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Expatriate career support: predicting expatriate turnover and performance

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This study aimed at explaining why multinational companies have difficulty retaining their repatriates as well as how multinational companies can improve in- and expatriate performance. In the study 100 in- and expatriates of a multinational company operating in the food and personal care industry reported the career support they experienced, their perceived career prospects within and outside the home organization, their intentions to leave, and their performance. As predicted, it was found that perceived career support negatively related to intentions to leave. Additionally, it was found that perceived career support positively related to perceived career prospects within the home organization and expatriate performance. Interestingly, no relationship was found between perceived career prospects outside the home organization and intentions to leave. Implications and directions for future research and HR practices in multinational companies are discussed.

Keywords: career support; expatriate; inpatriate; performance; turnover

Introduction

As business becomes more global, and international management plays an ever more critical role in business practice, an increasing number of employees is sent on expatriate assignments. A parallel development is the increase in inpatriation, the process of transferring host-country and third-country national managers into the domestic/home market of a multinational corporation (MNC) on a semi permanent basis (Harvey and Buckley 1997; Harvey, Speier and Novicevic 1999). Several studies point out that corporate career support with the aim of the retention of expatriates has become a significant determinant of international business success (Selmer, Ebrahimi and Mingtao 2000; Tung 1998). Despite this notion, research indicates that parent companies are paying too little attention to the career development of their expatriates and that this lack of career support is one of the main reasons why companies fail to retain expatriates (Black, Gergersen, Mendenhall and Stroh 1999; Selmer et al. 2000; Stahl, Miller and Tung 2002; Suutari and Brewster 2003; Riusala and Suutari 2000). As many as one out of four managers leave, or intend to leave their employer within one year of repatriation (Black et al. 1999; Selmer 1999). According to Harvey and Buckley (1997) retention of inpatriates is even more problematic, given that inpatriates face additional adjustment difficulties compared to expatriates.

The costs to firms of losing returning expatriates (repatriates) are significant, both financially and strategically (Stroh 1995). Repatriates usually understand the workings of

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both corporate headquarters and foreign operations, which is of great importance for the management of these foreign operations (Stroh, Gregersen and Black 2000). Moreover, Fink, Meierewert and Rohr (2005) found that expatriates gain market-specific knowledge, personal skills, job-related management skills, network skills, and general management skills that are vital for competitive advantage. Harvey and colleagues (Harvey, Novicevic and Speier 1999; Harvey, Speier and Novicevic et al. 1999) argue that the knowledge, skills and experience of inpatriates in comparison with expatriates are even more vital for organizations. The loss of in- and expatriate knowledge and skills is thus critically detrimental for organizations hoping to develop global competence (Cassiday 2005).

Career support can be essential for companies in retaining their repatriates, but the success of in/expatriates on assignment is equally important. The costs involved with underperformance are, both for the organizations and for the expatriate, substantial (McCaughy and Bruning 2005). Moreover, the performance of expatriates is critical to the success of the international projects on which MNCs are working (Punnet 1997). Despite the significant amount of expatriate literature, relatively little is known about the predictors of in/expatriate performance (Werner 2002; Mol, Born, Willemsen and van der Molen 2005). Feldman and Thomas (1992) found that career support is a significant predictor of performance. Therefore this study also addresses in/expatriate performance.

This study concerns the perceived career support and its consequences for *inpatriates*, a specific category of expatriates that are transferred from their home organization into the headquarters of a MNC. However, literature on all categories of expatriates is considered relevant to this study. Consequently, this study is considered relevant to expatriate literature in general.

Perceived career support

Career support can be regarded as a component of organizational support (Kraimer and Wayne 2004). Organizational support theory (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison and Sowa 1986) states that employees personify the organization and from the way they perceive the organization is treating them, they infer the extent to which the organization values their efforts and cares about their well-being. Employees in turn reciprocate such perceived support with increased commitment, loyalty, and performance. In a review of over 70 studies, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) found that perceived organizational support indeed is related to increased affective commitment to the organization, increased performance, and reduced withdrawal behaviours. Within the expatriate context perceived organizational career support (PCS) has been shown to relate positively to perceived career prospects (Kraimer and Wayne 2004) and expatriate performance (Feldman and Thomas 1992), and negatively to intention to leave (Naumann 1993).

In the expatriate literature, PCS is usually measured by asking expatriates to indicate whether several career support practices are present in the organization. Examples of these practices are pre-departure career development planning programs (Handler and Lane 1997; Riusala and Suutari 2000) and the appointment of career coaches who assist with examining and managing their career options (Selmer et al. 2000). However, which and how many practices are relevant may differ from study to study. As a consequence, there is no consensus on a general definition of the construct or its operationalisation.

Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001) found that it is the expatriates' *perceptions* of their organization's support, rather than an objective assessment of whether such practices exist, that will have the greater influence on career support outcomes. Recognizing that in/expatriates' perceptions of career support are vital, PCS in our study is defined as the

extent to which the in/expatriate believes that the parent organization cares about his or her career needs.

Perceived career prospects within the home organization

One outcome of PCS discussed in the expatriate literature is perceived career prospects: the belief that specific skills and experience of the expatriate are valued and are helpful for actual job offers. For organizations, developing practices aimed at influencing PCS may be interesting if such programs are effective in influencing in/expatriate intentions to leave. Selmer (1999) notes that when expatriates perceive that their career prospects do not match with the career prospects in the organization, dissatisfaction is instilled and the focus is shifted to a search for alternative job opportunities outside the current organization.

Granrose and Portwood (1987) as well as Kraimer and Wayne (2004) found a positive relation between career support and perceived career prospects within the home organization. Similarly, a positive relation has also been found between career support and constructs that are similar to perceived career prospects. Meziyas and Scandura (2005) for instance, propose that career support reduces expatriates' fear of being passed over for promotion while on assignment, resulting in more positive feelings of career satisfaction. Additionally, Culpan and Wright (2002) found that career support is positively related to improved career success.

In addition to research demonstrating that career support results in more favourable career prospects, other authors, like Handler and Lane (1997), argue that a *lack* of career support results in more unfavourable career prospects. Additionally, Forster and Johnsen (1996) argue that it is partly a lack of career support by the home organization that leads expatriates to perceive unfavourable career prospects. Research using similar constructs of perceived career prospects also supports this association. Stahl (in Stahl et al. 2002) for example, found that expatriates who report a lack of long-term career planning anticipate difficulties finding a suitable re-entry position and inadequate advancement opportunities after repatriation. Summarized, we expect that perceived career support will be positively associated with in/expatriates' perceived career prospects within the home organization (Hypothesis 1).

Intentions to leave

As expatriate turnover is costly both for the employee and for the organization, understanding whether turnover intentions are related to – the absence of – corporate support is important. Findings in several studies on intentions to leave support the role PCS may play in reducing actual turnover. A review of recent expatriate research concludes that when expatriates perceive little career support they start to seek employment elsewhere (McCaughy and Bruning 2005). Additionally, Naumann (1993) found a significant positive relation between a perceived lack of career support and intentions to leave during, or shortly after, international assignments. Furthermore, Granrose and Portwood (1987) found that expatriates who perceive a mismatch between individual career plans and organizational career plans show intentions to leave their home organization, whereas expatriates who do not perceive a mismatch do not show an intention to leave. Assuming that this perceived mismatch between individual and organizational career plans is related to a perceived lack of career support, these findings are also considered relevant to this study, leading to our second hypothesis: perceived career support will be negatively related to in/expatriate's intentions to leave the home organization (Hypothesis 2).

Career prospects outside the home organization

While the intention to leave may reflect perceived lack of career support within the home organization, it may also reflect an expatriate's choice to pursue a – perhaps more promising – external career opportunity (Lazarova and Tarique 2005). Career prospects outside the home organization have long been neglected in expatriate research. Stahl et al. (2002) were among the first authors who demonstrated that this concept plays a significant role in the expatriate career literature. In a sample of 494 expatriates, Stahl et al. (2002) found that expatriates were not seriously concerned about their career prospects within the company because these expatriates believed the expatriate experience would advance their career prospects outside the home organization. They saw the experience as positive for their personal and professional development. These findings support the emerging notion of the 'boundaryless career concept' (Arthur and Rousseau 1996) or the 'protean career' (Hall 1976), which is a key point of discussion in contemporary debates in career theory (Briscoe and Hall 2006; Richardson and Mallon 2005). The boundaryless career concept differentiates itself from dominating traditional career theory where career involves traversing an organizational or occupational hierarchy. In the expatriate context the boundaryless career concept implies that an international assignment is valued for the opportunity it brings for skills acquisition, personal development and career enhancement, even though it may not help expatriates to advance within their repatriating company (Arthur and Rousseau 1996).

Concerning the relation with intentions to leave, Stahl et al. (2002) found that 51% of the sample of expatriates identified that they would leave the firm for a better job in another company, whereas only 25% responded that they were unwilling to leave the home organization. These high intentions to leave are partly due to the fact that 89% of the respondents perceived more favourable career opportunities outside the company. These findings are in line with a review on research on global managers, which indicates that a significant number of expatriates are searching for positions outside the parent companies' boundaries, resulting in increased intentions to leave when favourable career prospects are perceived outside the firm (Cappellen and Janssens 2005).

Other research shows a direct relation between perceived career prospects outside the home organization and turnover. Suutari and Brewster (2003) found that 65% of the expatriates in their sample reported they had received job offers from other employers while they were still abroad, and 60% received external job offers after they repatriated, some receiving multiple job offers. The latter study, conducted as a longitudinal cohort analysis, found that these job offers impacted positively on the career prospects of the expatriates, ultimately resulting in expatriate turnover. Additionally, Sanchez, Spector and Cooper (2000) provide examples of repatriates who left their companies upon return only to accept jobs in alternative companies that provided more favourable career prospects.

Summarized, we hypothesize that perceived career prospects outside the home organization will be positively associated with expatriates' intentions to leave the home organization (Hypothesis 3).

Expatriate performance

What constitutes expatriate performance may differ both in definition and in operationalization from study to study (Mol, Born and van der Molen 2005). Most research focuses on 'expatriate success', which is often defined in terms of expatriate adjustment, commitment, job performance, and intentions to complete the assignment (Kraimer and Wayne 2004). Mol, Born and van der Molen (2005) disagree with this

general conceptualization of expatriate performance. They argue that criteria like adjustment and commitment are best construed as mediators of performance outcomes, rather than as performance outcomes per se, and that research should solely focus on criteria that actually sample job performance. On the other hand, Caligiuri and Day (2000) argue that the performance construct has been oversimplified to an assessment of overall performance, and that performance should rather be viewed as a multidimensional construct. Motowidlo and Van Scotter (1994) found empirical evidence confirming the notion of performance as a multidimensional construct and distinguish task performance from contextual performance. This taxonomy of performance is frequently used in the expatriate context (e.g. Caligiuri and Day 2000; Kraimer, Wayne and Jaworski 2001).

In line with this approach, this study distinguishes task performance from contextual performance. Task performance is defined as the effectiveness with which expatriates perform activities that contribute to the organization's technical core, either directly by implementing a part of its technological process, or indirectly by providing it with needed materials or services (Motowidlo and Van Scotter 1994). Contextual performance on the other hand is defined as activities that are directed at maintaining the interpersonal and psychological environment that needs to exist to allow the technical core to operate (Motowidlo and Van Scotter 1994).

Research on the relationship between PCS and expatriate performance is rare. Some support has been found in the literature in favour of a positive relation between career support and related conceptualizations of expatriate performance. However, there still exists no consensus on whether there is a direct relation between career support and performance, or whether this relation is mediated by commitment to the home organization. In favour of an indirect relationship, Kraimer and Wayne (2004) found empirical evidence of a positive relation between PCS and expatriate's commitment to the home organization and suggested a further effect of commitment to the home organization on self-rated performance. On the other hand, Feldman and Thomas (1992) found empirical evidence for a positive direct relationship between PCS and self-rated expatriate performance, supported by qualitative data derived from an open-ended question in their survey. Since the indirect relationship in the first research is partly based on an assumption, and the latter research is based on empirical evidence, a direct relationship is proposed in this study. Thus, we hypothesize that the perceived career support will be positively associated with expatriate (task and contextual) performance (Hypothesis 4).

Method

Study procedures and sample characteristics

The participants in this study were employed by a Dutch-based MNC operating in the food and personal care industry. Expatriate and inpatriate employees received a three-page survey and a covering letter explaining the study purposes by email. The employees received two reminders to optimize the response rate. Furthermore, participants were offered feedback on their personal scores to increase the response rate. In total 250 surveys were mailed to in- and expatriate employees. Over two months, a total of 100 usable surveys were returned, for a response rate of 40%.

This sample represents in- and expatriates of 30 nationalities as shown in Table 1. The largest nationality groups of respondents were from the UK, Germany, and France. Of all employees, 97 were inpatriates stationed in the Netherlands (headquarters), two expatriates were stationed in Switzerland, and one expatriate was stationed in the United Kingdom.

Table 1. Number of expatriates from each nationality.

<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Number of expatriates</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Number of expatriates</i>
American	1	German	20
American/Turkish	1	Ghanaian	1
Argentinean	1	Greek	1
Australian	1	Hungarian	1
Austrian	4	Indian	5
Belgian	1	Irish	1
Brazilian	3	Italian	2
British	22	Mexican	1
Canadian	3	Polish	2
Czech	2	South African ^b	2
Danish	2	Spanish	1
Dutch ^a	2	Swedish	1
Ecuadorian	1	Swiss	2
Finnish	1	Turkish	2
French	12	Venezuelan	1

^aStationed in Switzerland. ^bOne South African was stationed in the UK.

The average age of the respondents was 37 years. Of the expatriates 35% were female. This proportion of women is relatively high compared to other expatriate research samples (see Adler 1979; Stroh et al. 2000; and Stahl et al. 2002 on this topic). Of the respondents 73% were married or living together, and in 80% of the cases these partners had moved with the respondent to the country of assignment. With regards to family, 50% of the respondents had children, and in 84% of the cases the children had moved with their parents to the country of assignment. Educationally, 2% had a secondary school diploma, 6% had a Bachelor's degree, 57% had a Master's degree, 16% had a MBA degree, and 20% had a PhD as the highest educational level. On average, the participants had been working for their company for 10 years. The average length of time on the current in/expatriate assignment was 2.5 years.

Instruments and measures

To gather the data for this study, a questionnaire was developed to measure dependent and independent variables. This questionnaire is composed of several scales, which have been tested and used by different authors. For the purpose of this study, the scale measuring perceived career prospects outside the home organization was newly developed. All items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale from '1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree'.

Perceived career support was measured using the four items of the career dimension from Kraimer and Wayne's (2004) perceived organizational support scale (Cronbach's alpha is .93). Respondents are asked to indicate how much they agree with each statement. A sample item is: 'I feel that my parent company cares about my career development.'

Perceived career prospects within the home organization was measured with four items adapted from Parker and McEvoy's (1993) lack of promotion expectations scale. A sample item is: 'I expect to advance within my parent company when I repatriate.' The Cronbach's alpha is .85 for this measure.

Intention to leave is measured with a five-item scale designed by Wayne, Shore and Linden (1997) (Cronbach's alpha is .89). A sample item in this section is: 'I am actively looking for a job outside my parent company.'

Perceived career prospects outside the home organization was measured with four items based on prior work of Parker and McEvoy (1993). A sample item is 'I expect to advance in another firm when I repatriate.' The Cronbach's alpha is .74 for this measure.

Expatriate performance was measured using Kraimer and Wayne's (2004) nine-item scale. Kraimer and Wayne's (2004) scale contained two different dimensions of expatriate performance: task performance (five items) and contextual performance (four items). Responses on the nine items were factor analyzed using principal axis factoring and varimax rotation. Based on the results of this factor analysis one item that loaded on both factors was deleted: 'Technical competence.' The item 'Establishing relationships with key host-country business contacts' loaded high on the contextual performance factor, but also loaded somewhat high on the task performance factor. Consequently, it was decided to conduct a second factor analysis using oblimin rotation. Based on the results shown in Table 2, this item was maintained. A sample item for task performance is: 'Meeting performance standards and expectations.' A sample item for contextual performance is: 'Interacting with host-country co-workers.' The Cronbach's alpha reliabilities for these scales were respectively .94 for task performance and .81 for contextual performance.

Results

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables.

Table 3 shows employee age is related to career prospects within the home organization. Therefore, this control variable is included in the subsequent multiple regression analyses on career prospects within the company. Remarkably, age was not correlated with perceived career prospects outside the home organization.

Furthermore, correlation analysis (Table 3) showed that time on assignment and perceived career prospects within the home organization are related to intentions to leave. Therefore, these variables are entered in the multiple regression analysis predicting intentions to leave.

Results of the T test indicate that in/expatriates with partners who did not move with them to their country of assignment showed lower task performance than in/expatriates who did take their partner with them to their country of assignment ($t = 2.241$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, this variable was entered in the multiple regression analysis in which task performance is predicted.

Table 2. Results of factor analysis on expatriate performance items (oblimin rotations).

<i>Scale item</i>	<i>Task performance</i>	<i>Contextual performance</i>
Meeting job objectives	.88	
Overall job performance	.94	
Meeting performance standards and expectations	.90	
Meeting specific job responsibilities	.85	
Interacting with host-country co-workers		.88
Establishing relationships with key host-country business contacts		.53
Adapting to foreign facility's business customs and norms		.69
Interacting with co-workers		.62
Eigen values	4.81	1.22
Percentage of explained variance	60	15

Note: Loadings less than .30 are not reported.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlations.

Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Perceived career support ^a	3.43	1.54										
2. Perceived career prospects within ^a	4.22	1.61	.53**									
3. Intentions to leave ^a	3.98	1.39	-.39**	-.35**								
4. Perceived career prospects outside ^a	5.08	1.00	.20*	.29**	-.02							
5. Task performance ^b	5.59	.77	.18	.13	.01	.20*						
6. Contextual performance ^b	5.05	.89	.18	.10	.01	.18	.60**					
7. Age	37.32	7.14	-.08	-.26**	.01	.04	.06	.15				
8. Number of children	.98	1.11	-.03	-.08	.10	.12	.07	.04	.44**			
9. Time on assignment (in months)	30.21	29.70	-.17	-.19	.24*	.08	.15	.31**	.44**	.13		
10. Organizational tenure (in months) ^c	124.46	80.58	-.09	-.15	.06	.02	.20	.23*	.76**	.45**	.47**	
11. Highest degree obtained	2.56	.95	-.01	-.06	.09	-.15	.07	.22*	.06	-.06	.04	.12

Notes: ^aValues range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree); ^bValues range from 1 (very poor) to 7 (very strong); N = 100; ^cN = 97; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

Table 4. Results of regression analysis, predicting perceived career prospects within the home organization.

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Perceived career prospects</i>
Perceived career support	.510**
Age	-.225**
R ²	.329
F value	23.768

Note: N = 100; **p < 0.01.

Additionally, correlation analysis also indicates that the control variables time on assignment, organizational tenure, and highest degree obtained correlate with contextual performance. Therefore, these control variables are inserted in the multiple regression analysis predicting contextual performance.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the hypothesized relationships.

Table 4 presents the results of the regression analysis in which the career prospects within the home organization are predicted. Results indicate a positive relationship between PCS and perceived career prospects within the home organization, confirming Hypothesis 1.

Furthermore, Table 4 reveals a negative relationship between age and PCS. This result indicates that the older in/expatriates become, the less favourable they perceive their career prospects upon repatriation.

Table 5 presents the results of a regression analysis in which intentions to leave are predicted. Results indicate a negative relationship between PCS and intentions to leave, confirming Hypothesis 2. In addition, we tested whether career prospects within the home organization mediates the relationship between PCS and intentions to leave. In order to assess mediation, three conditions must apply: (1) a significant relationship between the mediator and the dependent variable controlling for the independent variable; (2) a significant relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable; and (3) the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable decreasing or becoming non-significant when the mediator is added (Baron and Kenny 1986). Results in Table 5 show that the relationship between the independent and the dependent variable decreased when perceived career prospects within the home organization was entered in the regression model. However, no significant relationship is found between perceived career prospects within the home organization and intentions to leave. Consequently, a direct relation between PCS and intentions to leave, one that is not mediated by perceived career prospects within, was confirmed.

Table 5. Results of regression analysis, predicting intentions to leave.

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Intentions to leave step 1</i>	<i>Intentions to leave step 2</i>
Perceived career support	-.368**	-.274*
Perceived career prospects within	-	-.202
Perceived career prospects outside	.044	.086
Time on assignment	.177	.151
R ²	.186	.213
Δ R ²		.027
F value	7.298	6.429

Note: N = 100; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

Table 6. Results of regression analysis, predicting task performance and contextual performance.

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Task performance^a</i>	<i>Contextual performance^b</i>
Perceived career support	.093	.239*
Perceived career prospects outside	.096	
Partner moved with respondent	-.231	
Time on assignment		.309**
Organizational tenure		.081
Highest degree obtained		.195*
R ²	.087	.199
F value	2.179	5.640

Note: ^aN = 73; ^bN = 96; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

In Table 5, no results are found for a relationship between career prospects outside the parent organization and intentions to leave, disconfirming Hypothesis 3.

Table 6 presents the results for the regression analysis in which expatriate performance is predicted. Regarding the regression analysis for task performance, no significant relationships were found. In particular, PCS was not found to be related to task performance, as the results for contextual performance show. However, PCS was positively related to contextual performance. These findings imply that Hypothesis 4 is partially confirmed. In addition, time on assignment and highest degree obtained were also related to contextual performance.

Discussion and conclusion

Implications for expatriate research

As predicted in Hypothesis 1, a positive relationship between perceived career support and perceived career prospects within the home organization was found. This finding concurs with prior research by Granrose and Portwood (1987) and by Kraimer and Wayne (2004). This indicates that expatriates who perceive more career support by their company will perceive more favourable career prospects within their home organisation.

Additionally, the negative effect of PCS on intentions to leave, as predicted in Hypothesis 2, is confirmed in this study. This finding is congruent with other research in the field (e.g. McCaughey and Bruning 2005). Results imply that the more career support is experienced by an expatriate, the less likely he or she will be to want to leave the home organization. This research found support for a direct effect of career support on intentions to leave, disconfirming a theoretically plausible mediation by perceived career *prospects* within the home organization. Apparently, in/expatriates' intentions to leave are predicted by the support they get from their home organization and not so much by the career prospects that are influenced by career support. In other words, the delivery of career support is valued more for the recognition or attention the home organization shows to its in/expatriate employees, than for the actual career changes, opportunities and development programs that derive from career support practices. Accordingly, this finding confirms organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al. 1986) arguments to the effect that employees infer the extent to which their company cares about their well-being and reciprocate such perceived support with reduced withdrawal behaviours.

The relationship pertaining to the positive impact of perceived career prospects outside the home organization on intentions to leave was not confirmed in this study (Hypothesis 3). This implies that career prospects outside the home organization do not influence the

intentions to leave of the in/expatriates in this sample. This finding is in contradiction to career literature indicating a 'boundaryless career concept' (Arthur and Rousseau 1996). Although the 'boundaryless career' literature implies that expatriates pursue their career goals regardless of whether these can be attained inside or outside the home organization, this study does not find support for the notion that in/expatriates' intentions to leave may be prompted by their choice to pursue external career opportunities. Therefore, the conclusion could be drawn that in/expatriates in this organization still value 'traditional' career paths within the boundaries of the home organization. This is especially interesting considering the fact that, in comparison with expatriates, the retention of in-patriates is more difficult and the costs associated with the loss of in-patriates are higher (Harvey, Novicevic and Speier 1999; Harvey and Buckley 1997). Thus career support for in-patriate managers may help organizations to retain their global managers.

Another interesting result in this study is the relatively low correlation between perceived career prospects within and outside the home organization. Though prior expatriate research has frequently operationalized career prospects as a unidimensional construct, findings in this study imply that career prospects within and outside the home organization are dissimilar, and should accordingly be operationalized as different constructs.

The relationship pertaining to the impact of PCS on expatriate performance, as predicted in Hypothesis 4, was partially confirmed. No support was found for a relationship between PCS and task performance. It appears that the effectiveness with which expatriates perform activities that contribute to the organization's technical core is not predicted by PCS. This finding contradicts Feldman and Thomas (1992) who found a positive direct relationship between both constructs. Possibly, an inadequate operationalization of task performance has caused the lack of evidence for a direct relationship. According to Mol, Born and van der Molen (2005), the field of expatriate research is struggling to find an adequate operationalization of task performance. Another explanation is that perceived career support has an indirect effect on task performance, as suggested by Kraimer and Wayne (2004).

Nevertheless, results indicate PCS as a significant predictor of contextual performance. Apparently, the more career support expatriates perceive, the better they are able to maintain the interpersonal and psychological environment that needs to exist to allow the technical core to operate. Since few studies have empirically investigated causal relationships between expatriate performance and its predictors, this study could trigger more research exploring these relationships. Future research investigating expatriate performance could include PCS as a predictor.

Practical implications

This study offers PCS as a 'best practice' in reducing the strategic and financial costs involved with in/expatriate turnover. The direct relationship between PCS and intentions to leave found in this study implies that an increase in expatriates' PCS will result in a decrease in intentions to leave. Consequently, MNCs can reduce costs involved with in/expatriate turnover by increasing PCS and capitalize upon the expatriates' overseas experiences. Furthermore, the retention of (returning) expatriates will facilitate the development of global leaders that will contribute significantly to a firm's long-term survival.

Furthermore, PCS positively influences expatriates' career prospects within the home organization. Although results in this study do not support a relationship between career prospects and intentions to leave, other studies (e.g. Selmer 1999) note that unfavourable career prospects ultimately result in intentions to leave.

Another interesting finding this study revealed is that expatriates working for this Dutch-based MNC organization still value 'traditional' career paths within the boundaries of the home organization. This implies that MNCs can still control the turnover of their repatriates. If repatriates decide to leave the home organization, this will be due to internal factors that the company can influence, such as a lack of career support. The home organization does not have to be concerned about repatriates leaving the firm due to external factors that they cannot control, such as career prospects outside the home organization.

Furthermore, this study offers PCS as an important tool in reducing the costs involved with expatriate underperformance. Buzási, van den Berg and Paauwe (1998) demonstrated in their overview of best practices of expatriate management that expatriate underperformance is often a consequence of the expatriate's incapability to build relationships. It is demonstrated in this study that PCS enhances expatriates' contextual performance. Since contextual performance is defined as a set of activities directed at maintaining the *interpersonal* environment, it can be argued that contextual performance and the expatriates' capability to build relationships are closely related. Consequently, MNCs can implement career support practices to make international assignments less likely to fail, or more successful.

An obvious means of increasing expatriates' PCS will be the provision of more career support practices. Also, it must be ensured that career support practices are better adjusted to the demands of different groups of expatriates. In addition to providing more and better adjusted career support, it is of equal importance to communicate these career support practices to expatriates. If organizations put a lot of effort in improving their career support practices, but fail to inform expatriates of this, enhancement of PCS will be unlikely. In reconsidering which (additional) career support practices to include in expatriate management, it could be helpful to review Riusala and Suutari (2000), and Selmer and Leung (2003) that present a range of career support practices that MNCs provide. An effective way for MNCs to stimulate career planning for expatriates could be the linking of 'home leave' to a visit to the HR department at the repatriating company. This way, expatriates who are allowed to visit home once or twice a year will be able to discuss their career plans on a regular basis with the home organization.

Furthermore, the issue raised by Selmer (1999) pertaining to the fear of potential expatriates that expatriation could negatively affect their career can also be solved by improving career support practices. Consequently, the recruitment of expatriates within MNCs could be positively affected. Greenhaus, Callanan and Godshalk (2000) note that organizations should consider implementing career-oriented human resource support systems. Human resource support systems that have a focus on career development, and are integrated with corporate business plans, appear to provide a strong foundation for companies in the achievement of their strategic goals (Greenhaus et al. 2000) and will prevent expatriate underperformance (Buzási et al. 1998). This study demonstrates that MNCs could benefit significantly from similar systems, since turnover costs could be decreased and performance increased by putting an emphasis on career development.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations of this research that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional nature of this study limits the ability to draw strict causal conclusions. Since the main variables in this research concern the perceptions of expatriates, caution is advised in drawing conclusions concerning actual career support, career prospects, and turnover.

As mentioned, it is possible that organizations provide outstanding career support practices, but fail to communicate the existence of these practices towards their expatriate employees. Further, it is possible that although organizations provide adequate career support practices, these practices are below expectations. As a result, expatriates might report significantly lower PCS practices. Additionally, intentions to leave should not be confused with actual turnover.

This study makes use of self-reported performance. Shay and Baack (2004) note that self-assessment of performance could bring in a variety of sources of bias such as leniency error (Meyer 1980), restriction of range (Thornton 1980), and halo error (Holzbach 1978). This study can be distinguished from other expatriate studies since it makes use of a sample of expatriates in which virtually all participants had moved from a subsidiary location to the corporate headquarters. Usually, studies are conducted among expatriates who are sent from the headquarters to foreign subsidiaries.

Directions for future research

The above has already addressed several recommendations for further research. However, more recommendations can be mentioned that could reveal new insights concerning the impact of career support for expatriates.

It would be interesting if future research could explore the relationship between actual career support practices as provided according to the Human Resource Managers, how they are perceived by expatriates, and the impact on different outcome measures such as turnover and performance. Especially, research that could indicate which career support practices explain most of the variance, in for example intentions to leave and performance, would be interesting for both expatriate theory and practice. Furthermore, future research would benefit from a longitudinal study design in order to develop causal predictors of actual turnover and performance.

As mentioned, the results of this study are in contrast with findings of Stahl et al. (2002) supporting the notion of boundaryless careers for expatriates. Consequently, this study brings the contemporary debate in the career literature further into the expatriate literature. Future research should explore what characteristics are predictors of 'boundaryless' or traditional attitudes towards careers amongst expatriates. Since the research by Stahl et al. (2002) only covered German expatriates and the present study covered a broader variety of nationalities, future research could explore whether nationality plays a role in predicting career attitudes.

Furthermore, career development models could be integrated with models for expatriate career support. This way, the different career stages of expatriates could be revealed, with major possible implications for future research concerning the topic. Finally, future research should use multiple source and multiple method methodologies in order to obtain more reliable performance data and to reduce common source and common method bias.

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