

**Retaining Repatriate Knowledge at the Crossroads Between Global Knowledge Management and Global Talent Management**  
**La rétention des connaissances des repatriés entre global knowledge management et global talent management**  
**Retener los conocimientos de los repatriados, punto de intersección entre gestión global del talent y gestión global del conocimiento**

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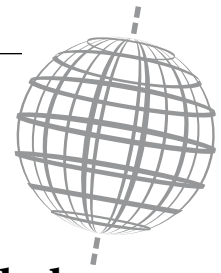
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Résumé de l'article

Sur la base de cadres théoriques liés à la GTM et à la GKM, nous montrons les enjeux liés à la rétention des connaissances du repatrié et nous abordons les approches et les mécanismes permettant d'y pallier. Nous nous appuyons sur une étude qualitative dans une entreprise multinationale allemande pour expliquer et discuter une mesure organisationnelle particulière, le programme d'experts pays, qui permet, en étant au carrefour des approches de GKM et de GTM, de surmonter les principales difficultés liées au transfert des connaissances acquises lors de l'expatriation et de faciliter les processus d'apprentissage.

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# Retaining Repatriate Knowledge at the Crossroads Between Global Knowledge Management and Global Talent Management\*



## La rétention des connaissances des repatriés entre global knowledge management et global talent management

## Retener los conocimientos de los repatriados, punto de intersección entre gestión global del talent y gestión global del conocimiento

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### ABSTRACT

While recent contributions introduce the need for dialog between global knowledge management (GKM) and global talent management (GTM) to facilitate repatriate knowledge transfer, a literature gap exists regarding the implementation of this hybrid approach. Using the theoretical backgrounds of repatriate knowledge, GKM and GTM, we define the challenges of retaining repatriate knowledge and suggest approaches to overcome these. Building on the qualitative case study of a German multinational company we introduce a specific organizational measure, the country expert program, which, by being at the crossroads between GKM and GTM and thus facilitating learning, overcomes repatriate knowledge transfer's major challenges.

**Keywords:** global talent management; global knowledge management; repatriate knowledge.

### RÉSUMÉ

Sur la base de cadres théoriques liés à la GTM et à la GKM, nous montrons les enjeux liés à la rétention des connaissances du repatrié et nous abordons les approches et les mécanismes permettant d'y pallier. Nous nous appuyons sur une étude qualitative dans une entreprise multinationale allemande pour expliquer et discuter une mesure organisationnelle particulière, le programme d'experts pays, qui permet, en étant au carrefour des approches de GKM et de GTM, de surmonter les principales difficultés liées au transfert des connaissances acquises lors de l'expatriation et de faciliter les processus d'apprentissage.

**Mots-Clés :** Gestion globale des talents; gestion globale des connaissances; connaissances des repatriés

### RESUMEN

Basándonos en los antecedentes teóricos de los conocimientos de los repatriados, GKM y GTM, definimos los desafíos de retener los conocimientos de los repatriados e introducimos enfoques para superar estos desafíos. Sobre la base de un estudio de caso cualitativo en una empresa multinacional alemana, presentamos y discutimos el programa de expertos de país como medida organizativa específica, el cual, al encontrarse en el punto de intersección entre GKM y GTM, permite superar los principales retos relacionados con la transferencia de conocimientos adquiridos durante la expatriación y facilita así los procesos de aprendizaje.

**Palabras clave:** gestión global del talento; gestión global del conocimiento; conocimientos de los repatriados

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Former studies have shown that the repatriation phase is one of the most crucial stages of the assignment process and that repatriate knowledge management is a major challenge (Hocking, Brown, and Harzing, 2004; Reiche, Harzing, and Kraimer, 2009; Knocke and Schuster, 2017). Most authors consider that expatriates acquire relevant knowledge for the whole organization while abroad (Berthoin Antal, 2000; Fink *et al.*, 2005; Oddou *et al.*, 2013) and that organizations, in order to benefit from its value, should try to retain, share or transfer this expatriate knowledge after the international assignment (Oddou *et al.*, 2009; Blakeney *et al.*, 2006). Many authors formulate different recommendations to prevent the resignation of repatriates (and the loss of individual talents and skills) but fewer contributions exist about the transfer of the knowledge

itself and about the collective and organizational conditions of this transfer (Furuya *et al.*, 2009).

Recent studies (Welch and Steen 2013; Furuya, *et al.* 2009) point out that it is critical to separate the organizational knowledge perspective from the individual skills and talent perspective, because skills are primarily embedded in individual and knowledge transfer within the organization and thus very much depend on dyadic interactions between knowledge sender and knowledge receiver as well as on the organizational context. Some recent contributions propose to consider a hybrid approach between global knowledge management (GKM) and global talent management (GTM) to consider these issues (Vance *et al.*, 2014b), but without a clear illustration of how this hybrid approach should look.

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Our contribution focuses on a qualitative case study of a German multinational company which has developed an important set of human resource management (HRM or HR) and knowledge management (KM) measures to retain repatriates and repatriate knowledge. We focus on one of its support measures, the country expert program (CEP), which is a pool of selected employees with former expatriate or international mobility experience, who can be contacted as trainers, coaches or experts to transfer within the organization some of the knowledge specific to the country of their experience. We describe and discuss the learning processes implied by this program, which articulates GKM and GTM to overcome the challenges related to repatriate knowledge transfer.

In our first section, we present a literature review about repatriate knowledge, and about the main issues that have been identified in its transfer, from three perspectives: individual, dyadic and organizational. In our second section, we present the case company and its global mobility support practices as well as our case study methodology. In a third section, we propose an analysis of the CEP and focus on its learning processes. Finally, we discuss the contributions as well as the context specificities of our case study and introduce future research avenues.

### Literature Review: Issues Related to Repatriate Knowledge

The purpose of expatriation varies depending on the perspective of the expatriate and of the organization (Furuya *et al.*, 2007; Hocking *et al.*, 2004). For expatriates, an international assignment can be perceived as a phase of their career during which they experience a new role, a new unit, a particular foreign market or overseas life in general. Thus, it is also a driver for developing individual skills or competencies, i.e. one's own individual human capital (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013; Al Ariss, 2014; Cerdin and Brewster, 2014; Collings, 2014). For the multinational company (MNC), international assignments can be considered from a global organizational perspective, e.g. as means to reinforce the control, coordination or cohesion of subsidiaries, or to facilitate the transfer of organizational practices or knowledge between headquarters and subsidiaries (Evans *et al.*, 2002). In both cases, expatriation can be seen as an individual and/or collective learning process in which new skills and knowledge are developed (Adler, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2004). This means that the reintegration of expatriate knowledge upon repatriation becomes an issue and calls for KM efforts and measures during repatriation to capitalize on the benefits of expatriation (Bonache *et al.*, 2007; Burmeister *et al.*, 2015).

#### DEFINING REPATRIATE KNOWLEDGE

Kostova and Roth (2002) define knowledge as ideas, rules, procedures, experiences and models developed over time, guiding actions and decisions. The exposure to new ideas, experiences, practices, market approaches or cultures is considered a key element in the development of personal and organizational knowledge (Oddou *et al.*, 2009). Expatriation is, therefore, a satisfactory way to transfer and disseminate knowledge throughout the organization (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

In one of the first studies dealing with expatriate knowledge transfer, Berthoin Antal (2000) developed a model consisting of five categories to characterize the knowledge acquired by expatriates

abroad. Declarative knowledge ("knowing what") is about knowing that the foreign market has a different structure and that local practices are different. Procedural knowledge ("knowing how") refers to knowledge put into action and has a significant tacit dimension. Knowing how to supervise a local group or negotiate with local customers are examples of this knowledge type. Expatriates also develop conditional knowledge ("knowing when"), enabling them to identify the right time to use the professional routines, for example a specific type of communication. The fourth category of knowledge, according to Berthoin Antal, is axiomatic knowledge ("knowing why"), and corresponds to the understanding of practices or the ability to explain why local cultural practices differ from the practices of one's culture of origin. Finally, the fifth category is the notion of network knowledge ("knowing whom"), referring to expatriate relationship development and the ability to identify key contacts. Expatriates meet many people during their stay, thereby developing networks both inside (colleagues, managers, other expatriates) and outside the subsidiary (customers, suppliers, expatriates from other companies).

Fink *et al.* (2005) propose another typology composed of five categories of expatriate knowledge, namely interpersonal skills, job-related managerial knowledge, knowledge of the foreign market, network knowledge and general management knowledge. Interpersonal skills (see also Black *et al.*, 1992; Caligiuri and Di Santo, 2001) are extremely subjective and linked to individuals, sometimes very similar to personality traits or fundamental attitudes such as openness to new experiences, empathy or flexibility. The authors describe the job-related managerial knowledge as the development or improvement of leadership skills within a specific work environment, e.g. how to communicate, motivate or determine objectives with the staff. Knowledge of the foreign market corresponds to declarative knowledge ("knowing what"). This type of knowledge is frequently identified in the literature on expatriation (Lazarova and Caligiuri, 2004) and includes language skills and knowledge of the local economic, political and social system as well as knowledge of how business is done at a local level. For the authors, network knowledge is also an important element of repatriate knowledge. General management skills correspond with experience in a variety of domains, providing the expatriate with an overview of the different functions which is necessary to manage an entity.

The typologies by Berthoin Antal (2000) and by Fink *et al.* (2005) have been regularly used and discussed by several authors (including Barmeyer and Davoine, 2012; Caligiuri and Di Santo, 2001; Bonache and Brewster, 2001; Lazarova and Tarique, 2005; Oddou *et al.*, 2009; Nery-Kjerfve and McLean, 2012; Burmeister *et al.*, 2015) and are still the reference point. Given the value associated with the different types of knowledge developed during an international assignment, it is of great importance for organizations to be aware of the challenges related to retaining repatriate knowledge.

#### CHALLENGES OF RETAINING REPATRIATE KNOWLEDGE WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS

Transferring repatriate knowledge is a twofold issue. On the one hand it is about retaining people, i.e. retaining repatriates within the company in order to preserve the individual skills and knowledge that they have developed. Retaining them is often described as a challenge, and it is regularly said that repatriates

should be offered attractive positions otherwise they would find new career opportunities in other companies. Lazarova and Caligiuri (2004) posit that supportive repatriation practices, including career development processes, increase repatriate desire to stay in the organization notably because of improved perceptions. On the other hand, transferring the knowledge of repatriates is about retaining their knowledge or, more precisely, making people share their knowledge within the organization.

An important part of repatriate knowledge is tacit, i.e. complicated and deeply embedded (Gonzalez and Chakraborty, 2014; Nery-Kjerfve and McLean, 2012), and the tacit nature of repatriate knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) can be an obstacle. The more tacit and implicit the expatriate knowledge is, the more difficult the transfer will be, requiring interaction between the expatriate and other actors within the organization (Szulanski, 1996). Some categories of knowledge, like technical or market-related knowledge, are easier to transfer than social competencies, a global mindset or what Fink *et al.* (2005) describe as general management skills, because these skills are too deeply rooted in the individuals. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) have developed a model of knowledge creation with two coupled dimensions (tacit/explicit and individual/collective) that can be applied to repatriate knowledge sharing, as it explains how knowledge is created through interactions between human agency and social structures, how explicit and tacit knowledge intertwine and how individual tacit knowledge might be transformed into collective knowledge. Socialization is seen as the first step to knowledge creation and it represents “the process of converting new tacit knowledge through shared experiences in day-to-day social interaction” (Nonaka and Toyama, 2003). The next step of the knowledge creation model, so-called externalization, occurs when tacit knowledge is made explicit through dialog and reflection. During the combination process, organizational actors collect and combine explicit knowledge inside and outside the organization to form more complex and systematic explicit knowledge which is then disseminated among the organization’s actors. Finally, the internalization process enables the conversion of created and shared explicit knowledge into enriched tacit knowledge. This step represents knowledge application and use in practical situations which leads to new routines. Furthermore, these four modes of knowledge conversion form a spiral as organization knowledge creation is “a never-ending process that upgrades itself continuously” (Nonaka and Toyama, 2003).

### THREE LEVELS OF ANALYSIS TO UNDERSTAND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Burmeister *et al.* (2015) propose three levels of analysis in organizations – individual, dyadic and organizational – to further explain the challenges of learning processes in the transfer of repatriate knowledge. We will outline in the following sections the relevance of these dimensions for knowledge retention (Marsick and Watkins, 2003; Kogut and Zander, 1993).

The *individual level of analysis* enables additional explanation of the challenges of retaining repatriate knowledge linked to individuals. As mentioned by Oddou *et al.* (2009), knowledge retention is affected both by the ability and the motivation of repatriates (knowledge source) to share knowledge on the one

hand and, on the other hand, by the willingness and readiness of recipients (knowledge receivers) to learn from repatriates. On the repatriate side, Oddou *et al.* (2009) note that repatriate ability to share knowledge is affected by the degree of repatriate expertise acquired abroad, the degree of power in the job position upon re-entry and the development of social networks. Regarding repatriate motivation to share knowledge, employees are basically confronted with the question of whether they think of their own benefit or of the common good of the company (Moser 2002). Husted and Michailova (2002) note an existing “knowledge-sharing hostility”, meaning that knowledge retention is used as a power resource that secures a personal competitive advantage over colleagues. According to Nery-Kjerfve and McLean (2012), repatriates who feel valued by their organization are more willing to engage in knowledge sharing behavior. On the recipient side, individuals’ receptivity to decoding and applying repatriate knowledge affects repatriates’ knowledge transfer success (Oddou *et al.*, 2009; Kang and Kim, 2010).

The characteristics of the knowledge sender and knowledge receiver also affect the relationship between both. Issues related to interactions between repatriates and other actors in the organization are pointed out in *the dyadic level of analysis*. The more tacit and implicit the expatriate knowledge is, the more the transfer or learning process will require interpersonal interaction between the expatriate and other actors within the organization. Several authors agree that knowledge transfer outcomes are affected by the type of interaction between knowledge sources and recipients as well as the type of relationship they have built (Szulanski, 1996; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Argote *et al.*, 2003; Ipe, 2003; Joshi *et al.*, 2006; Bartel-Radic, 2006; Huang *et al.*, 2013; Burmeister *et al.*, 2015). Social capital theory and boundary spanning theory are therefore crucial to understand further the challenges related to the need for interactions and the characteristics of these interactions. Previous research highlights the role of social ties for knowledge transfer (Reiche *et al.*, 2009; Mäkelä and Brewster, 2009; Reiche, 2011). Repatriates should therefore engage in interpersonal interactions and boundary spanning activities (Kostova and Roth, 2003; Reiche *et al.*, 2009; Barner-Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014), e.g. facilitating interactions, managing potential conflicts or building trust. The dyadic learning process, i.e. mutual or reciprocal learning resulting from knowledge transfer in interpersonal interactions, is more productive when it is continuous and regular, during and after the expatriation period (Berthoin Antal, 2001) and when it is built on trust (Riusala and Suutari, 2004; Mäkelä, 2007; Barmeyer and Davoine, 2019).

At the *organizational level*, several types of obstacles to knowledge transfer can be identified (Gonzalez and Chakraborty, 2014; Oddou *et al.*, 2009; Minbaeva *et al.*, 2003). Berthoin Antal (2001) points out that the jobs allocated upon repatriation are often unsuitable for the transfer process, as they do not plan to use the knowledge and skills developed abroad. The organization’s structures and procedures can also be a barrier as they might leave little room for exchanges of experience and for interaction, both of which would enable this transfer. Furthermore, the organization culture may not promote new ideas or innovative approaches, or repatriate knowledge may be undervalued (Barakat and Moussa, 2014; Ismail Al-Alawi *et al.*, 2007). The repatriate’s motivation to transfer his/her knowledge might

thus be hindered (Bonache and Brewster, 2001). Organizations, by offering targeted career and repatriation support, might increase repatriate motivation to share knowledge as well as recipient willingness to learn (Kostova and Roth, 2002; Reiche, 2012; Oddou *et al.*, 2013; Burmeister *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, offering an open environment and practices favoring interactions might also help in retaining repatriate knowledge (Nery-Kjerfve and McLean, 2012). Cohen and Levinthal (1990) relate the transfer of knowledge to absorptive capacity as the “ability of a firm to recognize the value of new, external information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends”. The more pronounced it is, the greater the transfer of knowledge (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Szulanski, 1996; Minbaeva *et al.*, 2003; Kang and Lee, 2017). Gonzalez and Chakraborty (2014) also introduce the notion of knowledge sustainability, referring to the organization’s ability to develop and generate knowledge from the knowledge received or absorbed. As different authors (Minbaeva *et al.*, 2003; Lazarova and Tarique, 2005; Oddou *et al.*, 2009) have already pointed out, knowledge transfer should be considered as a strategic activity.

#### OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF RETAINING REPATRIATE KNOWLEDGE WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS

Recent contributions (Vance *et al.*, 2014b; Welch and Steen, 2013; Furuya *et al.*, 2009) show that the individual knowledge perspective cannot be totally separated from the two other levels because it is influenced by social capital (dyadic level) and by career and repatriation support (organization culture). Nonaka and Toyama (2003) point out the interdependent connections between entities and structure that make the knowledge sharing process, which in turn enables the transformation of individual knowledge into dynamic collective knowledge. The dyadic relationships of the individual also influence and are influenced by the organizational environment: the organization’s structure, practices and culture (e.g. control and incitation systems) influence opportunities and intensity of interactions as well as knowledge sharing behaviors in both the knowledge source and knowledge recipient (Burmeister *et al.*, 2015; Reiche, 2012). Minbaeva *et al.* (2014) argue that individual-level behavioral characteristics as well as interactions are key aspects of organizational absorptive capacity and highlight the need to consider the interplay between individual, team and organizational levels of absorptive capacity.

Because of the duality of considering knowledge and people, the issue of transferring repatriate knowledge might be considered not only using a GKM approach, which neglects the human dimensions and remains at a rather theoretical and abstract level, but also a GTM approach (Vance *et al.*, 2014a). While KM brings an organizational and conceptual perspective, talent management can be viewed as an individual approach, where individual skills and competencies are central for organizations to benefit from the knowledge value (Vance *et al.*, 2014b). Retaining repatriate knowledge is also a matter of GTM (Al Ariss, 2014). Tarique and Schuler (2010) define GTM as “systematically utilizing IHRM activities [...] to attract, develop, and retain individuals with high levels of human capital (e.g. competency, personality, motivation) consistent with the strategic directions of the multinational enterprise”. An important task of GTM will therefore be to describe key elements of individual human capital and to match these individual profiles to organizational

pivotal positions (Vance *et al.*, 2014b). Repatriates can be viewed as those talented individuals who possess specific knowledge to fulfill key roles (Moeller *et al.*, 2016). Hybrid HR practices combining GKM and GTM should be implemented to overcome the challenges of retaining repatriate knowledge within the organization. Vance and his colleagues (2014b) encourage further research to articulate GKM and HR practices within GTM. The current study aims at focusing on ways to link GKM and GTM. The development of a dyadic learning process, representing the interface where individual and organizational perspectives meet up, needs to be scrutinized as a means to overcome the challenges we have identified.

#### Methodology

Our study is based on qualitative interpretive research. We conducted case study research within one MNC (Marschan-Piekkari *et al.*, 2004) on the basis of semi-structured interviews, following the qualitative case studies on repatriate knowledge of Berthoin Antal (2001), Bonache and Brewster (2001) and Fink *et al.* (2005). This approach was chosen due to the explorative nature of our study and is common for studies on multinational companies in order to understand the contextual complexity and the contingency of a phenomenon (Dul and Hak, 2008; Ghauri, 2004; Yin, 2009). Qualitative research attempts to explain the particular contexts in which the data is collected, with interpretation processes. In this respect, with a “thick description” (D’Iribarne, 2009; Geertz, 1973) of the social phenomena observed on the basis of interviews and with the analysis of documents, observations of the context itself, it enables the disclosure of a relatively complete set of explaining factors for a phenomenon.

#### THE RESEARCH CONTEXT: MOTORIX

The case study was conducted within Motorix, a German company and a major player on the global automotive market, with more than two-thirds of its turnover generated and more than half its staff working outside Germany. In the 2000s, the company developed guidelines for an ambitious, multi-faceted international development policy. The primary objective of this policy was to reinforce exchanges between the staff of the different national sites, at all hierarchical levels. This exchange reinforcement policy was due, first of all, to the desire to facilitate the global management of the value chain by reinforcing coordination via human resources synergy at all levels. Motorix’s desire to improve coordination is combined with the desire to develop managers’ intercultural skills and global mindset through international mobility. This development policy also concerns the managers of all national subsidiaries, with the goal of forming joint management teams for subsidiaries in which local managers would be the majority. The policy requires numerous mobility support measures to help with preparation, periods abroad and repatriation. Since 1990, mobility for periods of more than 18 months concerns more than 2,500 employees of the group concurrently: nearly 60% of these are expatriations from the parent company to foreign subsidiaries, while the rest are inpatriations from foreign subsidiaries to the parent company, but also transfers from one subsidiary to another, and from one geographical area to another. This current mobility pattern is closer to a “geocentric” coordination model (in the

sense of Perlmutter, 1969), characterized by the desire to integrate the diversity of local cultures into a global entity with strong interdependence between foreign subsidiaries and the parent company. Mobility is no longer exclusively restricted to senior executives and is not limited to long periods: the 2,500 long-term stays conceal a range of short-term stays, of meetings for coordination of international project teams and, above all, of a multitude of daily international contacts throughout the organization. Motorix has developed, besides classical instruments of KM like Communities of Practice or Lessons Learned, numerous support systems and tools (see Table 1), which can be considered as intercultural knowledge management best practice, as discussed by Bengoa and Kaufmann (2014).

In contrast to other MNCs, Motorix seems to be a pioneer in developing and using diverse measures and tools that not only accompany the preparation and accompanying phases of the expatriation cycle (Adler, 2008; Berthoin Antal, 2001) but also contribute to knowledge sharing within the company and help to retain repatriates by valorizing their skills.

#### SAMPLE

The sample was established in cooperation with the training and international mobility department in order to get a representative range of expatriates, countries and hierarchical positions affected by expatriation (see Table 2). We interviewed 31 former German expatriates with an experience abroad of at least two years, to focus on long-term assignments only. Only repatriates who had returned to Germany within the past two years were selected, in order to avoid memory bias (Burmeister *et al.*, 2015). Interviewed repatriates had worked in one to three different host countries and spent 5.58 years abroad on average.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were conducted with a semi-directive guide inspired by the approach used in the studies previously cited (Berthoin Antal, 2001; Bonache and Brewster, 2001; Fink *et al.*, 2005). Focus was on the preparation for expatriation, the repatriation experience, the knowledge developed and the transfer of this knowledge upon repatriation, the challenges encountered and, in particular, on the relevance of the tools implemented by the company. Three researchers conducted the interviews, which were all in German as it was the mother tongue of the expatriates.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each of the 31 interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interviews were analyzed by subject using word fields and categories, with particular attention being paid to the answers to the questions which were of interest for the research project (King and Horrocks, 2010). A grid of analysis was built, based on the challenges of retaining repatriate knowledge using the four levels of analysis presented in the first part of this article. Subsequently, texts were coded using the computer-aided analysis tool MAXQDA and evaluated using content analysis (Kuckartz, 2007; Mayring, 2008). As proposed by Eisenhardt (1989), emergent findings were compared with existing literature in order to integrate both in the development of the study. One organizational measure that was implemented appeared to be of particular interest for overcoming the challenges related to repatriate knowledge: the CEP, which appeared to be up-and-coming in terms of articulating GKM and GTM. The initial grid of analysis was thus modified and the content analysis was repeated with the aim of identifying responses about the CEP and the challenges of retaining repatriate knowledge (see Table 3). In addition, to triangulate the data coming from the repatriate interviews (Yin, 2009), the results of the study were presented to and discussed with a focus group involving 15 expatriates and seven members of the HR training and international mobility department of Motorix.

#### Findings: The Country Expert Program's Role in Overcoming the Challenges Of Retaining Repatriate Knowledge Within Organizations

In this part, we focus on a specific knowledge instrument which appears to be very efficient for intercultural knowledge management: the CEP, which seems to fulfill important functions at the interface of GKM and GTM. After a description of the CEP, findings are divided into three sections. The first section aims to show that the CEP is a relevant GKM tool and enables the overcoming of challenges related to knowledge characteristics and to the organization. The second section presents the CEP as a valuable GTM tool and thus focuses on repatriate retention and on the individual level of analysis. The last section aims at demonstrating how the CEP allows dyadic learning processes, interrelated with individual and organizational elements.

**TABLE 1**  
**Motorix's Support Programs and Tools**

Measures and tools	Content and goal
Intercultural preparation trainings	... for the expatriate and his/her family, which includes general information on the host country as well as different intercultural adaptation aspects.
Country reports	... containing cultural and practical information on the countries concerned are also available in German and English. These reports are regularly updated and are available on the training department's website.
Intranet forum	... with political, economic, societal und cultural information on countries.
Mentors	... are appointed to facilitate the on-site integration of expatriates and knowledge transfer.
Feedback on mobility	... is systematically collected and sent to the mentors who accompanied the expatriates in the subsidiaries.
Reintegration workshop	... upon repatriation, that the expatriate and his/her family attend.
Country expert program	... upon repatriation, in which former expatriates are identified as country experts, who share their expertise in a specific market or culture and their local network. These country experts are also involved in the preparation training of future expatriates.

TABLE 2 Sample										
	Educational background	Host Country	Position abroad	Function abroad	Time spent abroad (years)	Accompanied by	Back in the headquarter for	Position since repatriation	Knowledge transfer	Activity as Country expert
M1	Mechanics	Wales Belgium China	Group leader / head of department	Plant construction / Expert	10	-	9 months	On trip abroad	Indirect	Passive
M2	Concurrent degree	India	Group leader / head of department	Expert	3.5	Family	7 years	Group leader	Direct	Active
M3	Econometrics	Czech Republic	Head of division	Plant construction / Expert	6.5	Family	4 years	Coordinator position	Direct	Active
M4	Electrical engineering	Mexico China	Group leader / head of department	Expert	8	Family	1.5 years	Dossier / project manager	Indirect	Active
M5	System engineering	Hungary	Group leader	Department creation	5	Family	3 years	No data	Indirect	Active
M6	Management	Italy	Plant director	Plant management	3	Family	1.5 years	Management position	Indirect	Active
M7	Chemistry	Brazil	Management responsibility	Expert	3	Wife	2 years	Regional coordination	Indirect	No
M8	Mechanics	South Korea Turkey Japan	Group leader / head of department	Plant construction / Expert / Department creation	10	Wife	5 years	No data	Direct	Active
M9	Mechanics	China	Group leader	Expert	3	Wife	1 year	Group leader	Indirect	No
M10	Mechanics, doctoral degree	Czech Republic	Head of division	Division creation	3.5	Family	1 year	No data	Indirect	No
M11	Aerospace engineering	Japan	Group leader	Expert	5	-	2 months	No data	Indirect	No
M12	Mechanics	India	Group leader	Expert	4	-	7 years	No data	Indirect	Active
M13	Mechanics, doctoral degree	Portugal	Group leader / head of department	Expert	5	Family	6 years	Head of division	Indirect	Active
M14	Physics, doctoral degree	Brazil China	Head of division	Expert	6.5	Family	9 months	Quality manager	Direct	No
M15	Physics, doctoral degree	Turkey	Group leader / head of department	Expert	3	Family	3 months	Advisor	Indirect	Passive
M16	Apprenticeship	Switzerland Russia	Head of division	Expert	9	Family	9 months	Department creation	Direct	Passive

**TABLE 2**  
**Sample**

	<b>Educational background</b>	<b>Host Country</b>	<b>Position abroad</b>	<b>Function abroad</b>	<b>Time spent abroad (years)</b>	<b>Accompanied by</b>	<b>Back in the headquarter for</b>	<b>Position since repatriation</b>	<b>Knowledge transfer</b>	<b>Activity as Country expert</b>
M17	Mechanics	India USA	Management responsibility	Expert	6	Family	3 years	No data	Direct	Active
M18	Management	China	Director of the merger and acquisition division	Expert / Mergers	6	Family	1 year	Coordinator position	Direct	Active
M19	Concurrent degree	Australia Belgium	Plant director	Expert	10	Family	3 years	No data	Direct	Active
M20	Technical sales engineering	Spain	Head of division	Expert	7	Family	9 months	Project	Indirect	Passive
M21	Mechanics	Italy	Group leader	Expert	3.5	Wife	1 year	Acquisition manager	Direct	No
M22	Management	Malaysia	Head of division	Closing down a business unit	2	-	6 months	Head of department	Indirect	No
M23	Concurrent degree	USA	Group leader	Expert	7	Family	1 year	Advisor	Direct	No
M24	Master's degree	China	Project manager / Head of division	Expert / Project	10	Family	1 year	Services centre director	Direct	Passive
M25	Apprenticeship	Mexico Brazil	Project manager / general manager	Expert / Project	15	Family	7 months	Business unit director	Direct	No
M26	International management	Portugal	Group leader / project manager	Expert / Group leader	3	-	1.5 years	Project coordination	Direct	Active
M27	Econometrics / Electrical engineering	Spain	Project manager	Project	4	Family	1 year	Project management	Indirect	No
M28	Mechanics	USA	Project manager	Expert	3	Family	9 months	No data	Indirect	No
M29	Econometrics / Electrical engineering	Australia	Head of division	Expert	3	Family	7 months	No data	Indirect	No
M30	Economics	India	Head of division	Expert	2.5	Family	9 months	No data	Indirect	No
M31	Management	Tunisia	Plant director	Plant management	3	Family	9 months	No data	Indirect	No



**TABLE 3**  
**Analysis Grid**

Angle of analysis	Challenges of retaining repatriate knowledge within organizations	Authors
Repatriate knowledge	Retaining repatriates	Lazarova and Caligiuri (2004) Berthoin Antal (2001) Barmeyer and Davoine (2012) Al Ariss (2014)
Knowledge characteristics	Tacitness of knowledge	Gonzalez and Chakaborty (2014) Nery-Kjerfve and McLean (2012) Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) Szulanski (1996)
	Knowledge identification, documentation and recognition	Bonache and Brewster (2001) Burmeister <i>et al.</i> (2015)
Individual level	Knowledge source's ability and motivation to share	Oddou <i>et al.</i> (2009) Moser (2002) Husted and Michailova (2002) Nery-Kjerfve and McLean (2012)
	Knowledge recipient's ability, readiness and motivation to learn	Oddou <i>et al.</i> (2009) Kang and Kim (2010)
Dyadic level	Continuous and regular interactions	Berthoin Antal (2001)
	Trusted relationships	Riusala and Suutari (2014) Mäkela (2007) Oddou <i>et al.</i> (2013) Burmeister <i>et al.</i> (2015) Levin <i>et al.</i> (2006)
Organizational level	Job allocation upon repatriation	Berthoin Antal (2001)
	Structures and procedures	Gonzalez and Chakraborty (2014) Minbaeva <i>et al.</i> (2003)
	Organization culture	Barakat and Moussa (2014) Bonache and Brewster (2001) Ismail Al-Alawi <i>et al.</i> (2007)
	Absorptive capacity	Szulanski (1996) Cohen and Levinthal (1990) Gupta and Govindarajan (2000) Minbaeva <i>et al.</i> (2003) Minbaeva (2007)
	Knowledge sustainability	Gonzalez and Chakraborty (2014)

### THE COUNTRY EXPERT PROGRAM

At the time of our study about 340 country experts (CEs) could be found in the intranet database of Motorix, working as internal consultants without being concretely paid for this consulting activity and mainly based at headquarters. CEs exert many different functions: they act as mentors or coaches for expatriates and also as consultants for specific projects, they establish country-specific expert networks in the organization, they contribute to the writing of country reports and help with intercultural preparation training, they organize information events and workshops on critical incidents and best practice.

In order to become CEs, a multi-circular-term development program for repatriates was originated at Motorix in the late 1990s. Motorix tried to integrate the recommendations of the literature on intercultural knowledge management tools related to the different stages of the expatriation cycle. Before every international assignment, the future expatriate participates with his/her life partner in a three-day country-specific intercultural preparation seminar, during which a CE shares their knowledge about the foreign assignment. When returning to their home country after their assignment, repatriates have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in a reintegration seminar. After that, the

HR development department offers the former expatriates the possibility to attend free training as a CE, which qualifies them to share their knowledge and experience in preparatory seminars with future expatriates. The selection of the CEs is based mainly on two criteria: their successful expatriation and their motivation. This circular process for intercultural knowledge transfer has become well established in the company.

In our interviews we found different reasons why repatriates are motivated to further work as CEs: some respondents mentioned self-reflection on their experiences abroad, others are motivated by representing and promoting the country in which they worked, others like to help and support future expatriates for an easier integration in the host country. Ultimately, the success of CEs depends a great deal on their ability and motivation to share their knowledge within the organization: *"I accepted training as a country expert, in which I participated in order to systematically process the knowledge that was collected on site and to pass it on within the company. Practically passing on the knowledge to others. [...] And I noticed that Portugal has nothing at all. And then I said: All right! If it doesn't exist yet, I am ready to take it over and then create the structures in the intranet, build up the distribution list."* (M26)

The 31 interviewed expatriates of our research represent a heterogeneous group in terms of knowledge transfer: 12 people are actively involved in the activities of intercultural knowledge transfer as CEs, five considered themselves as passively enrolled for this activity and 14 do not participate in this institutionalized instrument of knowledge transfer.

#### CEP AS A GKM TOOL WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION

The CEP has been initially defined as sharing so-called local market-specific knowledge. We observed that this knowledge is very often about “knowing why”, e.g. in China: *“I can tell you so many things about the country, the people, the culture and the mindset. I can also tell you about business practices and how people work. And I can also tell you about the country’s economy and politics, even religion.”* (M24). Some CEs told us that they could play a major role in helping newly appointed expatriates who were having difficulties with local business partners to solve specific problems. Market-specific knowledge is also linked to network knowledge and developing trust with key persons: *“Thanks to my various stays abroad, I have developed a genuine network and this has had positive effects. I know exactly who to contact in the event of a problem. If I can’t solve a problem myself, I always know someone who will help me.”* (M17). Network knowledge is about introducing key actors, building trustworthy relationships and being a guarantor for newcomers by establishing contacts with local clients and suppliers. Due to the special bond between the subsidiary and the parent company, expatriates also develop new relationships with their contacts in the headquarters. In this sense, CEs possess the necessary network knowledge and can introduce future expatriates to their network.

CEs can also play a major role in headquarters as interfaces between the different units. Consequently, a number of repatriates cited the importance of improving their understanding of the company’s matrix structure by adopting a perspective other than the German one, referring then to organizational knowledge: *“Above all, I finally understood in detail how the company operates at international level. Now I clearly see how things are organized. You know where and how things work when you’re on site.”* (M4). It is interesting to note that, Motorix being a company with a global chain organization, some units could be world leaders for specific products, processes or techniques, even in emerging countries. CEs may intervene to allow the diffusion of the specific knowledge from these units.

Some categories of repatriate knowledge are easier to transfer, like technical or organizational knowledge (e.g. knowledge about technical processes, legal and software standards, or market knowledge of a specific area). Procedural and conditional knowledge include a significant tacit dimension. CEs therefore intervene in intercultural training and reintegration workshops, they collaborate to improve country reports and intranet forums and act as local mentors. This integration of KM tools and CEP signals the willingness of the organization to support a knowledge-oriented organizational culture, which values knowledge recognition, assimilation and application and improves the absorptive capacity of the company.

#### COUNTRY EXPERTS AS VISIBLE TALENTS

Some skills, like general management skills (e.g. a manager running a unit with 100 employees) or interpersonal skills (e.g.

openness, flexibility), are more difficult to transfer and share. The CEP contributes to the retention of repatriates – and their non-transferable skills – in the organization and contributes also to improving both the ability and motivation of repatriates to share and the ability and willingness of knowledge receivers to learn from them. Becoming a CE implies being selected (motivation to share knowledge is a selection criteria) before being trained. The development program validates repatriate expertise and signals repatriate knowledge value to others. Most importantly, repatriates become more visible in the whole organization and the CEP helps them to develop their network further: *“People meet again and again all over the world. When I travel to foreign locations, I meet the German expats, who are typically also in management positions. You’ll get a scary network. I’ll say, it’s always the same five percent who move in a large organization.”* (M3)

By being actively involved in the organizational learning process, repatriates feel valued and this limits potential frustration upon repatriation. Being a CE gives a symbolic position and organizational legitimacy to repatriates, in line with GTM. CEs, recognized as visible talents in the organization, are less inclined to leave the company, and are also trained to be more able and motivated to share their knowledge.

#### COUNTRY EXPERTS AS CENTRAL ACTORS IN THE DYADIC LEARNING PROCESS

As already highlighted, knowledge transfer requires interaction between repatriates and other actors within the organization, especially for the diffusion of tacit knowledge. Trust mechanisms associated with CEs are crucial for improving the transfer of knowledge within the organization. The label of CE expertise resulting from selection and training is a trust builder. Furthermore, CEs are able to build interpersonal trust through continuous and informal interactions. The CEP, by including repatriates in different activities in the organization, creates opportunities to interact, to develop networks and interpersonal trust through information events, preparatory seminars, and workshops. Relevant interactions between CEs and expatriates are not limited to formal workshops and meetings. A significant part of the knowledge transferred by CEs is actually done so in a spontaneous way by meetings and telephone calls: *“Knowledge circulation is not very structured, mostly done by simple calls. But there are always people who would like to know something about a topic, and then they call me.”* (M24).

The formal structure of GKM and informal interactions intertwine in the knowledge sharing process, enabling the retention of tacit knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). During our empirical research, it became clear that the CEP is only a part of the GKM, a formal support for informal interactions. Many interviewees underlined the importance of existing informal social networks and ties between former expatriates from a given country, in which information and knowledge sharing seems to emerge naturally and spontaneously. Interpersonal and individualized contact makes it much easier to assure the transfer and circulation of knowledge, because of its dialogical and interpersonal dimension: *“The most important things when someone goes abroad are not seminars or books, but what really helps is, if you can sit with someone who was there.”* (M11).

CEs organize a lot of informal social networks and events based around specific countries like China, India, Turkey or Brazil. For example, a Brazilian evening takes regularly place in the city where Motorix headquarters are located, but outside the company. During these events, repatriates from Brazil and their family members meet and exchange knowledge with future expatriates. A time to share a drink and food is followed by a time for information, questions and discussions. From our results, it appears that CEs act as institutionalized boundary spanners: they play a role of interface between different units by using the relevant knowledge (e.g. network, local market, intercultural, organizational knowledge) to span boundaries. They convey network knowledge and boost network knowledge growth by exchanging, linking, facilitating, and intervening in interactions. Since the dyadic learning process provides knowledge decoding in the transfer, assimilation is facilitated and more deeply embedded.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE COUNTRY EXPERT PROGRAM

Some difficulties and limitations due to different constraints are, nevertheless, pointed out by the interviewees. First, many repatriates remain passive and do not participate in the CEP, often because of the lack of support from their executives, as the following statement shows: *"I was asked by the HR department if I wanted to be a country expert, but my current boss was afraid that this could keep me from my primary responsibilities."* (M7). Knowledge transfer might be time consuming and thus can be perceived as counterproductive in the short term. Therefore, some executives do not allow employees to participate in international knowledge management activities: *"I also think that the awareness among executives is not present, [...] also due to the fact that the executives who had to decide this, had no experience abroad."* (M12) Second, the repatriates do not have enough time, beside their direct responsibilities, to invest resources in CE activities. Third, the geographical distance, especially between the headquarters and countries like China or India, does not always permit the fulfillment of the functions of a CE. When working abroad, the CE is too far away from the headquarters, where most of the preparation training takes place. Last but not least, the temporal distance of the stay abroad has to be addressed since it might make country-specific information out of date: *"The intercultural knowledge, as such, of course, does not change. In contrast, the country-specific knowledge has a certain half-life and is soon less valuable."* (M8). Not only specific market knowledge but also network knowledge becomes obsolete over time.

### Discussion

Based on a three-level approach, this article studies the challenges of retaining repatriate knowledge as identified in the existing literature and highlights the difficulty of clearly separating individual perspective from organizational perspective in repatriate KM. Our study describes a relevant instrument for repatriate knowledge transfer, which links GKM and GTM. The CEP of Motorix seems to be really useful for the diffusion of tacit knowledge and to overcome several classical barriers to knowledge transfer identified in the literature (Bengoa and Kaufmann, 2014; Burmeister *et al.*, 2015).

*The CEP as a GKM tool.* The program developed by Motorix helps to promote and regularly use expatriate knowledge in different daily situations (e.g. training sessions, contacts with the former subsidiary, help and advice in particularly difficult business cases). The knowledge valuation and recognition resulting from the CEP have a positive impact on the challenges of retaining repatriate knowledge related to the organization since they foster a knowledge-driven organizational culture (Ismail Al-Alawi *et al.*, 2007) and thus enhance both absorptive capacity and knowledge sustainability (Nery-Kjerfve and McLean, 2012). CEs are able to articulate different knowledge registries, from tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge. They remain available in the long run by playing the role of mentors and following expatriates all along the expatriation life cycle, from preparation training to reintegration workshops, which establishes a virtuous knowledge spiral (Nonaka and Toyama, 2003).

*The CEP as a GTM tool.* The CEP exerts a positive influence on the challenges of retaining individuals by offering organizational visibility. Blakeney and colleagues (2006) highlighted that most employees turn to other companies to find career progression. HR department experts clearly express that identification as a CE is a plus for further career promotions. More than visibility, CEs develop a recognized status in the organization and act as representatives of the added value of overseas experience. They preach for the use and recognition of the knowledge acquired abroad and thus have a symbolic as well as a socio-political role in reinforcing expatriates' position and career perspectives as well as their legitimacy. Through their activities, they extend their network and potential influence within the organization.

*The CEP promotes dyadic learning processes.* The case study clearly shows the importance of interactions between knowledge senders and knowledge receivers in the transfer process. The quality of the transfer seems to be higher when the possibility is given of informal and regular interactions, which facilitate trust and interpersonal relationships and make the CEP more effective than IT documentation tools (country forums or country reports). Through the interpersonal ties CEs have developed during their overseas assignment and back home, a web of strong interpersonal relationships is spinning throughout the organization and across the world (Reiche, 2012; Kang and Kim, 2010). The resulting social capital that has developed contributes to the diffusion of repatriate knowledge all over the organization.

### Conclusion

In sum, our findings give insights into a program linking the GKM and GTM of a German MNC which can serve as best practice for other MNCs in many ways. At the same time, the difficulties expressed and the limitations pointed out by some interviewees show that Motorix's CEP is not a panacea and needs continuous monitoring to play its role in the GKM process.

Our study obviously has some limitations: first, we undertook a qualitative single case study within a German MNC which has developed over decades a complex and exhaustive set of instruments and a corporate culture that cannot be easily replicated in other MNCs. Furthermore, German MNCs prove to have higher repatriate retention rates: Stahl *et al.* (2002) identified that an overwhelming 90% of the German expatriates in their

sample expected positive career effects from their assignments. Our case study might therefore represent an area of best practice to study further. Second, since we discovered the CEP as a major GKM tool during the case study the interview guide developed for the qualitative analysis did not address this program specifically. Another limit to consider relates to the fact that we interviewed only repatriates. Repatriates engaged as CEs might not be completely objective about their expertise or the knowledge transfer in general.

Future research should investigate the combining of GTM and GKM in order to systematically address new issues that might arise. The characteristics and the implementation methods of CEP should also be investigated, as well as other instruments that might promote intercultural dyadic learning.

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