational repatriation support depends on the employee's proactive engagement to job planning and career path development. Often there is no structured organizational procedure in place, urging employees to proactively reach out to relevant department managers, have ongoing discussions and utilize their network for potential job positions upon return. The job search experience can vary from one repatriate to another, with some finding suitable positions more easily, while others encounter challenges that require extra effort. It has been found out that expatriates usually receive comprehensive support when they go abroad, but during repatriation, they often need to proactively engage in finding a job at home and manage all the personal aspects related to their return. As explained by the HR professional, interviewee 10: *"And as an organization you can provide support, but in general, every employee, and it doesn't matter whether it's an expatriate or not, every employee fundamentally has their career in their own hands."*

However, this expectation might not always be explicitly communicated before the international assignment starts. Although workshops and seminars on this topic have been provided, it is not typically a central focus at the beginning of an assignment. Rather, the idea is that these matters evolve gradually, often through ongoing conversations between supervisors and employees. These conversations, which include performance assessments and discussions about future goals, offer a platform for addressing the next steps in an employee's career, especially after repatriation. While leaders are there to guide and support, the primary responsibility still lies with individuals to steer their career paths. This proactive approach aligns with the broader notion that career advancement does not come effortlessly but demands active engagement and dedication. As highlighted by interviewee 7, flexibility, time, and a willingness to take baby steps towards career goals are necessary for achieving a job position upon return that aligns with an employee's career aspirations:

I think one has to be flexible nowadays and you cannot wait for someone to approach you and give you a great opportunity. I don't want to say that it is always positive because there's a lot of politics involved... You have to keep your network and be visible and do projects that have an impact and so on. It's a constant struggle. And at the same time, you also need to work technically and will deliver high quality results. So, it's a marathon really. This doesn't happen overnight, at least not for me, you do baby steps. And you have to do them continuously.
 (Interviewee 7)

It is important for the company to maintain contact with employees during their international assignments and discuss potential job options upon their return. But some interviewees noted a

lack of structured processes for job planning and job placement during repatriation. This gap necessitates individual effort and therefore some employees may prefer to take the lead in their career planning. As interviewee 7 recommends: *“if you want something very good, then you better look for something as well, and not completely rely on HR.”* According to the findings, repatriates are usually offered the same job position as before they left, just with a higher grade. But if they take the initiative and actively seek new employment opportunities, they often obtain higher positions or the opportunity to take their career development in different directions. As highlighted by interviewee 7: *“If you're proactive and you have good ideas, then there are a lot of opportunities.”*

Furthermore, interview participant 8 emphasized the importance of proactive communication and initiative during and before repatriation. Line managers, or higher-level managers, maintain contact with employees in the sending and receiving areas to seek feedback and facilitate discussions. While this practice is not a formal policy, it is considered to be a natural part of the process. The repatriate recommended checking the job board for openings, visiting the office before returning home to discuss future career options. Even though he personally had no issues with communication, he suggested that longer-term expatriates might benefit from more active company contact, especially in the pre-return phase. Successful repatriation relies on employee proactivity and adaptability. The goal is a mutually beneficial outcome where the organization capitalizes on the employees' enriched experiences, offers suitable roles, and maintains a lasting employment relationship. However, this desired scenario is not guaranteed and remains subject to various factors.

4.3.4.4. Six-Month Job Guarantee upon Return

In the context of job planning upon repatriation, some organizations offer a job guarantee for a specific period after international assignments to provide a sense of security to their returning employees. While it is not a universal practice, two companies within the research sample offer a six-month job guarantee upon return, albeit with specific conditions. This guarantee allows repatriates to work at the headquarters for the initial six months after returning from international assignments. The concept of this employment security emerged as a topic of interest and led to discussions among expatriates. One HR professional explained that it should provide a sense of security, since expatriation is always accompanied with uncertainties. Interviewee 9 expressed his sentiments about this six- months job guarantee as follows:

The rule is that if you don't find a job within six months, they can release you from the company, which I find quite strict. It was actually surprising to me that it is possible in Austria that they have the right to cut your contract, to fire you basically. Only I heard that happening in a few very special cases where I think they probably had good reason for those people. So, I think

it's very, very unusual - they try everything to keep you in the company. But that's a funny term to have in the contract. (Interviewee 9)

An HR professional at Company A emphasizes that if a situation arises where an employee cannot be placed within the guaranteed time frame, something significant must have gone wrong, as their intent is to secure employment for their repatriates. While mutual agreements or resignations have occurred, the guarantee aims to provide a certain level of security. Nonetheless, the HR professional pointed out that no one can provide an absolute assurance due to the evolving nature of organizations and the broader job market. He emphasized that labour law allows for employee exclusion despite employment contracts.

The repatriate, interviewee 9, expressed his dissatisfaction with this contract term, perceiving it somewhat harsh from the company, considering that he and many other expatriates take the risk of going abroad for their employer. He described his discontent in the following: *"it's almost like a little punishment or risk let's say."* Additionally, the repatriate noted that the company also had a clause allowing them to recall employees with zero notice in exceptional situations, such as a major oil price crash. While the participant was personally okay with this clause, he expressed discomfort with the six-month termination clause. Despite some concerns and discussions about this clause, interviewee 9 personally did not feel overly worried about it. However, he acknowledged that it had influenced some colleagues' decisions to decline international assignments:

People are talking about it a lot, to be honest. Like it came up in conversations. I personally didn't worry about it because I was trying to do a good job. I tried to keep good relationships. I think I'm on good terms with the company, both there and back home, so I wasn't worried [...] But I think there were some people that were bothered by it, and it affected their decision not to go even. (Interviewee 9)

Also, interview participant 8 expresses his concerns about the contract terms related to job security upon repatriation. He found it worrisome that their employment contracts allowed for the possibility of not finding a job after six months back home. While he personally felt secure due to his line manager's plans, he noted this contractual uncertainty could be a risk to others' careers.

These concerns demonstrate the risks and doubts associated with foreign assignments, highlighting that expatriates require qualities such as flexibility, and adaptability. It is important to understand that this guarantee provides a safety net, but it does not determine the nature of the position upon return; it lays a foundation for continued employment and career growth within the organization. Typically, it ensures that employees have a job for the first six months after repatriation, which is often extended into a permanent position based on the employee's

performance and the organization's needs. While there is some apprehension about job security, most participants feel that their company values their experience and wants to keep them.

4.3.4.5. Career Expectations

Effective management of career expectations during the repatriation process is a critical component of a successful return for employees following their international assignments. The career expectations of repatriates differ depending on the duration of their expatriate assignments. It has been found out that short-term assignees often anticipate returning to the same position they held before the assignment. In contrast, long-term assignees typically expect higher-level positions, with increased responsibilities and higher financial compensation upon their return. Additionally, two repatriates also expressed their desire for extended holidays or sabbaticals. Repatriates believe their experiences abroad have equipped them with valuable skills that should be recognized by their employer. They seek recognition for their experiences and expertise gained during their international assignments and emphasize the importance of respect and appreciation for their contributions to the organization. HR manager, interviewee 4, shared her thoughts regarding the career expectations from her experience:

They have a lot of experience and I think it's only natural for the employee to expect, [...] Usually that's also what the employees naturally tell you „I'm certainly not going back into the same position". We are aware that if you would just take people back and they would sit at the very same table they're probably not happy with that decision or would not even agree on that and tell us like "I'd rather look somewhere else". I think that comes natural and it's absolutely reasonable too, as I said, they gained a lot of experience abroad. And that makes a difference. [...] We want to make sure that we use their potential and not just make them sit in the very same position again. (Interviewee 4)

Another HR professional acknowledges that an expatriate assignment is usually linked with a promotion upon return. However, these unwritten promises create high expectations among the employees which are sometimes hard to fulfill. *“When you come back it's always a promise that something good will happen to you. But that promise does not always materialize. Yeah, and it creates some sort of expectation that stays in the back of your mind.”* (Interviewee 6)

Moreover, the experiences of individual repatriates, like those of interviewee 2, highlight the challenges that may arise when career expectations are not met. Returning with high ambitions from his overseas contributions, he struggled to fit into a role alongside his colleagues in the home company with different qualifications. He emphasized the complexity of comparing his practical expertise with those with less hands-on experience. While he recognized the challenges for companies in balancing expats' needs with team dynamics and salary structures, he disagreed

with using a university degree as the sole measure of success. His decision to leave the company post-repatriation was influenced by unmet job roles and reintegration expectations.

To prevent employee turnover, the HR professional interviewee 10 underscored the importance of expectation management. He mentioned that transparency, open feedback, and clear perspective are crucial to tackle the divergence of expectations. Although formal discussions about expectations before assignments are not common within his organization, the alignment between roles and an employee's career path reduces conflicting expectations. Career progression is an ongoing collaborative process where employees should comprehend their role's purpose and associated expectations, reflecting their commitment in development and future prospects. While meeting specific expectations can be demanding, consistent communication during career discussions can reveal employees' short-term, medium-term, and long-term ambitions, along with their career expectations and future plans.

Another HR manager highlighted that meeting employees' expectations usually works out surprisingly well in her organization. This is also owed to the fact that their employees know that they are very valuable to the organization. As emphasized by the HR professional, interviewee 4: *"Otherwise, we wouldn't invest so much money into them. So, it's definitely not our intention to just let them go."* She continues by stating:

But you know in the end you have to make sure that expectations are kind of matching. And if they don't ... yeah, there's just no other choice than to let them go. But at least we try whenever we can, to let them go in good conditions. As we always experience, maybe sooner or later they will come back and find the exact right spots within our organization. So then at least we can make sure that we leave them in good conditions. (Interviewee 4)

Moreover, another HR professional stressed the challenge of maintaining transparency and ensuring that expectations align with reality during the repatriation process. Central to overcoming this challenge is effective communication. While continuous information sharing may not be necessary, finding the right balance in communication is essential. He emphasized that key elements for a successful repatriation include maintaining regular contact, facilitating discussions, and ensuring timely preparation for the return.

4.3.4.6. Career Promotion and Financial Compensation

Repatriates usually strive for career advancement after returning from their international assignments by leveraging the knowledge gained during their time abroad. This ambition is a common expectation among repatriates and aligns with talent development mechanisms within organizations. As emphasized by interviewee 10: *"ideally, you have a higher-ranking position, of course"*. This progression is considered as an integral part of the expatriation experience. HR professionals often commit to assuring repatriates that they will return to at least the same or

equivalent position held before their international assignments. As interviewee 10 highlights: *“we even guarantee that”*. This commitment is crucial for retaining repatriates, as emphasized by the HR professional, interviewee 6: *“Retention is very important because you invest so much into the employees. But if you feel stuck in the company and you feel you can't progress, well then people tend to change”*. However, the possibility of career advancement after repatriation depends on various factors. In larger organizations career progression is usually possible if the employees possess the academic background, whereas smaller organizations may find it challenging to promote repatriates due to their limited job openings. One repatriate experienced difficulties to reintegrate into a higher position within his company due to the required academic qualifications for the desired job positions: *“it is sometimes easier to move up the career ladder faster by looking for job opportunities outside the company”*, (Interviewee 2). Moreover, interviewee 9, talked about the general sentiment of returnees within his organization when they do not receive a promotion upon return: *“There is a kind of question mark asking yourself, like ‘come on, have you progressed?’ You've gone away for five years and then you're doing the same. It has just to do with what's available in the company”*. He emphasized the importance of personal initiative and adaptability in pursuing career opportunities and expressed confidence in his ability to explore different roles in the future, either within the company or externally if necessary.

The potential of career promotion upon repatriation is dependent on several factors, including performance, availability of positions, opportunities, and flexibility. Two out of six repatriates experienced a degree of continuity in their job positions, where they resumed roles like those they held before their expatriation. One repatriate, interviewee 5, was able to leverage on his international experience by returning into his old team now as their leader. This role allowed him to utilize knowledge and experiences gained abroad making them a valuable resource for colleagues facing challenges related to foreign markets or cultures: *“I offered to everybody when I came back... if they have any issues with China, they don't understand them or whatever it is [...] communication wise, they can come to me.”* This demonstrates the value of international exposure in career development, which is supported by, interviewee 4, an HR manager:

If somebody worked with a team for a few years somewhere in China and comes back, this person has personally and professionally developed and of course we want to make sure that we use our potential and not just make them sit in the very same position again. (Interviewee 4)

Notably, one repatriate, interviewee 7, underwent significant role changes, moving from a technical role as a geoscientist into a managerial one. He explained: *“I came back as a project manager for digitalization projects and data science projects.”* This career change was initiated by himself; however, he still highlighted the challenges of adapting to this new and completely different position: *“Changing the job was a challenge.”* However, not all repatriates experience

promotions or significant role changes. Interviewee 8, who pursued a shorter expatriate assignment did not receive a promotion upon repatriation: *"I did not get promoted. I came back to the more or less the same position and the work that I did was similar."* In contrast, interviewee 9, who completed two expatriate assignments, experienced career progression opportunities despite expressing disappointment over a lack of salary increase following a job grade promotion. This situation was attributed to complex organizational arrangements involving the company's works council and salary re-standardization.

In terms of financial compensation, repatriates note that the consistent benefit packages they received during their international assignments are not available anymore upon returning home, which can be frustrating. In Company B salary adjustments are made annually, and these are tied to merit processes in the home country. This means that, over time, the employees' salary gradually increases, and when repatriates take on new positions upon repatriation, they can expect higher salaries. However, it is crucial to emphasize that despite these incremental benefits, many expatriates encounter the discontinuation of allowances, entitlements, and benefits when they repatriate. This change can be frustrating for them, as they no longer enjoy the advantages provided during their foreign assignments, contributing to heightened expectations that can be challenging for organizations to meet. The findings suggest that five out of six repatriates negotiated for a higher salary than their pre-expatriation earnings. In specific situations, companies are willing to customize salary structures to retain and motivate repatriated employees, which may involve creating new job positions or salary bands that align with the repatriate's skills and experience. However, managing repatriates' expectations can be challenging for companies. Finding a balance between retaining and motivating employees, while staying within salary structures and regulations is a significant task for HR and global mobility.

4.3.4.7. Employee Retention vs. Employee Turnover

The collaborative efforts made by both the organization and the employee to secure a suitable post-return job, with the desired outcomes of knowledge infusion and career advancement, significantly influence whether an employee chooses to remain with or depart from the company. Generally, it has been found out that the repatriates express a certain sense of commitment to their employers after their international assignments. However, some decide to explore external opportunities, given their attractiveness in the job market. This section elaborates on repatriates' intent to stay with their employers and delves into the topic of employee turnover.

Intent to Stay with the Employer: The repatriates' intentions to stay with their employers following their international assignments are determined by a combination of personal experiences and organizational factors. Common themes emerge from these diverse experiences offering an insight into this critical aspect of employee retention. One prevailing theme is loyalty to the organization. Employees who have been working for various years often feel rooted connections

with their employers which creates a sense of devotion. This loyalty stems from an appreciation of the stability and security the company offers, which is especially valued in the volatile oil industry, where job redundancies have occurred in recent years. Moreover, alignment with personal interests and factors such as geographical proximity to family, partners, or hometowns influence the decision to stay, and was stated by three repatriates. Likewise, the compatibility of the corporate culture with the repatriate's values and preferences further reinforces the decision to remain with the employer. Organizational commitment of employee growth and development is another critical determinant. Repatriates who see their employers as providing opportunities for career advancement, including international assignments and further education, while also fostering knowledge infusion and personal enrichment, are more likely to stay. Interviewee 7 describes various factors expressing his satisfaction towards his employer:

I have the feeling that I get support, I can grow, and I get out of my comfort zone and that my opinion is appreciated and heard and that I have responsibility or get responsibility. So, I have the feeling that I can also, even if it's just on a personal level, make an impact on people as well. So, sharing knowledge, mutual knowledge exchange. And this is what I like. So, I come every day to work, I have the possibility to choose what I want to do. Obviously at the end of the day I need to deliver [...] but I can pick whatever I want best in a certain situation. I want to do a bit of admin now or a bit of technical work... It's nice. And the salary is not bad, obviously.
 (Interviewee 7)

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that external market dynamics and industry changes can also influence returnees' decisions. Concerns about the future direction of the business, particularly in sectors undergoing profound change, may lead some to seek alternative employment opportunities.

Employee Turnover: Employee turnover, a reality in the corporate world, is a concern that MNCs strive to minimize, by putting a lot of effort into retaining their valuable workforce. As interviewee 10, an HR professional, properly states: “*of course, that is something that should definitely be avoided*”. In Company A the employee turnover rate is rather low, even though exact numbers were not mentioned. According to the HR Business Partner the low attrition rates are owed to the company's attractiveness as an employer including a comprehensive employment package and a positive company culture with appreciation, respect, and open interaction. His company is a big global player operating in a dynamic industry with the possibility of offering continuous opportunities for development, benefits beyond salary. The HR expert expresses a realistic and open-minded approach toward workforce dynamics and mentions that employee turnover is natural and not always something negative; it is often in the best interest of both the company and the employee, to terminate the employment relationship. In today's evolving job landscape, employees rarely commit to a single employer for life. This rather positive attitude towards

employee turnover aligns with the Global Mobility Expert, interviewee 3, who shares the following personal insights:

I think the main learning that I have now after so many years spent in HR is that regardless how much effort I put in what I'm doing, I will not be able to please everyone because every employee has different needs. Doesn't matter how much I want to help them, some of them will not be happy with our support and they will simply resign and look for a different employer. At the beginning I was frustrated when such things happened, and I was wondering why and asking if we can change something to keep these people in the organization? But the answer is no. [...]. So, if one day the motivation is gone, it's gone and that's it. (Interviewee 3)

However, by addressing this issue thoroughly, MNCs can take actions to enhance employee retention. Interviewees emphasized that employee turnover after repatriation can often be attributed to misaligned expectations, lack of career development opportunities, or a company's inability to provide promotions or attractive positions. Maintaining transparency, open communication, and offering a clear career path can help reduce turnover and retain valuable talent. The key takeaway is that a well-defined retention strategy is necessary, though it cannot eliminate fluctuations entirely. As interviewee 3 notes: *"There are fluctuations. Yes exactly, and we have to accept that this is the situation and that's it. Maybe it's the personal situation at home [...] Then you cannot change this. You have to accept it and move forward."*

One interviewee within this research, repatriate 2, provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by repatriates. He changed employers due to uncertainty about his professional reintegration and limited career advancement opportunities. Despite aspiring to a team leader role, his former employer required additional training that conflicted with his personal life and family obligations. Frustrated by this uncertainty and unmet expectations, he eventually left the company and found a position in a medium-sized company, where he could pursue his career goals without delays or additional educational requirements.

While employee turnover is a reality, MNCs can minimize it through attractive employment packages and a positive work culture. Thereby, it is important to acknowledge the evolving nature of careers and employees' diverse needs. Companies do not need to bend excessively to meet every expectation, as interviewee 10 wisely asserts:

As a company, you don't have to bend over backward. That's crucial. We are an organization, and everyone is replaceable here, that's how it is... and every employee actually has their own destiny in their hands, that's the key. (Interviewee 10)

In conclusion, while organizations are dedicated to reducing employee turnover by creating appealing employment packages and fostering positive work environments, they must also

recognize the limitations in fulfilling every individual's expectation. Some employees may seek better opportunities elsewhere when it better aligns with their career goals.

4.3.5. Post-Return Support: Professional Reintegration

After the repatriates return from their foreign assignments to their home company and home country, it is essential to offer repatriates with the support they need for successful professional reintegration within the organization. This post-return support represents the final phase of the organizational support provided. The findings indicated that reintroduction events and cultural reintegration courses play a useful role in this process. Additionally practical information about changes in the home country and support for repatriate families are also necessary.

4.3.5.1. Formal Reintroduction into the Home Company

Interestingly, it has been found out that the companies interviewed did not have formal reintroductions for the repatriates within their departments. Repatriates, having spent several years abroad where organizational changes often occurred, such as new colleagues or restructuring, sometimes felt disconnected from their home company. For instance, interviewee 1 mentioned that her boss's gesture of gifting her a welcome back card alongside essential work equipment made her feel happy and appreciated. Repatriates expressed that they would be in favour of social gatherings with their new teams and colleagues, as these events help them in their professional reintegration. As interviewee 8 pointed out, such gatherings are not only beneficial for the returning employee but also for their colleagues:

Sometimes it's a bit strange because only recently a person came back from a country after five years and all of a sudden, he is just sitting there. I mean everyone knows this person from before. But still [...] I mean he just came back and then you maybe go for a coffee or so. But sometimes it's strange. (Interviewee 8)

An official social welcome gathering, which recognizes the repatriate's return makes all the parties involved aware that the employee is back in the office, part of the home company again. This fosters a sense of belonging and initiates fruitful business cooperation among colleagues.

4.3.5.2. Reintegration Training

Expatriate assignments serve the dual purpose of facilitating international business activities and providing personnel with valuable international experience. These assignments offer valuable opportunities through working abroad but can be challenging due to cultural differences and unfamiliar environments. To ensure successful reintegration upon return, it is crucial to offer post-return support, including cultural reintegration training.

One key aspect of the expatriate experience is cultural integration. Expatriates often face cultural differences, not only in the host country but also upon returning home, where things may have

changed during their absence. The interview participants shared their personal experiences of cultural differences and noted that cultural training would serve as reminders of cultural norms. Such training would help with cultural reintegration and practicalities such as registering with authorities and finding relocated stores. The insights from HR professionals and repatriates underscore the importance of post-return support, including cultural reintegration training. While cultural training is typically provided before departure, some repatriates suggested that it should also be offered upon return. This training would help individuals reacquaint themselves with their home country's culture, understand any changes that have occurred, and navigate practical matters like taxation and registration. As emphasized by the HR professional, interviewee 6:

This would be an idea, the cultural reintegration training, because you get one when you move in in the new country. Why not get one when you come back? So just to know the practicalities. I would see it as an idea, because there are a lot of changes in the country that you left from. And you need to know, okay, „what am I doing with my kid"? "Am I paying taxes in the same place?" I'd like to register with the authorities... is it in the same place? And the company is not supporting you at all. (Interviewee 6)

Most of the repatriates expressed that they personally did not feel the need for a cultural training after homecoming, but recognized its potential benefits, especially for expatriates with extended stays abroad. Interviewee 2 highlighted that this training would be especially beneficial for repatriates who formed a relationship abroad and return home with a partner from another culture. This training could support a partner's adaptation and community integration. As interviewee 2 explained in the following:

Of course, pre-return training for repatriate families is also very important. Because, naturally, many singles go abroad, and then they might return with someone. I know four examples of people who went to Latin America, and each one came back with a Latina. This is something that, in the post-return phase, can additionally support the family. In essence, the situation shifts, in the sense that if you go abroad as an expat with a family, you look forward to being integrated into the place or country as quickly as possible. But if you go as a single and return with a family, then it would be fantastic if the company helps support the employee's family. (Interviewee 2)

Overall, the post-return support should encompass cultural training, practical assistance, and resources for navigating changes in the home country. Additionally, offering reduced working hours at the beginning and end of an assignment was proposed by interviewee 1 as a helpful measure to aid in the transition for returning employees. Ultimately, the key takeaway is that support during repatriation significantly enhances expatriate success and well-being, facilitating

their smooth reintegration into home organizations and countries, where they can effectively leverage their enriched skills and experiences.

4.3.5.3. Debriefing

Debriefing is a critical aspect of the repatriation process, serving three primary purposes: technical debriefing for knowledge transfer, HR debriefing for organizational feedback, and repatriate experience debriefing for insights valuable to future assignees. Repatriates represent a very valuable source of knowledge and information which can help to enhance the knowledge transfer between subsidiaries, improve the organizational and HR planning for expatriate assignments, and provide guidance for future expatriates. The findings indicate that no formal process exists within the three companies interviewed yet, but interviewees from all three organizations surveyed, including HR professionals and repatriates, consistently affirmed the value of such processes.

HR-Debriefing Interview: In terms of HR debriefing, conducting a post-repatriation interview between the company's HR and the repatriate, alongside with their spouse, can be highly beneficial. These final interviews are conducted once the initial emotional upheaval has settled, and the repatriate's family has reintegrated. They serve as a valuable final evaluation, helping to identify bottlenecks and challenges in the repatriation process, thereby facilitating adjustments and efficiency improvements. At the same time, this discussion demonstrates commitment, appreciation, and recognition towards the repatriate. However, formal HR debriefing sessions are often absent, as emphasized by the HR professional, interviewee 6: *“the debriefing interview.... it never happens...”*. Nevertheless, interviewee 6 still recognizes the potential for learning and development and highlights the valuable insights that could emerge from such discussions. The non-existence of debriefing interviews is quite surprising for repatriates, as they are willing to share their experiences to support the improvement of organizational practices of expatriate assignments. As expressed by interviewee 9 in the following:

This was something that surprised me for both my assignments that there's no feedback session. I mean the HR was amazing for both the home country and host country. The only thing is, they don't have a debriefing session [...] but it's surprising because it is a good chance to give feedback. (Interviewee 9)

Also, HR professionals recognize the opportunity such a feedback session would bring along, as underlined by the Global Mobility Expert, interviewee 3: *“The debriefing interview is again something very, very good and interesting because learnings might come out from such an interview. It is a development opportunity for everyone to learn from this experience.”* Another HR professional noted that the decision to conduct HR debriefing often varies among HR managers. She advocates for making debriefing a mandatory step in the repatriation process to ensure consistent knowledge transfer. She emphasized that it could not only help the returning employees

but also future assignees by fostering knowledge sharing and mentions that some repatriates “*wish for it, some don’t*” (Interviewee 4). Moreover, the HR Business Partner suggested structured debriefing meetings for HR and returnees, as these meetings provide a platform to discuss the expatriate experience, address any issues, and offer valuable feedback. As described in the following:

I believe that this would make sense, for instance, in my role as an HR Business Partner. I sit down with the returnee, perhaps for an hour [...] and most importantly, I also get to know the people I haven't been accompanying for a few years. That's also quite valuable... and I receive immediate feedback. However, from my perspective, it can only be an offer. (Interviewee 10)

Technical Knowledge Debriefing: The transfer of knowledge back into the home organization is very important as it allows to leverage on the experiences, and skills gained abroad. Repatriates discussed the importance of knowledge infusion and debriefing after returning from international assignments and explained that is almost not done. Notably, one repatriate summarized his knowledge and learnings gained abroad in a written form driven by his line manager’s request. In contrast, interviewee 5 had the possibility to return to a job in which his expertise gained abroad helped him as he could offer valuable insights to colleagues dealing with matters related to China. Another repatriate expressed that there is no formal knowledge debriefing process, and that they are expected to transfer skills without guidance. Additionally, the participants also discussed the challenges of organizing and transferring data and knowledge within the organization. The absence of a structured process for knowledge transfer and data storage is identified as a problem that can incur costs for companies. Interviewee 8 underscored the importance of knowledge transfer during debriefing. He highlighted the complications arising from the lack of systematic data organization:

That's a very big topic, knowledge and also data. Because you collect so much data over the years [...] but then if there is no common agreed way on how to store data [...] it's a complete mess after a couple of years. And this costs the company a lot of money. (Interviewee 8)

Repatriate Insight Network: The concept of the Repatriate Insight Network underscores the importance of sharing experiences and feedback with the company upon return, which emerged as a crucial finding within this thesis. It highlights the importance of acknowledging the value of the international experiences at the workplace. While financial compensation is necessary, it serves as a hygiene factor rather than a long-term motivator. What truly matters is the appreciation and respect shown to repatriates for their knowledge. As one HR professional emphasized:

I also believe that the organization they return to should have an open ear for the experiences people have gained elsewhere. [...] So, they return and naturally want to share their experiences and perhaps how things are done differently elsewhere. And then you simply don't want to hear, "Yes, that's fine, but we don't do it that way here." [...] because otherwise, what one may have accomplished elsewhere for a certain period tends to be dismissed just because they weren't physically present. I think this is also important when we talk about expectations... Of course, everyone is different, right... some might not care at all, but I do believe that respect and appreciation are important and that one should feel heard. (Interviewee 10)

Several methods can facilitate knowledge exchange, including round table discussions, internal company magazines, and online platforms like blogs. Especially, round table discussions are perceived as a constructive way for encouraging repatriates to share their experiences. As interviewee 10 suggested: *"I mean, for example, you could invite a cross-section of employees to a round table once a quarter. I think it's a good idea."* These sessions encourage feedback sharing and mutual learning. Repatriates can serve as mentors for new assignees, providing valuable insights and support. Fostering a corporate culture characterized by openness, respect, and appreciation for diverse perspectives is considered vital for successful repatriation and organizational growth. In conclusion, the Repatriate Insight Network promotes the idea that repatriates should have avenues to share their experiences and insights. It emphasizes the importance of respecting and appreciating the knowledge they bring back and facilitates knowledge exchange. The goal is to create an inclusive and supportive organizational culture that benefits both repatriates and the organization.

4.3.6. Contrasting Example: Lack of Support

The previous subchapters revealed that most of the repatriates benefited from extensive support systems, receiving support measures before, during, and after their expatriate assignments. However, it is notable that the intensity of the organizational support vastly decreased during the repatriation process. This makes it evident that the repatriation of expatriates still represents an underestimated phase within the expatriation cycle, often resulting in a perceived lack of support, particularly concerning job planning and professional reintegration into the base company. Despite these repatriation challenges, expatriate support systems are generally viewed as well-structured and positive.

As already touched upon in chapter "3.3 Data Collection", one interview with a female repatriate from a company operating in the communication and information systems industry, stands out within the research sample. She received significantly less support compared to the other repatriates. Her company has a notably smaller expatriate workforce, comprising only 25 employees, which operates quite differently from the larger firms in this study. These larger companies maintain expansive expatriate networks, ranging from 100 to 400 employees. This

variance underscores that the size of a company's expatriate workforce has a significant impact on the support measures offered to its international employees. Consequently, the returnee faced a more challenging repatriation experience than her counterparts in the larger companies, warranting a detailed examination of her unique repatriation experience. This subchapter serves a dual purpose: first, it highlights how the company's size and expatriate network can significantly influence the support received by repatriates. Second, it emphasizes the critical role of MNCs offering comprehensive repatriation support programs. These programs aim to improve the homecoming experience, ensure seamless reintegration into the home country and company, and ultimately improve employee satisfaction. When expatriates receive solid organizational support before and during repatriation, their willingness to stay with the company is significantly higher. This increased commitment and loyalty results from a genuine sense of appreciation and recognition by the employer.

4.3.6.1. Received Organizational Support and Homecoming Experience

When examining the expatriation journey of interviewee 1, it becomes evident that she encountered unique challenges and would have greatly benefited from additional assistance. The support received during her expatriate assignment reveals a mixed picture, highlighting the need for more support. Throughout her journey, different phases showcased both the company's assistance and the areas where additional support could have been valuable. Before her international assignment, her company had an assignment policy in place, including financial support for a tax advisor up to a certain limit and a relocation bonus. However, there were notable gaps in support during the relocation phase. The company took responsibility for booking her flight ticket and arranging a temporary hotel stay upon arrival, but many other aspects of her relocation, including finding an apartment and managing the shipment of personal belongings, became her sole responsibility. The interviewee expressed the need for more support, particularly for logistical and relocation challenges, as articulated in her quote:

They book your flight and then you get a hotel at the beginning. [...] So, I organized everything myself. I would have appreciated things like recommendations for how to send boxes or which companies to use or things like this. [...] and then especially the support locally there.
 (Interviewee 1)

The company also provided look and field trips, but her primary focus was on work-related tasks during these visits, as she stated:

I went there several times before I actually moved because I was already working on so many topics with them. So, it was not just like a trip "oh hi, nice to meet everyone" and driving around to see where I want to live. No.... I was really working. So, on the weekends, if I stayed for two weeks or so, I would look at apartments. (Interviewee 1)

During her international assignment, the company provided her with a car due to the long distances she had to travel. The financial support continued during her stay abroad which could be utilized for various purposes, including purchasing furniture locally or obtaining a local driver's license. The interviewee mentioned that she appreciated the coaching services offered to her which proved beneficial, for professional and personal issues, especially during challenging times.

Upon her return, the process of reintegration began, which she had to proactively initiate at least eight months before her return date, as communicated in the organization's policies. However, she received no assistance with terminating her work contract or closing housing agreement. Financially, she was granted a relocation bonus upon returning, which was slightly reduced compared to the one she received before departure. Interviewee 1 faced a challenging homecoming experience to Austria which occurred during a COVID-19 lockdown, complicating her transition. She was isolated in her apartment due to the lockdown and an ankle injury, preventing her from socializing with others. This isolation contrasted sharply with her previous responsibilities and workload in the host country, resulting in adjustment difficulties.

I came back and obviously I still had the handover, and I was going through a transition phase, but it was going down a lot, the responsibility and all the challenging tasks. So, it's quite challenging to adapt to this that you come from let's say a high-speed boat to a slow boat or something like that. (Interviewee 1)

This phenomenon, often referred to as "micro-management," is a common experience among repatriates who may feel their skills gained during international assignments enable them to accomplish more. Upon her return, Interviewee 1 had certain expectations, including a salary increase, the possibility of a sabbatical, and the potential for a promotion. In terms of her professional reintegration, she received a warm welcome from her team, and her boss was supportive. She was working for three months, transitioning into her role, and adapting to a slower-paced work environment, which was challenging but ultimately satisfying as she assumed more senior responsibilities. Her role evolved significantly, suggesting a shift rather than a promotion. Over time, her expectations were gradually met as she successfully negotiated an increased salary and secured the desired sabbatical. Overall, the expatriate's journey from departure to return was dynamic as she had to take significant initiative and responsibility for many organizational tasks. This experience highlights the importance of a well-rounded supportive system to help expatriates adjust to their new environment, reduce stress of relocation, and facilitate reintegration. It emphasizes the significance of providing comprehensive repatriation support, which helps to align the organizations and the employees' expectations, increase employee satisfaction and commitment towards the employer, and a successful expatriation cycle.

4.3.6.2. Desired Organizational Support

The repatriate stressed the importance of effectively managing her transition, particularly regarding the motivations and expectations between the multiple parties involved including HR, the current manager, and the new manager. She encountered challenges when her manager in the home company wanted to retain her until the last day, complicating her relocation to the host country, which she had to manage independently. Therefore, she recommended implementing a structured transition timeline, gradually reducing home country job responsibilities to near-zero before moving. This approach allows for a smoother transition and workload management during expatriation and repatriation. Furthermore, she expressed a desire for greater assistance in logistics and relocation, particularly with packaging and shipping arrangements. Interviewee 1 also mentioned the need for comprehensive information and guidance. She advocated for structured plans, timelines, and clear instructions especially for time-sensitive tasks like obtaining a driver's license within a 60-day restriction. Additionally, she wished for lists of recommended places to go for various needs, such as banks or furniture stores. Local support in the new location was another critical point. The availability and quality of support is often depended on the receiving unit, whereby smaller companies like hers have limited resources for expatriate support. She emphasized the access to local support and guidance for a smoother transition. Moreover, she would have appreciated support in unsettling during repatriation including the termination of contracts of work, housing, or bank accounts, and support with bureaucratic tasks and logistics.

Overall, the limited organizational support highlighted the importance of a more structured and supportive process to facilitate the expatriate's experience and reduce stress. This aligns with the insights from the literature review of this thesis. Even if returnees perceive a decrease in their roles and responsibilities, their feeling of deprivation can be mitigated when they receive the attention and support, they believe they deserve from the organization. Consequently, organizational support plays a pivotal role in reducing career derailment by fostering feelings of commitment and loyalty towards the employer. Support, while not resolving the challenges of managing high expectations, can enhance employees' commitment, increasing their intent to stay, even in the absence of career promotions due to a limited number of top-level positions.

4.4. Expatriates Repatriation Journey

The concluding section of the findings chapter in this thesis delves into the repatriates' perspectives of their repatriation experiences. It offers valuable insights into how repatriates perceived the support measures provided to them and informs about their personal evaluations of these measures. This final chapter discusses the areas in which the repatriates found support to be effective and highlights aspects where they felt a need for more guidance.

4.4.1. Perceived Organizational Support

The repatriates generally perceived the organizational support throughout their expatriation and repatriation journey as very positive, however they primarily faced challenges regarding job planning. Their overall positive perception of the received support is reflected in their commitment and loyalty towards their employers. Nevertheless, there were still specific areas where they wished for improvement or additional support. Consistency and comfort were recurring themes in their feedback. The repatriates consistently felt supported throughout their repatriation processes and never felt alone due to the continuous support they received. This is highlighted by interviewee 5: *“One of the nicest things for sure was that you know you will always have somebody backing you up and helping you in every direction possible. [...] So, in the end it was really well organized.”*

It has been found positive that support networks seamlessly extended across both local and international aspects of repatriation. Assistance was readily available regardless of whether they were dealing with issues in their home or host countries. This seamless transition between locations was a valuable aspect of the support they received. The repatriate, interviewee 2, expressed general satisfaction even though he encountered challenges, stating that he was surprised by the extent and quality of the support provided:

I was actually somewhat surprised by the way it was handled, and the support provided because, well, it's a large company, but the way it was managed and how the support was given was very, very good. So, it was really the case that even services or things were supported where you initially wouldn't expect that someone would take care of them or that someone would actually do it. (Interviewee 2)

However, some repatriates noted that they received less support during the repatriation phase compared to during their stay abroad. This is expressed by interviewee 8 who mentioned a decline in interaction during this phase.

I think in general; a lot is done especially in the expatriation. There's a lot of support and that's all relatively clear. [...] also, the treatment in the country [...] I mean on the repatriation, I can't recall... there was a medical check-up before my return. And when it was clear that I would be returning... I can't remember... There was not so much interaction. I mean there was an end of assignment

contract which I needed to sign [...] the company took care of the housing, that it was cancelled... Also, my homecoming was easy because my boss, my line manager, already knew what I would have to do. (Interviewee 8)

While the overall support was positive, some repatriates pointed out areas for improvement. Before the international assignment commences, interviewee 5 highlighted the need for better cultural preparation and training before the assignment. He found that adapting to cultural differences was challenging, especially in host countries with big cultural differences like China. He recommended providing insights into local customs and ways of interaction to facilitate smoother interactions and avoid misunderstandings. Interviewee 9 raised one major issue, the absence of tax advice both before and after the international assignment. The repatriate would have wished for recommendations related to taxation and financial planning to better cope with understanding tax obligations and specific tax rules to prevent financial issues.

Five out of six repatriates emphasized the importance of ongoing communication throughout the expatriation and repatriation process. Interviewee 5 mentioned while he appreciated initial support, he noticed a decline in communication after about a year. He suggested that periodic communication, unrelated to issues, would have helped his parent company to maintain a connection and stay updated on his experiences abroad. This is reinforced by the experience of interviewee 8 who argued that he was missing communication and engagement from his company during the assignment. He mentioned the need for personal initiative, especially during the pre-return phase, to gain more clarity of the future job role.

Moreover, challenges were primarily noted in job planning and resocialization. Repatriates expressed feelings of uncertainty and highlighted the importance of having a clear plan for reintegration into the organization, including structured guidance and discussions about career expectations and potential job positions. Three out of six repatriates expressed the need for career counselling and job planning. Interviewee 7 mentioned missing a structured approach to repatriation, with ongoing discussions and strategic planning about his roles within the organization which had to be compensated by extra efforts and individual initiative. This need is further emphasized by Interviewee 2, who expressed overall satisfaction with the support during his international assignment but noted a gap in job reintegration upon return. He wished for better alignment of expectations and balanced solutions.

Furthermore, interviewee 9 desired more frequent home-visits during the assignment to strengthen ties with the home country and the company. This would have eased his repatriation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he temporarily returned home, facing financial challenges due to the company's housing policy, which covered only the host country. Even though he did not expect housing support in his home country, as it was communicated to him before, he would have

appreciated flexible and enhanced assistance given the extraordinary circumstances. Lastly, three out of six repatriates expressed the absence of formal feedback sessions or debriefings as a potential oversight. They desired more structured opportunities to provide feedback and share their experiences to further enhance the repatriation process.

In conclusion, the repatriates' positive perceptions of organizational support during their repatriation processes are a testament to the company's commitment to facilitating a smooth transition home. However, they would have wished for more ongoing communication, cultural preparation, job planning, career counselling, and financial guidance to enhance the repatriation experience. They also acknowledged the role of personal initiative in navigating the repatriation process effectively.

4.4.2. Professional Reintegration

The repatriates' experiences in terms of professional reintegration into their home companies after foreign assignments vary but share common themes and challenges. The findings reveal that three repatriates experienced smooth reintegration due to well-defined job roles upon return, while three needed to proactively lead their repatriation processes for a successful professional transition. Repatriates often face significant challenges, stemming from changes in the company, their own career ambitions, and the dynamics within the organization. Interviewee 2 properly described this complexity:

Reintegration is indeed a topic of discussion, not only on a personal level but also for the company. You've provided a certain service to the company, and the company knows that you are someone who can effectively survive anywhere [...] And over the long period of three years, you can't guarantee that you'll be able to reintegrate people or provide for them again. And that's certainly a significant challenge for any company - finding a good middle ground, ensuring that you can retain people, keep them motivated, and create a balance. In a large company [...] they have salary bands, and you get placed into one of those based on criteria like basic training, professional experience, and so on. So, it's undoubtedly a tremendous challenge for companies bringing expats back. I'm convinced, aren't you? (Interviewee 2)

Repatriates expressed a smoother professional reintegration when comprehensive organizational support was provided to them. Companies with well-established processes for smooth reintegration, including proactive job planning well before the repatriate's return, ease their transition, reduce stress, and contribute to their satisfaction. One repatriate, interviewee 9, discussed the ease of his organizational reintegration upon returning from his international assignment. He mentioned that the process went smoothly and highlighted the company's experience in handling such transitions, which contributed to his positive experience: “*Yeah, it was very easy. I mean, they've done it so many times for so many expats. I think they've learned over*

the years as well. I can't really complain." The job planning of interview participant 9 was initiated six months pre-return and he received a job grade promotion even though he is doing almost the same job task as before his assignment. Interviewee 8's reintegration was also perceived as simple due to the unfortunate premature termination of the expatriate assignment caused by external factors. His line manager had already arranged a specific job position, ensuring a smooth transition because the repatriate knew his new job's tasks. Also, interviewee 5 described his professional integration as relatively smooth, as he rejoined his previous team in a leadership role:

They immediately welcomed me back without any hesitation. Since they knew me, we never had any issues, we worked well together before. What I did in the very beginning was to sit together with each of them and ask them "what are your expectations from me?" (Interviewee 5)

While he maintained contact with his team during his time abroad, he found it more challenging to reconnect with individuals in the broader company who had changed positions or left. Some repatriates faced difficulties in reintegrating in the organization due to the organizational changes happening, as expressed by interviewee 7: *"I knew my department manager; I knew some people of my team already. But what was a bit tough was that in the meantime a reorganization happened, and people were mixed around."*

It was found out that three repatriates proactively initiated their repatriation processes to ensure their professional transition and overcome reintegration challenges. Out of these three, one struggled with job reintegration, resulting in employee turnover. Whereas interviewee 7, an example of proactive engagement, initiated his job search six months before returning home after facing initial difficulties in job acquisition. This proactive approach, involving seeking new opportunities, acquiring new skills, and embracing role changes, led to career growth and job satisfaction. Despite initial challenges due to skill adjustments, interviewee 7 now expresses contentment with his career development. To facilitate professional reintegration, repatriates who successfully reintegrated often highlight the significance of networking, flexibility, visibility, and sustained effort in achieving career growth and job satisfaction.

Balancing the needs of returning expatriates with existing team dynamics and salary structures poses challenges for companies. Some repatriates, like interviewee 2, may have heightened expectations based on their international experience, desiring higher positions that cannot be fully met. Interviewee 2's professional reintegration was challenging despite his proactive approach, initiated a year in advance, due to conflicting ambitions with colleagues' qualifications and experiences. He found it difficult to relate his extensive expertise with colleagues who had less hands-on experience but possessed proper academic education. While acknowledging the difficulties faced by companies in balancing the needs of returning expats with existing team dynamics and salary structures, he indicated that finding a middle ground was crucial. His decision

to leave the company was not hasty but was based on a comprehensive evaluation of the available opportunities and a thorough assessment of his career expectations in relation to what the company had to offer.

In summary, repatriation into the home company after foreign assignments is a complex process. It requires a balance between the repatriate expectations, company policies, and the evolving dynamics within the organization. Successful reintegration often involves proactive efforts by the repatriate and supportive practices by the company, ultimately leading to positive professional outcomes.

4.4.3. Homecoming Experience: Social and Cultural Adaptation

The homecoming experiences of expatriates vary widely, as evidenced by the insights gained from different interviewees. Four out of five repatriates generally perceived their return in terms of social and cultural adaptation as easy, as emphasized in the following: *“The social adaptation or cultural adaptation was probably just a change but not a significant challenge or something like this. No, it was not.”* (Interviewee 8) *“No challenges, really no”* (Interviewee 7). Notably, two repatriates came back during the COVID-19 pandemic, which put additional strain on their readjustment phase: *“Coming home... First, of course it was quite a difficult task, because in China COVID was still the present, the numbers were going up again. So, you were locked up again in your apartments, in your cities.”* (Interviewee 5)

Individual homecoming experiences differ, with some finding it challenging, especially when dealing with lockdowns or a significant shift in work responsibilities. On the other hand, those with strong social connections and support networks in their home countries often found reintegration relatively easy. Also, the perceived ease in readjustment can be attributed to employees' previous immersion to different cultures and destinations due to personal and professional international experience. Frequent international exposure accelerates adaptation, even though the initial re-entry shock remains inevitable. Additionally, organizational support from the interviewed companies contributed to a smoother transition resulting in a more relaxed homecoming experience. The impact of expatriate assignments on individuals is profound, extending beyond financial benefits. Cultural exposure and adaptation play a major role in personal transformation. These changes may become more pronounced in longer assignments, making repatriation a complex process. Interviewee 7 expressed enthusiasm about his past expatriation experience:

It was overall a positive experience and when I think back to be honest, it was one of the best times... I think in my life. You know I could grow personally and professionally. [...] in a sense that I became less German the way that I work. So, there is room for flexibility and not having a plan A, B, and C all the time but also allow the unplanned a bit. This is what I learned... also I saw Vienna with completely different eyes than when I came back. (Interviewee 7)

The following section elaborates on the cultural and social adaptation of repatriates, providing a detailed account of the challenges they encountered. However, it is worth noting that most repatriates, specifically four out of five individuals interviewed, found the process of returning home to be relatively smooth.

Cultural Adaptation: The People and Culture Manager, interviewee 6, emphasized the profound impact of cultural exposure on expatriates during their experience of living abroad:

An assignment changes you very much, very, very much. It's not necessarily the money part and the benefits, it is the cultural part that is changing. Because you're exposed to these different cultures and whether you want it or not, you adapt. And when you adapt, you change yourself. And when you repatriate, I would see, especially if you have been for five years out of the country challenges arise. (Interviewee 6)

Interviewee 5, who spent three years in China, shared his personal feeling of being a foreigner in his own country after an extended time abroad:

My coming back, I mean. [...] I also got the experience from my earlier travels abroad... that after such a long time when you come back home, you sometimes feel a little bit like a foreigner in your own country. Because even though you know all the habits, you know what's going on, you're not used to it anymore, so you have to adapt again. (Interviewee 5)

This phenomenon of cultural readjustment is not uncommon, as individuals need to reacquaint themselves with their home country's customs and routines. To better cope with these challenges, often referred to as the re-entry culture shock, the HR professional, interviewee 6, recommends cultural reintegration courses. However, cost-cutting in her industry often hinders this option. The advantage of such a training has been reemphasized by the homecoming experience of interviewee 5. Repatriates consistently noted differences in cultural norms and the challenges of readjusting to local habits. For interviewee 1, cultural adaptation involved acclimating to Austrian life, including differences in daily routines like store opening hours, transportation choices, and language use.

The People and Culture Manager beautifully captures the essence of the expatriate experience with the metaphor of being a triangle. When leaving your home country, you are like a square. Upon arrival in a new country, you become part of a round environment that moulds you into something different, like a triangle. This metaphor illustrates the continuous process of adaptation and transformation that occurs during international assignments, making repatriation a unique experience where individuals are no longer the same as when they left their home country.

Social Adaptation: In terms of social adaptation, repatriates often experience significant changes in their social circles. Interviewee 1 captured this the bittersweet feeling of returning to Austria, symbolized by the German saying, *"a sad and a smiling eye."* Extensive travel and prolonged stays abroad can lead to the gradual reduction of one's social circle, leaving only close, dependable friendships. Upon returning home, individuals may need to rebuild their social networks. Interviewee 5 underscored the importance of having a support network upon returning and shared that moving in with a friend facilitated his social reintegration. When spending extended periods abroad, repatriates notice that their friendships change, resulting in smaller social circles. As emphasized by interviewee 2: *"The friendships you have are actually quite rare [...] but they are the ones you can always call, and they are always reliable"* (Interviewee 2). Moreover, the personal aspect of repatriation was discussed, noting that the experience can vary based on one's personality, whether introverted or extroverted. Interviewee 2 shared his own journey, highlighting how he reconnected with the community through sports. However, he mentioned that he currently does not have an extensive social circle due to work commitments and family responsibilities, underscoring the significant impact of individual preferences and circumstances on the repatriation experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the social reintegration of repatriates. Interview participant 5 discussed the difficulty of returning during the ongoing pandemic, with flight cancellations and uncertainties. Moreover, interviewee 1, expressed the emotional challenges of her homecoming due to COVID-19 restrictions and her injury:

It was not easy. I came back when there was a lockdown actually. At that point it was horrible. You could only meet people walking outside, right during this period. And then I hurt my ankle, so I was trapped for a long time at home. But I couldn't walk, so I couldn't go outside. So anyhow I was trapped in my apartment, and it was a big change (Interviewee 1)

In summary, the findings suggest that the expatriates' homecoming experiences are highly individualized and complex journeys influenced by various factors. These include the duration of the assignment, individual personality traits, the extent of cultural adaptation, and the presence of social support. While some repatriates find it relatively easy to readjust socially and culturally into their home country, others face significant challenges. These challenges can be exacerbated by external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals are no longer the same as when they left their home country, as they undergo a transformative journey during their international assignments. Despite the challenges, most repatriates interviewed in this research expressed that their return home was relatively smooth, underscoring the value of personal and professional international exposure in facilitating this transition.

5. Discussion

This chapter explores repatriation dynamics by bridging established theory and real-life practices, derived from the existing literature and the empirical findings of this thesis. The first section discusses newly found additions to existing expatriate management theory. The subsequent section outlines practical contributions and managerial implications for MNCs, focusing on improving employee support during repatriation while aligning with organizational interests. This chapter concludes by addressing research limitations and proposes directions for future research.

5.1. Theoretical Contribution

Black and Gregersen (1999) research has been pivotal in drawing academic attention to repatriation by highlighting the challenges faced by organizations when retaining corporate expatriates after their international assignments. Despite growing attention to repatriation, literature remains fragmented (Chiang et al., 2018), leading to employee turnover due to an incomplete understanding of the repatriates' situations and re-entry processes (Hoang & Ho, 2019). Some organizations overlook the crucial role of repatriation in the expatriation cycle (Burmeister et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2022), causing challenges for HR managers and expatriates (Cave et al., 2022). To address this issue, studies have highlighted the need for organizational support (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; Lazaroova & Cerdin, 2007; Stahl et al., 2009). However, few scholars have examined repatriation from an organizational perspective (Knocke & Schuster, 2017). To bridge this research gap and gain a holistic understanding of the delicate repatriation of expatriates, this thesis takes a multi-dimensional approach, considering both the repatriate and the organizational stakeholder's perspectives. By examining these two dimensions simultaneously, this research aims to provide insights into the intricate repatriation process and contribute valuable insights to the field. This thesis contributes eight distinctive theoretical implications to literature and attempts to close the research gap by investigating how MNCs support expatriates during repatriation while aligning with organizational interests.

1. Integrated Approach – Complexities and Drivers: First, empirical research underlines the complexity of repatriation pointing out its intangible challenges. There is no patent solution that covers all the needs of the different parties involved guaranteeing success. This study concurs with existing literature affirming that repatriates receive comprehensive support during their overseas assignments but considerably less before and after repatriation. This underscores the need for MNCs to enhance support for returning expatriates. Scholars like Wan (2019) and Wang (2023) advocate for treating expatriation and repatriation as integrated processes. This integrated approach aligns with the empirical findings, suggesting repatriation as an ongoing facet of personal and professional development. Talent development is a common goal, with fulfilling business needs as the primary objective. Four drivers for sending employees on expatriate

assignments emerge: (1) business needs, (2) skill-based roles, (3) talent development, and (4) experience-seeker assignments catering to younger employees seeking unique experiences. This latter category introduces a novel dimension, focusing on personal growth rather than primarily fulfilling business needs. It aligns with talent attraction and retention strategies, making the employer more appealing and retaining loyalty, especially among younger employees. Furthermore, prior research by Renshaw et al. (2021) underscores critical factors for expatriate assignment success. These encompass careful assignee selection and preparation, provision of expatriation rewards, long-term career planning, and structured repatriation mechanisms. It is crucial that these factors align with expatriates' individual goals and needs. Building upon this research, the study's empirical findings emphasize the connection between organizational reasons for international assignments and employee motivations. Organizational purposes include addressing business needs, skill development, fostering employee growth, and maintaining an attractive employer profile. Employee motivations span cultural immersion, career advancement, access to unique opportunities, financial incentives, and proximity to international markets. This alignment suggests the potential for more strategic and mutually beneficial expatriate assignments within MNCs.

2. Holistic Support Perception: Secondly, this research reinforces the buffering effect identified by Breitenmoser and Bader (2021) and additionally introduces the concept of holistic support perception. The buffering effect, as described by Breitenmoser and Bader (2021) emphasizes how organizational support reduces perceived career derailment, which refers to experiencing a decrease in hierarchical status and responsibility compared to the pre-assignment level, while increasing the repatriates' intent to stay with their employer. This insight aligns with Meuer et al.'s (2019) findings that connect enhanced organizational support to job embeddedness, reducing the perception of career derailment. What sets this research apart is the finding that repatriates view support holistically throughout their entire expatriate journey, without differentiating between pre-expatriation, expatriation, and repatriation phases. Repatriates typically receive extensive support before and during expatriation, but this support significantly decreases upon repatriation, aligning with existing literature. Nevertheless, even with reduced support during repatriation, repatriates maintain a positive perception of the overall organizational support. Measures such as career planning, clear communication about job roles, and increased compensation demonstrate the organization's commitment to the repatriates' well-being and career development. When repatriates feel valued, supported, and have clarity about their post-return roles, they can form realistic expectations, even if those expectations do not necessarily involve a promotion in rank. This is particularly important because as individuals advance in their careers, higher-ranking positions become scarcer. Recognizing this holistic perspective is vital for companies, as it helps to maintain repatriates' commitment and intent to stay, even if expectations might not be entirely met upon return, ultimately benefiting both the employees and the organization.

3. Balancing Organizational Interests and Employee Needs: This research sheds light on the paramount challenge faced by HR professionals of balancing organizational interests with employee needs. As confirmed by existing literature, organizational needs include enhancing employee satisfaction, managing assignment costs within budget constraints, maximizing return on investment (KPMG International, 2022), promoting knowledge transfer (Peltokorpi et al., 2022), and employee retention (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021; KPMG International, 2022; Wang, 2023). Importantly, the empirical findings within this thesis have revealed a subtle shift in the perception of employee retention. While employee retention remains a primary objective for MNCs, HR professionals no longer view low employee turnover rates solely as a negative outcome, but rather as a natural occurrence, as long as turnover rates stay low. Empirical evidence suggests that companies are shifting their focus away from the retention metric alone towards enhancing the overall employee experience. This strategic shift recognizes that improving employee satisfaction inherently fosters greater loyalty and commitment, positively influencing employee retention. The delicate equilibrium between the organizational interests and employee needs stands as a central challenge in the context of international assignments and repatriation. HR professionals play an essential role in ensuring its success. Existing literature in the field of expatriate management theory emphasizes the importance of aligning return assistance with both organizational goals and the individual needs of repatriates (Johnson, 2019; KPMG International, 2022). The findings of this study further confirm these theoretical perspectives by demonstrating how HR professionals navigate the complex landscape of employee expectations that often diverge from rigid corporate budget constraints. HR professionals act as intermediaries in aligning local and headquarters policies, by addressing any inconsistencies through collaborative means. This alignment between HR practices and business goals requires continuous policy review to ensure fairness and cost-effectiveness, reflecting theoretical principles that advocate for flexible and adaptable repatriation support programs (Knocke & Schuster, 2017; Wang, 2023). The role of HR managers in offering guidance on individual requests while adhering to budget limits achieves a balance which is vital for the success of international assignments. Regular assessments of allowances and policies help to meet employee needs which is especially important during dynamic scenarios such as the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the dynamic nature of international assignments, highlighted by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, these findings underscore the practical importance of agile HR practices.

4. Policy Design and Company Size: This research reveals a significant difference in support provision and policy design depending on the company's size and expatriate network. Smaller firms with manageable expatriate populations favor flexible policies, prioritizing personal contact and one-on-one interactions to enhance the overall employee experience and build trust. In contrast, larger companies increasingly leverage global mobility software to scale their operations. This aligns with the growing trend in literature (KPMG International, 2022) that underscores the

integration of global mobility software into global talent management. When smaller companies employ technology, they use it as a complementary tool, in contrast, larger enterprises invest in user-friendly global mobility software to further improve the employee experience. Balancing policy uniformity with individual needs is a challenge, and it has been found that companies often adopt a standardized policy approach in policy design. However, strict adherence to policies may not always be feasible, therefore some organizations consider individual factors like employee's position grade, family size, and destination country, aiming for fair treatment and positive repatriation. This aligns with literature emphasizing the need for HRM to manage individual differences effectively in international assignments (Johnson 2019, O'Donohue et al., 2018, Renshaw et al., 2021). While literature suggests a core versus flex policy approach (KPMG International, 2022), empirical research indicates that smaller firms prefer flexibility and direct contact with their employees, while larger ones opt for comprehensive but standardized support. Both existing literature and empirical findings, stress transparency and fairness in policy implementation, recognizing the importance of individualized support in expatriate management. The integration of technology in expatriate management offers significant opportunities, yet personal contact remains vital for addressing diverse personal issues. The synergy between technology and personal engagement forms a fertile foundation for effective expatriate management.

5. Organizational Stakeholders in Repatriation Support: This research fills the gap in understanding the various parties involved in repatriation support. Existing literature emphasizes HR professionals' central role in delivering quality repatriation support and coordinating assistance from multiple stakeholders (Howe-Walsh and Torka, 2017; Kurtessis et al., 2017). This study highlights the complex network of stakeholders involved in repatriation and the need for collaborative efforts for seamless reintegration. The HR business partner plays a pivotal role in bridging HR strategy and business needs, guiding expatriation, and repatriation decisions. The base company HR/global mobility manager at the headquarters oversees the entire assignment lifecycle, including repatriation planning and logistics. The specialized global mobility team focuses on operational aspects, leveraging technology, and managing logistical and administrative tasks. Regional HR specialists in host countries ensure consistent treatment of expatriates and assist with repatriation aspects, such as logistics and local procedures. Line Managers, as immediate supervisors, facilitate job transitions, motivate employees, and support reintegration. A novel finding is the role of career managers in some companies, guiding employees' professional journeys during international assignments. They maintain continuous contact with expatriates, to ensure long-term career development, preventing them from being overlooked during their time abroad. A further noteworthy addition to literature is the establishment of HR committees dedicated to enhancing repatriate career transitions. This committee meets regularly to enhance communication and collaboration among HR professionals and line managers, improving

professional reintegration. The research also underscores the value of home-base mentors (Chiang et al., 2020; Herman & Tetrick, 2009), often with HR backgrounds or expatriation experience, in guiding expatriates. Their presence and structure may vary across organizations, including informal buddy systems. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of outsourcing services like relocation support, legal experts, tax consultants, and insurance in effective expatriate management.

6. Knowledge Transfer: In the context of MNCs, intra-company knowledge transfer is recognized as essential for gaining a competitive advantage (Kim et al., 2022). Moreover, retaining repatriates is vital for preserving valuable knowledge and investments (Wang, 2023). Nevertheless, this research uncovers a significant gap in facilitating knowledge transfer upon repatriation. While existing literature acknowledges the disruption of dynamic re-expatriation when repatriates leave their companies, resulting in knowledge loss (Ho et al., 2016), the empirical findings of this thesis reveal that companies frequently neglect the essential practice of proper debriefing for knowledge transfer. This gap signifies a loss of valuable knowledge when returnees lack adequate debriefing, making it crucial to address this issue. The implementation of effective debriefing processes and strategies promotes knowledge transfer, sustains two-way knowledge flows, retains talent by appreciating experiences gained abroad, and enhances global competitiveness. Both, existing literature, and empirical research underline the critical role of knowledge transfer as a driver of organizational interest in repatriation support. The literature highlights that repatriates bring valuable knowledge and experiences acquired during international assignments (e.g., Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Peltokorpi et al., 2022), while empirical findings emphasize the importance of creating a supportive environment to ensure the effective transfer of this knowledge back to the organization. For companies to leverage on the experiences and competencies gained abroad, it is imperative to organize the knowledge and insights within a structured and systematic process.

7. Successful Repatriation through Career Planning and Job Security: This research extends the existing literature on expatriate management by emphasizing the significance of professional reintegration planning, primarily through effective job planning. The findings reveal while some repatriates view reintegration as their responsibility, half of them perceive job search upon return as the most challenging aspect. This challenge is driven by heightened career aspirations stemming from their international experiences. Job search represents a key trigger factor that often decides whether a repatriate remains with their employer or explores opportunities elsewhere. Already existing studies have demonstrated that repatriate turnover intentions relate to career planning availability and significant organizational changes (Stroh, 1995). Consequently, MNCs should offer comprehensive repatriation support, including career planning sessions before and during the repatriation process. Effective and continuous communication can alleviate insecurities and foster agreement on the repatriate's role before returning (Breitenmoser & Bader,

2021; Burmeister & Deller, 2016). Job security is a major concern among employees, with the fear of not finding a job upon return which can even deter some from accepting international assignments. Therefore, some companies introduce HR committees to facilitate reintegration as well as job guarantees for a specified period post-repatriation. A new finding of the research reveals that some organizations offer a six-month job guarantee for employees returning from international assignments, aiming to provide security. Opinions on this guarantee vary among repatriates, with some finding it strict and others viewing it as a safety net. It significantly influences the employees' willingness to accept international assignments but does not specify their exact role upon return, which rather depends on performance and organizational needs.

8. Balancing Expectations and Proactive Engagement: Finally, this research affirms existing findings of expectations in repatriate literature. Most repatriates aim for higher job positions, increased responsibility, greater financial compensation, aligning with psychological contract theories (Rousseau, 1995). Furthermore, it aligns with prior literature emphasizing the importance of mitigating career derailment fears through enhanced promotion opportunities, autonomy, and competitive compensation (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021). This study extends these insights by highlighting how misaligned expectations between repatriates and organizations can lead to turnover after repatriation. Additionally, a novel discovery relates to proactive employee engagement and job search initiative. Proactive employees increase their chances of finding desirable positions upon return, enhancing their commitment to remaining with their employer. Organizations value employees willing to reintegrate smoothly, as it shows they are in control over their career trajectory. Networking, visibility, sustained effort, and a proactive career approach are crucial for securing attractive roles post-repatriation. Ultimately, this research emphasizes the importance of planning professional reintegration and strategic job planning to tackle repatriates' challenges. It highlights the vital role of organizations in offering comprehensive support, which includes timely job planning, monitoring job openings, continuous communication with organizational stakeholders, proactive employee involvement and flexibility to bridge the gap between repatriates' expectations and organizational realities.

5.2. Practical Contribution

The findings on repatriation support carry significant implications for International Human Resource Management of MNCs that operate in the global market and employ expatriates. This chapter discusses the practical contributions derived from empirical research conducted with HR professionals and repatriates. Both groups have provided valuable insights into the intricacies of the repatriation process, highlighting areas of concern and opportunities for improvement. Through these interviews, a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by HR professionals and repatriates within the repatriation journey have emerged. Despite the overall positive perception of support, specific areas require enhancement. This chapter explores suggestions aimed at improving the existing support framework. It concludes by presenting a repatriation program, initially outlined in the literature review of this thesis, and significantly enriched by empirical research findings. This program offers pragmatic, real-world solutions with direct managerial implications for MNCs seeking to optimize their repatriation support strategies.

1. Continuous Communication with Repatriates and Ongoing Support: Maintaining continuous communication with expatriates throughout their assignments and repatriation processes plays a vital role in their overall support and successful professional reintegration. To achieve this, it is crucial to establish clear communication channels and provide support to individuals returning from their assignments. This process begins by initiating proactive communication with expatriates, focusing on staying informed about their well-being and challenges rather than only responding to issues as they arise. By implementing a continuous communication system that involves periodic check-ins, organizations can ensure that repatriates feel supported and connected throughout their assignment. This approach fosters a strong sense of belonging and commitment to the organization. Moreover, encouraging ongoing discussions about repatriates' future roles and career options, even while they are still abroad, can significantly contribute to a smooth transition upon repatriation. This proactive approach aligns expectations, fosters a sense of belonging, and benefits both individuals and the organization throughout the repatriation process.

2. HR Committee: Effective communication is a key area requiring improvement in the repatriation process. Miscommunication is identified as a common issue that hinders successful repatriation. To enhance communication, organizations can establish committees comprising stakeholders involved in repatriation. These committees, which include HR business partners, managers, and line managers, meet quarterly, with a primary focus on expatriates approaching the end of their assignments within the next year. Their purpose is to create a community that facilitates information exchange and collaboration across different regions. By fostering improved communication and collaboration, HR Committees play a vital role in creating a supportive,

growth-oriented environment for repatriates, aligning their skills with the organization's needs, and ensuring their long-term success within the organization.

3. Job Planning and Strategic Talent Development: Repatriation poses challenges in job search and career alignment, demanding comprehensive solutions. To address these issues effectively, a structured staff development initiative is crucial. This initiative includes personalized and timely repatriation plans, coupled with career development discussions, fostering a proactive approach to guide repatriates in their career trajectories. Aligning their strengths with suitable positions within the organization not only enhances their career satisfaction but also helps them to manage their expectations. Thus, it is essential to provide guidance through career counselling by offering clear and transparent career paths, including opportunities for advancement and leadership roles, which can motivate repatriates and alleviate concerns about underutilizing their potential. This is particularly valuable when an immediate promotion upon return is not possible, as it provides employees with a vision about future career goals. Improving job planning ensures smooth transitions while aligning roles and expectations, eventually facilitating repatriates' reintegration, and maximizing the value of their international experiences. The structured staff development initiative offers holistic solutions for repatriates' job search and career alignment challenges. Additionally, implementing compensation structures tied to performance and contributions addresses the issue of overqualification by rewarding employees for their expertise and value. These strategies enable organizations to navigate the challenge of employing highly skilled returnees, ensuring a seamless transition, and optimizing the advantages these individuals bring to the workplace.

4. Repatriate Insight Network and Corporate Mentoring: To create a sense of community and gain valuable insights from returned expatriates, a quarterly round table gathering is suggested. During these meetings repatriates can openly share their international experiences and knowledge. This not only promotes networking among them but also demonstrates HR's genuine interest and appreciation for their contributions. These round tables effectively serve as integrated debriefing sessions, fostering open discussions. Additionally, prospective expatriates preparing for overseas assignments can benefit by attending these gatherings, gaining practical insights and connections with corporate mentors or buddies within the home company. To enhance this support system, it is advisable to not only express interest in repatriates' experiences but also to establish a structured corporate mentorship program. Experienced alumni expats can provide valuable guidance and support to new assignees, leveraging their firsthand insights and tips for those beginning their international journeys.

5. Cultural Trainings – Preparation and Reintegration: Before embarking on international assignments, cultural preparation plays a crucial role in expatriate adaptation. This preparation helps expatriates adjust effectively to cultural differences and the host country environment. While

the presence of expatriate colleagues can offer some assistance, comprehensive cultural training is essential. This training should extend pre-visit orientations, providing deep insights into the host country's customs, social norms, and interaction styles. Moreover, the research emphasizes the importance of post-return training, particularly for repatriates arriving with partners and children from different cultures. Notably, some individuals start their international assignments as singles and return with a partner. To ease their cultural adjustment in the new environment, offering cultural training for new partners is advisable as it can significantly facilitate their transition.

6. Tax Consultation and Financial Guidance: It has been found that taxation consistently poses challenges for repatriates. To address these issues proactively, it is recommended to provide tax consultation and training before and during international assignments, rather than solely after their completion. Prior to going abroad, expatriates should undergo tax consultations to understand the specific tax rules and regulations pertaining to their international assignment. Clear and easily accessible guidelines should be provided to increase awareness of tax obligations, including exit taxes and financial residency rules. These consultations should cover tax regulations in both the home and host countries. Employees should be encouraged to take personal initiative in financial planning, complemented by guidance and resources to effectively manage and prevent unexpected tax-related challenges. Online training sessions are a suggested method for expatriates to familiarize themselves with tax rules. While personal responsibility is vital, providing assistance in navigating potential tax-related challenges is equally important.

7. Knowledge Transfer – HR and Technical Debriefing: Creating a supportive environment to leverage repatriates' insights is crucial for individuals and the organization. To maximize this potential, HR debriefing sessions should be mandatory in the repatriation process to ensure consistent knowledge transfer. These sessions offer valuable feedback that benefits the organization and future assignees. They serve as a platform for maintaining contact, gathering feedback, and addressing concerns. Repatriates express a strong interest in such discussions, by providing a valuable final evaluation to identify and address repatriation process bottlenecks and challenges. Standardized questionnaires or guidelines for HR professionals can enhance these debriefing interviews. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize the importance of technical knowledge debriefing for effective knowledge transfer back into home organization. Therefore, developing a structured process for systematically documenting repatriates' expertise and insights gained abroad is crucial to prevent knowledge and financial loss. Integrating digital platforms or tools for streamlined knowledge documentation and sharing holds significant potential, making knowledge more accessible and ensuring the effective preservation of valuable insights. Active integration of debriefing into the organizational culture emphasizes the importance of respecting and appreciating repatriates' knowledge and experiences, fostering an inclusive and supportive environment that encourages knowledge exchange.

Enhanced Repatriation Support Program
Prior Departure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alignment of employee's and company's motivations and expectations - Discussion of expatriate contract and allowances: inform about repatriation support and mention job guarantee upon return (if existing) - Pre-visit to host country - Cultural preparation training - Assignment of home-base mentor - Tax consultation - Relocation assistance
During Stay Abroad <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continuous communication - Local support in host country - Home-base mentoring - Home-visits
Pre-Return <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initiation of repatriation (up to one year before end of assignment) - Proactive employee engagement: contact with HR and line/career manager - Job planning and career counselling - Proactive job search - Planning of relocation - Pre-return tax consultation - Relocation assistance and support in termination of contracts
Post-Return <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Re-introduction welcome gathering at a team/department level - HR debriefing interview - Re-entry technical knowledge debriefing - Assignment of job position (ideally with career and financial promotion) - Tax consultation - Optional: post-return repatriation training (including cultural training) for repatriate and family - Repatriate alumni exchange network

Table 5: Enhanced Repatriation Support Program. Own illustration.

5.3. Limitations and Research Outlook

This research has several limitations that pertain to its scope, literature review, and methodology. First, the study's scope was constrained by using purposive sampling, which may not yield statistically representative results for the entire target population (Saunders et al., 2019). Moreover, the sample size was limited to ten interviews, which offers a restricted representation of the research topic. The research only focused on internationally operating companies with a presence in Lower Austria, narrowing its geographic scope. Half of the interviewees came from the oil and gas industry, which could introduce an industry bias to the findings, limiting their generalizability. Although the empirical data included three companies, resulting in data saturation, one interview with a participant from a smaller company with a different expatriate network provided a contrasting perspective on repatriation, making it challenging to compare repatriation experiences.

Furthermore, this study predominantly interviewed male expatriates, reflecting the current gender distribution in expatriation. However, given the increasing number of female expatriates, future research could explore the unique experiences and challenges faced by women in expatriation. Additionally, this research focused on retained repatriates, with only one interviewee having left the company after repatriation. Therefore, future research could investigate the experiences and challenges of repatriates who chose to leave their companies, potentially offering valuable insights into the repatriation process.

In terms of methodology, the use of qualitative semi-structured interviews may have influenced interviewee responses based on how questions were asked, introducing a potential source of bias. The coding of qualitative interviews is a subjective process, which might cause some bias in the evaluation of the data due to personal interpretation.

Looking forward, future research could explore the implications of shifting from traditional expatriate contracts to more diversified and locally adapted compensation structures. This could include examining how these changes influence employee motivation to take on international assignments, their career development, job satisfaction, and retention rates within the context of global talent mobility. Given the current absence of knowledge debriefing and structured reintegration strategies for knowledge gained abroad, future research could focus on the development and implementation of more effective knowledge transfer strategies to enhance business performance and competitiveness. Furthermore, research is needed to examine the impact of technology and integrated global mobility software on operational efficiency and the overall expatriate experience and satisfaction. Additionally, exploring the long-term effects of AI-driven predictive talent mobility on employee satisfaction, career development, and retention within multinational organizations would be a valuable avenue for future research.

6. Conclusion

Repatriation remains a significant challenge for many MNCs, as evidenced by limited research attention (Cave et al., 2022; Knocke & Schuster, 2017). Hoang and Ho (2019) emphasize the consequences of the persistent lack of understanding, often prompting repatriates to seek employment elsewhere, resulting in a loss of valuable knowledge and skills. To address these challenges effectively, comprehensive research and the implementation of organizational support practices are needed to enhance repatriates' commitment and knowledge retention (Amir et al., 2020; Peltokorpi et al., 2022). This research adopts a multi-dimensional approach, examining both organizational and repatriate perspectives. The central research question explores how parent companies can support expatriates during repatriation while aligning with its organizational interests. This question encompasses two key aspects: (1) the development of repatriation programs balancing organizational interests and expatriates' needs and (2) the repatriates' perceptions of the organizational support provided during their repatriation.

The repatriation phase within the expatriation cycle requires a delicate balance between organizational interests and employee needs to ensure successful international assignments and repatriation. Organizational interests encompass enhancing employee satisfaction, managing assignment costs, maximizing return on investment, facilitating knowledge transfer, and ensuring employee retention. Achieving this balance is challenging and involves reconciling standardized policies with individual requirements. Organizations often adopt standardized policies but also recognize the need for flexibility by considering factors such as the employee's position, family size, and destination country to ensure fair and positive repatriation experiences. Both existing literature and empirical research emphasize the value of transparent and fair policy implementation, along with the importance of personalized support. Budgetary constraints are vital in developing cost-effective programs as they serve as guidelines for addressing individual employee needs. Organizations aim to accommodate employee needs through policy adjustments and individualized support, while avoiding substantial deviations from established policies to maintain budgetary control. HR professionals are key advisors in evaluating emerging employee needs and their potential integration into assignment policies. They engage with stakeholders, offer recommendations, and ensure a comprehensive understanding of individual cases. While organizations retain decision-making authority over assignment budget allocation, HR professionals must align with these decisions, yet retain some flexibility to address individual needs effectively. The harmonization of divergent organizational and employee perspectives is pivotal for the success of international assignments and repatriation support. HR professionals are fundamental for maintaining this equilibrium, fostering a positive experience for both the organization and employees. Continuous policy reviews are integral, ensuring fairness and cost

management. This approach allows organizations to balance individual needs with budgetary constraints while maintaining policy relevance and effectiveness.

From the repatriates' perspective, the received organizational support during both expatriation and repatriation was generally perceived as positive, fostering loyalty and commitment towards their employers. They consistently felt well-supported, however, it is important to note that some observed a decrease in support during repatriation compared to their foreign assignments. In terms of professional reintegration into their home companies, repatriates' experiences varied. Some found it smoother due to clearly defined job roles upon return, while others had to proactively manage their reintegration processes. Challenges in reintegration stemmed from changes within the company, individual career aspirations, and organizational dynamics of finding a suitable job position. Successful reintegration often required proactive efforts by repatriates, emphasizing factors such as networking, flexibility, visibility, and sustained efforts towards career development and job satisfaction. Continuous communication emerged as crucial throughout the expatriation and repatriation journey, particularly in areas like job planning and resocialization. Repatriates expressed the need for clear reintegration, structured guidance, and discussions about career expectations and potential job positions, highlighting the importance of career counselling and job planning. Balancing the expectations of returning expatriates with existing team dynamics and salary structures posed challenges for companies. Heightened expectations rooted in their international experience often necessitated finding a middle ground to align individual aspirations with organizational possibilities. Areas for potential improvement encompassed cultural preparation, tax advice, ongoing communication, job planning, and career counselling. Additionally, repatriates expressed a desire for more frequent home-visits during assignments and structured opportunities for feedback and debriefings. Repatriates' homecoming experiences, including social and cultural adaptation, were generally perceived as smooth, though some encountered COVID-19-related challenges. These experiences were shaped by factors such as social connections, support networks, personality traits, and prior cultural adaptation, reflecting the transformative journey of international assignments.

In this research, several significant contributions have emerged, shedding light on the complex landscape of expatriation and repatriation. First, it emphasizes the need of an integrated perspective on expatriation and repatriation that aligns long-term strategic staff development with organizational objectives. It reveals that repatriates perceived organizational support holistically throughout their entire expatriation journey, maintaining a positive perception even with reduced support upon repatriation. Furthermore, the study identifies a complex network of organizational stakeholders involved in repatriation support and the importance of collaboration among them. Additionally, it underlines the significance of professional reintegration planning, job security, and aligning repatriates' expectations with organizational realities. The research highlights the

complexities of post-repatriation employee turnover, emphasizing transparent communication, open career planning, and proactive employee engagement for turnover reduction. Importantly, it identifies a significant gap in knowledge transfer upon repatriation and emphasizes the importance of structured HR and technical debriefing processes. Finally, the research introduces the novel concept of a repatriate insight network and corporate alumni mentoring to foster community and knowledge among repatriates. These collective findings contribute to a better understanding of expatriation dynamics and offer a roadmap for future success. They unveil the critical relationship between comprehensive support and organizational success in repatriation, where a supportive environment preserves valuable knowledge, contributes to employee commitment and satisfaction, and enriches the organizational foundation. This study illuminates the path to a new era of global talent management, where the bridge between organizational interests and employee needs becomes the cornerstone of success.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guidelines

Appendix B: Code Systems

Appendix A: Interview Guidelines

Questions for HR/Global Mobility Professionals

Warm Up:

- *Build rapport through (shortly) talking about general topics first.*
- *Introduce thesis topic and explanation of the interview.*
- *Ask for permission to record + emphasize anonymity of interview.*

Introduction Questions:

1. For which company do you work?
2. Can you briefly describe your role and responsibilities within the organization?
3. How long have you been involved in managing expatriates and repatriates?
4. Do you have already gathered professional experience abroad?
 - a. Can you tell me more about it? - Which experiences have you gathered abroad?
5. How many expatriates work for your company around the world?
6. How long do expatriate assignments typically last at your company?

Main Questions:

Organizational Goals of International Assignments:

7. How do global mobility programs support the overall talent management strategies of the organization?
 - a. Do international assignments have a managerial development or career development purpose?

Organizational Repatriation Support:

8. What is your function in providing repatriation support?
9. Who else is involved in providing repatriation support?
 - a. Do you use outsourced service providers like tax advisors or relocation agencies?
10. What are the organizational interests behind providing repatriation support to expatriates?
11. What support measures or initiatives does the company currently offer to repatriates during the homecoming process?
 - a. When do you offer support to your employees?
 - i. Before the start of the international assignment?
 - ii. During the international assignment?
 - iii. After the international assignment?
 - b. Could you describe the current repatriation support program and its comprehensiveness?

12. How are your repatriation policies designed? (standard vs. flexible approach)
 - a. How do you tailor the repatriation program to the individual needs of repatriates?
13. How do you balance supporting repatriates' individual needs with fulfilling the company's objectives?
14. *Do you also offer support practices to the spouse and children of the expatriate.*
15. In your experience with the existing repatriation program, how effective do you find it in supporting repatriates during the homecoming process? Are there any areas where you believe the program could be enhanced or improved to better meet the needs of repatriates?
16. Based on your experience, what lessons have you learned regarding the effective support of repatriates during the repatriation process?
 - a. What do you consider the most challenging aspect of repatriating expatriates, and why?

Career Planning:

17. What job positions do you tend to assign repatriates to upon their return?
 - a. Do repatriates receive higher monetary compensation compared to their pre-assignment salary?
 - a. *What do you do to retain the repatriates?*

Repatriation Program Evaluation:

18. *This is the repatriation program (p. 39) that I compiled based on the findings from my literature review. When you critically analyze this program which support practices do you consider as useful and which support practices are not necessary? Choose the most relevant support measures.*

Closing Questions:

19. Is there anything important that we did not discuss but you would like to mention?
20. Do you have any further questions?
21. Would you like to provide additional feedback?

Wrap-up

- *Explain the next steps of the research to the interviewee.*
- *Emphasize the anonymity of the interview again.*
- *Thank interviewee for participation.*
- *Inform to share results if interested.*

Questions for Repatriates

Warm Up:

- *Build rapport through (shortly) talking about general topics first.*
- *Introduce thesis topic and explanation of the interview.*
- *Ask for permission to record + emphasize anonymity of interview.*

Introduction Questions:

1. For which company are you working and what is your job position?
2. In which country did you spend your international assignment and how long was it?
3. What was your primary motivation to attend an international assignment?
4. How long have you been back in your home country after completing your international assignment?
5. Did your spouse or family join you to live abroad?

Main Questions:

Organizational Repatriation Support:

6. Did the company provide any support or assistance throughout your entire expatriation assignment, from before the assignment until your return home?
7. Which support practices were offered to?
 - a. Before the international assignment?
 - b. During the international assignment?
 - c. After the international assignment?
 - d. Did the company offer any assistance in terms of career planning to help you find a position?
8. How did you perceive the organizational support provided by the company?
 - a. What support measures did you find most valuable?
 - b. Were there any support measures that were not as useful?
 - c. In which aspects or areas would you have wished for more support?
 - a. Did your spouse and children receive support from your employer?
9. How would you rate the level of support provided by the company in terms of addressing your needs and concerns during repatriation?
 - a. Are there any specific areas where you believe the company could enhance its support to better meet the needs of repatriates?
10. Based on your personal experience, what improvements or changes would you suggest for the company's repatriation support practices?

Homecoming Experience:

11. Can you share your overall experience of returning to your home country after the international assignment?
12. What were the most significant challenges or difficulties you faced during the repatriation process? (*social adaptation and professional adaptation*)
13. How did you experience the adaptation phase into your home organization?
 - a. To what extent did the offered support practices by your employer help you in readjusting?

Career and Job Satisfaction:

14. Did you experience career promotion/advancement or an increase in salary compared to before the international assignment?
 - a. What were your expectations regarding your job and career after the international assignment? (e.g., in terms of position, hierarchical rank, money, knowledge transfer, appreciation...)
 - b. Were your expectations fulfilled?
15. Why did you leave or stay within the company?

Repatriation Program Evaluation:

16. *This is the repatriation program (p. 39) that I compiled based on the findings from my literature review. When you critically analyze this program which support practices do you consider as useful and which support practices are not necessary? Choose the most relevant support measures.*

Closing Questions:

17. Is there anything important that we did not discuss but you would like to mention?
18. Do you have any further questions?
19. Would you like to provide additional feedback?

Wrap-up

- *Explain the next steps of the research to the interviewee.*
- *Emphasize the anonymity of the interview again.*
- *Thank interviewee for participation.*
- *Inform to share results if interested.*

Appendix B: Code Systems

Codebook from Basic Coding Cyle

1 Personal Repatriation Experience	0
1.1 Suggestions for Improved Support	11
1.2 Perceived Repatriation Support	17
1.3 Homecoming Experience	4
1.4 Primary Motivation for Expatriation	6
1.6 Quotable Text Passages	1
2 Repatriation Support Measures	16
2.1 Received Organizational Repatriation Support	4
2.2 Pre-Assignment Support	5
2.2.1 Moving Support	6
2.3 Support During the Assignment	4
2.4 Design of Repatriation Policies	15
2.4.1 Direct Contact	6
2.5 Communication	17
2.6 Corporate Mentor	7
2.7 Planning of Job Position	32
2.8 Outsourced Service Providers	2
2.8.1 Insurance	5
2.9 Family and Spouse Support	4
2.10 Home-Visits	5
2.11 Temporary Working Hour Reduction	0
2.12 HR-Debriefing Interview	11
2.13 Re-introduction Welcome Event	1
2.14 Software	4
2.14.1 New Software	7
2.14.2 Current Technology	7
2.15 Improvements for Repatriation Program	3
2.16 Other	0
2.17 Quotable Text Passages	29
3 Job Position Repatriate	15
3.1 Professional Reintegration	5
3.2 Current Job Position of Repatriate	5
3.2.1 Knowledge Transfer	1
3.3 Job Guarantee	3
3.4 Career Expectations	19
3.4.1 Share Experiences	3
3.5 Proactive Job Search	10
3.6 Career Promotion	12

3.7 Financial Compensation	7
3.8 Intent to Stay	3
3.9 Quotable Text Passages	16
4 Organizational Aspects Expatriate Management	5
4.1 Financial Allowances	1
4.2 Balance Organizational and Employee Interests	3
4.3 Organizational Interests of Repatriation Support	11
4.4 Purpose of Expatriate Assignments	4
4.4.1 Business Need	8
4.4.2 Career Development Purpose	4
4.4.3 Experience Seeker	2
4.5 Accompanied Assignment Status	9
4.6 Duration of Assignments Organizational Perspective	6
4.6.1 Time Frame of Expatriate Assignment	6
4.6.1.1 Time at Home Post-Return	5
4.7 Initiation of Repatriation Process	15
4.8 HR Committee	4
4.9 Employee Turnover	14
4.10 Other	1
4.11 Quotable Text Passages	8
5 Job Position HR	5
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