Repatriation-returning home and adjusting
A qualitative study of the repatriation process in three Swedish multinational corporations

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Abstract

In order to stay competitive in the market, multinational corporations (MNC) need to expand their businesses in the international market. Sending employees to work abroad is a great way of expanding. However, having employees working abroad, brings a lot of advantages for the corporation, but it can also be a disadvantage for the corporation if the final step of international assignments, which is the repatriation process, has not been handled correctly. This thesis investigates how the managers of IKEA, Electrolux and SEB handle the repatriation process and how the repatriates experienced the process, during their pre-return period and post-return period. Our findings show that the repatriates experienced that the repatriation process was poorly conducted by the corporations due to lack of engagement from their side. On the other hand, managers of the companies felt that they handled the repatriation process very well. Therefore, it is essential that corporations prepare the employees well, before they start the international assignments, as well as help them to re-adjusting back in the home country. Working with practical expectations may lead to a smooth adjustment, which in turn, leads to a well-functioning repatriation process.

Key words: Repatriation, expatriation, MNC, pre-return repatriation, post-return repatriation
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1. Introduction

In the first part of the thesis, an introduction of the background, problem statement, purpose of the study and the research question will be presented. A presentation of the thesis and a general background view is essential to have a clear structure of what the thesis will be about. During the later sections of the thesis, sufficient information will be gathered in order to reach the purpose of the study and finally be able to answer the research question.

International experiences have become a critical asset for organizations (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). In order to stay competitive, a company must strive towards global knowledge (Paik, Segaud & Malinowski, 2002), such as global operations, business and cultural climates (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). One possibility to obtain this type of knowledge is to send employees, called expatriates, on international assignments (Paik et al., 2002). However, in order to obtain the certain knowledge and experiences that the expatriates are sent on international missions for, the companies need to handle the repatriation adjustment and re-adjustment process in the best possible way. The reason why the adjustment processes is essential is because unsatisfied repatriates may lead to the resignation, which in turn leads to financial losses for the company.

The quality of a company’s repatriation process and how effectively the repatriates are being managed and developed are crucial for the success of the international business (Linehan & Scullion, 2002). Multinational corporations (MNCs) need to expand globally to a higher degree and increase the presence of expatriates to remain competitive in the market today (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). The main purpose of sending employees abroad is to enable the expatriates to gain valuable knowledge that would be transferred to the company and gain experiences that can be beneficial for both the organization and the individual expatriate in the future (Webb & Wright, 1996; Harzing, 2001 & Clegg; Gray, 2002). Also, companies constantly search for different ways to expand and gain managerial control in the subsidiaries. Tan and Mahoney (2006) stated that international assignments reduce asymmetric information and communication costs between the headquarters and the subsidiaries that are placed abroad.

The international assignment can be seen as an integrated circular process that consists of three main stages, which are; selection and pre-departure, foreign assignment and the repatriation (Adler, 1986; Bonache, Brewster & Suutari, 2001). However, other scholars state
that there is a disproportion between the focus on the expatriation and the repatriation (Cox, Khan, & Armani, 2013; Kraimer, Shatter & Bolino, 2009). The repatriation is often overseen by executives since they identify the return of the expatriate as an unimportant issue (Black et al., 1992). At the end of international assignments, and after the transfer of the repatriate, the journey of going back ‘home’ tends to cause a situation of high anxiety for the repatriate. The situation is often challenging and many corporations do not have proper policies and procedures arranged for the return of repatriates (Yeaton & Hall, 2008). As mentioned by Black et al. (1992), this is due to the fact that corporations do not recognize the repatriation phase as an important stage of the international assignment.

The process of expatriation can be used for several reasons. The first reason is, as mentioned earlier, to gain valuable knowledge and experiences that would be beneficial for the MNCs and also for the expatriate’s personal development. Another reason is to support foreign operations within the same company. Lastly, the process of expatriation is also due to organizational development (Webb & Wright, 1996; Harzing, 2001; Clegg & Gray, 2002). Nowadays, expatriation is a valuable source and organizations are recognizing the need of information exchange between local offices and the headquarters. The possibility to develop potential talents through expatriations missions abroad is also essential for MNCs (Dickmann, Brewster & Sparrow, 2008). As the importance of expatriation is advancing, new crisis are thus arising. Substantial number of international assignees quit shortly after the repatriation. Hence, successful retention management is an important part of a successful approach, in order to enhance the repatriates knowledge transfer (Harzing & Pinnington 2015, p. 398). Expatriates are considered to be a key source of knowledge for an MNC. Nevertheless, in many cases, the knowledge acquired by an expatriate may be difficult to transfer and disseminate within the organization upon the return from an international assignment (Stroh et al., 2000).

The repatriation process is crucial to be managed effectively by corporations, in order to develop more opportunities within international assignments (Paik et al., 2002; Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). By conducting this research, where the main focus is the repatriation process, awareness will be created amongst the readers about the challenges that the expatriates face during their repatriation process and how multinational companies handle this process. Thus, the empirical analysis will be done from both the HR managers’ and the repatriates’ perspectives regarding the repatriation process, in order to analyze whether there
is a gap of different opinions about the expectations and reality between the two parties and how to improve the repatriation process for well-functioning repatriation adjustment. Nonetheless, due to lack of investigation within this subject throughout the years, some of the references in the thesis will be old. However, since the subject is still a relevant topic in the business world today, the references will be an essential part of the paper.

1.1 Problem statement

In order for businesses to expand globally, employees are sent abroad every year. After accomplishing the international assignment, an employee comes back to contribute his or her newly gained knowledge and foreign experiences to the home company with a hope to achieve recognition and progress within the job. Hodgetts and Luthans (1997) state that, repatriation occurs when an expatriate of a multinational company returns to the home company after an international assignment. Repatriation is considered as a less important issue for many companies, when it in fact can often bring challenges to the expatriates’ lives. According to observations, the main problem is when an employee moves alone or with his or her family to a foreign country with cultural differences and specific social and economic contrasts (Klaff, 2002; Tung, 1988). Challenges with cultural shock that may arise for an outgoing expatriate in the host country, may also arise when the repatriate returns home, which is reversed cultural shock (Doherty & Dickman, 2008, p. 257). Cultural shock refers to when expatriates experience cultural adaptation difficulties in the host country while reversed cultural shock indicates that the repatriate recognize the same difficulties after homecoming. They often sense that they are overlooked by the organization and some experience a “career wobble” (Doherty & Dickman, 2008, p. 257). Moreover, in some cases, repatriates feel dissatisfied with their career growth and experience that their work abroad has not been rewarded in regards to the career advancement in the home organization. Companies often take the repatriation adjustment process for granted because companies assume that employees can adjust by themselves without any support from the organization (Connolly, Jassawalla & Slokowski, 2004). Subsequently, many companies main focus is on the expatriation, rather than on the repatriation. Since the repatriation process is a major part of the international assignment, it becomes problematic for companies to neglect it. Nonetheless, the repatriation process is not a self-driven procedure, but it implies considerably more difficulties and issues than expatriation (Paik, Segaud & Malinowski, 2002). In addition, the negligence of the repatriation process may lead to difficult situations for both the companies
and the repatriates. For instance, considerably poor repatriation process can dissatisfy the repatriates, which may provoke them to quit their jobs after return. Doherty and Dickman (2008) claim that if a repatriate choose to leave the organization after homecoming, valuable knowledge will be lost. Consequently, companies will lose a huge investment because of the expenses of the expatriation. In addition, due to the often poorly handled repatriation process, future employees will not feel encouraged to go to foreign countries for international assignments. Thus, companies should consider it as an important issue and take their responsibilities with developing and improving the repatriation process, in order to minimize the risks of facing adjustment difficulties for these employees. These responsibilities will ensure smooth re-adjustments for the repatriates.

1.2 Purpose of the study

Based on the problem statement above, the repatriation process should be considered as an important phenomenon. In this study, we will investigate how the three Swedish multinational companies deal with the repatriation process, in order to gain a deeper insight from the companies’ point of views. Moreover, we will also observe the phenomena of what obstacles the repatriates of the three Swedish multinational companies are experiencing during their repatriation adjustment phase. This phenomenon has not been considered as an important issue within companies, and has thus not been examined thoroughly by other researchers. Nevertheless, the purpose of this study is to present the differences between the HR managers of the companies’ point of views, as well as the repatriates’ point of views. The different factors that are significant to incorporate in the company’s repatriation process in order to facilitate a smooth repatriation adjustment will also be presented. Thus, expectantly, this thesis will benefit both the companies and employees by improving the corporations’ strategies towards potential issues with international missions.

1.3 Research question

What factors should be improved in the repatriation process, in order to facilitate the repatriation adjustment process?
2. Theoretical framework

This part will offer an introduction to the topic and also the related key concepts. The purpose of this is to provide an enhanced understanding of the topic and a deeper view of the theoretical part of the thesis. The parts that will be brought up during this section are international assignment, expatriation and repatriation, the model of the framework, pre-return repatriation and post-return repatriation.

2.1 International assignment

International assignments refer to the concept of when organizations send employees on assignments abroad. As mentioned in the introduction, there are several reasons of why companies conduct international transfers within their company. Some of the reasons could be to fill empty job positions in the host country, transfer technical and managerial knowledge and developing the organizational by establishing desirable collaboration between the headquarters and subsidiaries. Regardless of where the expatriates are relocated, cultural change may imply certain discomfort and if the employee fails, the entire international assignment can be at risk (Mangala, 2005). According to Stroh et al. (2000) quitting the job shortly after arrival means that the knowledge the expatriate has gained during the international assignment will not be disseminated properly in the home country. Albeit the reason for the majority of failed international assignments is expatriates return home prematurely.

2.2 Expatriation and repatriation

According to Lazarova and Tarique (2005), when a company sends employees abroad for a longer assignment, he or she becomes an expatriate. Nonetheless, repatriation is the last step in the expatriation cycle (Paik et al., 2002; Riusala & Suutari, 2004) and involves readjustment and re-entry of international managers and their families back to their home country (Linehan & Scullion, 2002). Expatriation and repatriation are not two separate processes, but rather the former is a beginning and the latter is the closure of the same process (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). To provide a clearer view of the definitions; an expatriate can be defined as an employee in an organization who is a citizen in one country but working in another country for a period of time (Hill, 2014). Furthermore, the same person becomes a
repatriate when he or she returns from the international assignment to the home company (Hodgetts & Luthans, 1997). Hurn (1999) adds his view on this statement by mentioning that the repatriation process should not be isolated, but instead be perceived as the ongoing development process for the employees and also for the organizations. There are two main reasons for the organizations to improve and be more involved in the repatriation process (Harvey, 1982). Firstly, organizations invest a lot of resources to an expatriate. If the expatriate leave the job incomplete, there will be immense losses for the company. Not only will the monetary resources invested by the organization be lost, but the experiences and the valuable knowledge will also go in vain if the employees leave the organization. Secondly, if the organization is unable to deal with the problems that may transpire, the optimistic viewpoints may eliminate from international assignments and the employees may not be willing to go for future international assignments (Ibid).

2.3 Model of the framework

The repatriation process starts before the actual return of the international assignment (Black et al., 1992; Howard, 1974; Kendall, 1981). The process can be divided into two parts, depending on which time frame the process takes place: pre-return repatriation and post-return repatriation (Figure 1). In this framework, different types of factors will be presented and the division may not be precisely equally distributed in the time frames (Black et al., 1992). The theoretical framework of this paper is influenced by the model of Black et al. (1992), called “Basic Framework of Repatriation Adjustment”, which is the main structure of this framework. Nonetheless, the content of the different text boxes are modified by other studies and theories, to gain a broader view of different steps. The model is the foundation of this research. The pre-return time frame in the model indicates how well the expectations of the repatriates’ will be fulfilled. The post-return factors will also play an important role and show how the readjustment of the repatriate can be successful. “Expectation” is shown in the pre-return time frame and this factor permeates the repatriation process (Black et al., 1992). As displayed in figure 1, all parts of the time frame are connected to each other. An arrow connects the expectation from the pre-return period with the repatriation adjustment of post return time frame. This indicates that the expectation is the sub target and the requirement for a successful repatriation adjustment is the main target. If all factors in both time frames would be handled properly, the outcome would thus be beneficial for both the companies and for the employees (Ibid).
2.3.1 Pre-return repatriation

Black et al. (1992) and Connolly et al. (2004) claim that it is essential that the employees are prepared and aware of possible risks prior and during the international mission, in order to be able to decrease potential problems.

**Expectations**

Most employees begin to make their own predictions about the future of their expatriation period, before starting the international assignment abroad. Similarly, during the repatriation period, repatriates start imagining their homecoming and the diverse changes that have occurred and simply going back to the “real life” (Cox et al., 2013). Within both situations, the employee usually has different expectations in mind. However, the motives and expectations when sending expatriates on international assignments differ between the employees’ perspectives and the corporations’ perspectives (Paik et al., 2002). The expectation of the employee is to grow as a person and gain knowledge and experiences, whereas the motive and expectations of the company is usually to advance globally in order to have a competitive advantage. Difference between the motives and expectations occurs a lot within international businesses. Nevertheless, in order to facilitate the adjustment process for the repatriate, these differences need to decrease significantly (Black et al., 1992).
**Career plan**

Career planning is considered to be one of the most essential parts of the repatriation process. It involves communication between the employee and the management regarding the employee’s future and career when they return from the international assignment. According to Cox et al. (2013), the career planning should be decided prior the homecoming of the expatriates and is thus included in the pre-repatriation timeframe of the repatriation process. In this part, the manager and employee discuss the future of the employee from the career aspect, and clarifies what the employee may expect from the company upon return. A well-structured career planning helps an expatriate to plan his or her future. Hence, instead of imagining unrealistic future progress, the employee can plan something constructive in advance. This will in turn make them more aware of the reality that they will face after homecoming. Eventually, an evident career planning decreases the gaps between the expectations and reality in terms of work aspects (MacDonald & Arthur, 2005). Furthermore, career planning will also generate a stronger allegiance towards the organization and the repatriate will be inspired to remain in the same organization after completing the international assignment (Stahl, Miller & Tung, 2002)

**Communication**

According to Black et al. (1992), expatriates may create ‘mental maps’ that refers to their expectations regarding their future after homecoming. ‘Out of sight, out of mind’ can provoke them to feel that they are forgotten. This can be solved by keeping the expatriates updated of the potential changes in the home organization (Allen & Alvarez, 1998). Adler (1981), states that employees who are frequently up-to-date and communicated with their manager in the home country, have less expectations about the future. Having a constant communication with the manager increases their willingness to be loyal and stay in the same company after homecoming. According to Shilling (1993), the key to a successful multinational corporation is to handle the repatriation process properly and have a constant communication with the employees working abroad. Other researchers continues by claiming that the communication between the expatriate and the organization can be conducted either through having the expatriate make periodic visits to the home country or by assigning them a contact person (Allen & Alvarez, 1998; Stroh et al., 1998). An assigned contact person would keep the expatriate well informed regarding the organization and the home country. In turn, this would facilitate the adjustment and possible homesickness for the employee (Black et al., 1992). Hence, the main responsibility of the contact person would be to act as an intermediary
between the expatriate and the organization. Black et al. (1992) also state that period visits to the home country decreases the anxiety that repatriates feel in regards to going back home. By visiting the home country during the international mission, the expatriates get a chance to interact with the colleagues personally and get updates from the home office. Besides, they would also be able to share their acquired knowledge and experiences. Both strategies would thus improve the repatriation adjustment process more smoothly (Ibid).

**Preparatory training**

Preparatory training is another essential part of the pre-return repatriation. The reason is because it provides the repatriates with practical training and mentoring or training sessions. This type of training makes the repatriate more prepared for potential challenges in the upcoming, since it occurs prior to the homecoming, in order to facilitate for the adjustment process of the repatriate. According to Black et al. (1992), preparatory training also increases the expatriate’s knowledge and understanding of the differences between the countries in terms of cultural differences and norms. Assembling training sessions prior to the homecoming educates the expatriates on how to deal with the future repatriation adjustment process. Thus, by providing preparatory training to the expatriates, multinational companies will also benefit from it in the future, as the repatriation adjustment process becomes smooth.

**2.3.2 Post-return repatriation**

In order to reach a successful repatriation process, all elements of the process must be successfully accomplished, such as the pre-return and post-return repatriation. The re-adjustment in the home country can sometimes be more challenging than adjusting as an expatriate. Thus, the elements in the post-return repatriation are as essential as the elements in the pre-return repatriation (Black et al., 1992).

**Adjustment**

The last step in the repatriation procedure is the adjustment. According to Connolly et al. (2004), “an effective repatriation is reached when the repatriate is satisfied with the process”. Therefore, the way an expatriate adjust to the environment and the new culture is essential for their satisfaction with the repatriation process. The better the adjustment process is, the more knowledge and experiences the expatriate gain. The acquired knowledge and experiences would benefit the company, since that is the main goal of the international assignment. However, when finally adjusting to the host country, it can be more difficult to re-adjust back
to the home country, which is also an essential part of the adjustment process. But, since all elements in the time frame are connected to each other (figure 1), all parts of the pre-return and post-return repatriation must be fulfilled before a successful repatriation adjustment process can be fulfilled (Black et al., 1992).

Most multinational corporations have a large selection of employees. The common phenomenon is that employees often want to take the opportunity to make a career within international assignments. Due to the career development, they would hope for a promotion in conjunction with the home return (Black et al., 1992). Despite the fact that the employees are aware that they will probably not receive a promotion, they still expect to gain something in return for doing this huge “favor” for the company. Some scholars state that if a promotion is waiting for the expatriate, then they would put in additional hard work to prove how important their mission is for the MNC (Connolly et al., 2004). Nonetheless, since it is not always possible for companies to provide a job with a higher position to a repatriate, they should at least offer them a “temporary job”. The “temporary job” is a job that the repatriate would have until a position with a better job alternative is provided for the repatriate (Allen & Alvarez, 1998).

**Compensation**

Researchers have different opinions on whether compensation should be given to a repatriate or if a bonus should be applied to the salary. Dowling et al., (1994) argue that when the basic salary of an expatriate increases abroad, the other financial benefits e.g. bonus, allowances etc. increases as well. Nevertheless, if these allowances disappear after the return to the home country, it may be a shocking situation for the employee. This, in turn, can affect both the employee’s job satisfaction and financial situation. Price (1977) argue that “the higher levels of compensation, the higher is the job satisfaction” and vice versa. On the other hand, Black et al. (1992) state that high repatriation compensation can make the firm more dependable, which may lead to a higher commitment from the repatriate’s side, towards the company.

**Knowledge transfer**

Since the entire international mission is dependent on transferring knowledge to the home country, it must be performed correctly. Conversely, there is no direct way of transferring knowledge from a person to another person, but this can be done through having the repatriate get back to work and implement what they have been taught. Some researchers claim that
there is often lack of knowledge transfer within the repatriation process. One of the reasons for the lack of knowledge transfer may be that the repatriate does not find an interest in sharing the knowledge they have gained abroad, in order to still have a competitive advantage within the corporation (Chang, Gong & Peng, 2012). Another reason could be that the managers in the organization undeliberate prevent the knowledge from being transferred. This could occur by placing the repatriate in a situation or a job position where the employee cannot share their acquired knowledge from abroad (Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012). In regards to this point, if the repatriate would resign, it would be an immense loss of knowledge.

3. Methodology

*In the following section, the methodology will be presented, which indicates the process of how we went about in order to reach closer to the research question. The type of data that was collected and why the specific type of method was chosen is essential to be mentioned, in order to achieve trustworthiness within the thesis, which will also be presented in this section.*

3.1 Research method

The qualitative method is a procedure that is practical for both data collection and to analyze the collected data. This research methodology is necessary to gain an in depth understanding and insight about the topic (Collis & Hussey, 2014). Therefore, qualitative method has been chosen for this thesis as a research method. By conducting a qualitative study, there will be a clearer understanding of how the interviewees experience the repatriation process. The process of the study will involve a combination of research, analysis, and synthesis. Methodological assumptions will also be added, since it consists of assumptions made by researchers regarding the methods that are used in the qualitative research (Creswell, 2003). Also, it gives the reader a better understanding of the observable fact, which is about to be examined (Larsen, 2009). As stated by Routio (2018); “you start broad and then narrow it down as you learn more about the object of study”, which is a method that will be conducted throughout the paper. One of the reasons why we choose a qualitative approach is due to the interest we took in the interviewees’ answers and the differences between the answers of the two parties, in which we wanted to elaborate. Since the data collection is done through written questionnaires and interviews, this method will give us a deep understanding within the matter.
3.2 Research approach

Throughout the thesis, some observations have been done in order to come to a conclusion and closer to answering the research question. While making the observations, existing theories have been examined thoroughly to find reasonable explanations to the observations. Hence, abductive approach will be used as a means to test the theories. Abductive approach is a combination of both inductive and deductive approach (Bryman & Bell, 2013: 27). Inductive approach includes generating theory from the practice while the deductive approach is about having an existing theory and testing it in practice. Therefore, we used the abductive approach which is a mixture of both approaches, in which it makes room for new ideas to be generated (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Despite the fact that many of the references in the thesis are old due to lack of research within this topic, they are still up-to-date in today's international market. Nevertheless, by using an abductive approach, the old theories will be tested as well as new theories will be generated. Based on the existing theory and interpretations of the collected data, we have thus created a conclusion, as an explanation of the current situation in regards to the repatriation process.

3.3 Methodology for empirical data collection

3.3.1 Operationalization

This research is divided into two different viewpoints: HR managers’ viewpoint and the repatriates’ viewpoint. In order to get the best possible results, we have chosen somewhat similar questions when interviewing the HR managers and the repatriates. However, since the repatriates actually conducted the international assignment, the questions were more based on the time frame pre-return period and post return period (Figure 1). In order to reach a full accuracy of the thesis, a detailed interview guide was made. The interview guide consisted of 15 questions for the HR managers (Appendix 1) and 16 questions for the repatriates (Appendix 2), which will be discussed later. The HR managers in each company that we interviewed, works or have worked earlier with expatriates and repatriates. Prior to sending out the interview guide, each question was carefully thought out in relation to the whole thesis and what we wanted to get out from the responses. we sat down and thought of relevant questions that we should ask the HR managers. After the questionnaire, the interviews were conducted to collect the first hand data in order to reduce the risks of getting inaccurate information and avoid misunderstanding for the readers. The questions were quite similar for both parties, but more tailored towards if it was the HR manager’s or the repatriate’s who was
answering the questions. The specific questions were asked in order to get a closer look at the information regarding how the repatriates experienced the repatriation process versus how the managers experienced they handled the process.

The questionnaire does not always provide with detailed information whereas personal interviews give in-depth information. The interview guide was sent via email to the HR managers of the multinational corporations, IKEA and Electrolux. After receiving the responses from these companies, we gathered the information, summarized their answers and compared the answers of the two companies. Also, instead of transcribing their responses, we believed that in order to receive an overall view of their thoughts and experiences, a profound analysis of the responses were needed. Thus, after the collection and analysis of their responds, we were able to make a thoroughly full analysis of the thesis and come to a closer answer to the research question.

3.3.2 Data collection

A lot of studies have been done on the expatriates to investigate their viewpoints in regards to experiences and knowledge transfer. However, a fewer studies have been conducted on the repatriates and the company's perspective of the international assignment process. Therefore, we decided to conduct a study based on the multinational corporations’ point of views, more specific, the HR managers in each company that works with the whole expatriation and repatriation process, and also the repatriates’ point of views. The reason why their points of views are essential to the study is to be able to make a comparison between their opinions and how they have experiences the repatriation process. By conducting the comparison, Swedish multinational companies could thus improve the way they handle the repatriation process, in order to facilitate for the repatriates and benefit from their new acquired knowledge and experiences. In order to conduct the study from their point of views, we focused on collecting the data through a questionnaire interview guide, a personal interview, Skype and by phone. To obtain detailed answers from the interviewees, we had open questions for them to give us as freely answers as possible. According to Bryman and Bell (2013), open questions are often more beneficial for the reason that the interviewees can response in their own way, without being attached to make a choice between a few alternatives. Another reason is to encourage the interviewees to talk openly and freely and share their knowledge and experiences. By having closed questions, the interviewees would feel obliged to answer one of the fixed alternatives, even though they questions are not suitable for them. We wanted to avoid simple
answers as yes or no and instead get more detailed answers. In fact, these types of closed questions can in turn lead to inaccurate answers in which the result of the thesis becomes fallacious. On the other hand, the disadvantage with open questions is that the analyzing part is time consuming (Bryman & Bell, 2013).

3.3.2.1 Personal interviews
Another way of getting closer to answering the research question was by conducting a personal interview with the HR manager of international assignments in SEB and a repatriate of SEB. The procedure of the interviews was that we set up a meeting with the HR manager and later on with the repatriate during office hours in SEBs main office in Stockholm. The same detailed interview guide that was used for the questionnaires was also used for the personal interviews (Appendix 1 & Appendix 2). Nonetheless, throughout the personal interviews, some relevant supplementary questions were added as we went through the questions. The personal interviews lasted for about 40-45 minutes and gave us a deep insight of the corporations working process with the expatriates and repatriates from both the HR managers’ perspective, but also the repatriates’ perspective. After the interviews were conducted, we were able to form our own opinions from their answers, while keeping the theories that has been collected and the research question in mind.

The type of interview that was used was a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews follow a sequel order format for the questions that are asked to the respondents and there is a possibility to raise follow-up questions. This type of interview facilitates the opportunity to make comparisons between the results of the interviews, since the follow-up questions assist a reflective research (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Within the interview sessions, the questions were fully related to the topic, in which supplementary questions appeared in order for us to get a clear scenario of the repatriation process. Moreover, the detailed questions would give us a deeper understanding of the theoretical framework and empirical evidence part regarding the process and experiences of the repatriates. The empirical evidence is based on one’s observations and experiences, which is essential during the analysis and conclusion of a thesis, to elaborate the phenomenon of repatriation (Collis & Hussey, 2014). Thus, a clearer picture was gained of HR managers and repatriates working process in relation to the theoretical information that has been collected and the empirical evidence that was analyzed.
3.3.2.2 Phone and Skype meeting

The phone and Skype meeting were conducted with the repatriates from IKEA and Electrolux and one repatriate from SEB. The concept was the same as in the personal interview, where we used a questionnaire of 16 questions (Appendix 2) and tailored the sub questions after each individual’s answers. The questionnaire was, as with the questionnaire for the HR managers, relevant to the thesis and carefully thought out. The meetings lasted between 30 min - 1 hour.

3.3.3 Sampling method

This thesis is based on the case studies of three different companies. In order to find similarities and dissimilarities regarding the repatriation process, companies’ relevant information were investigated and analyzed. During the sample method, getting in touch with the human resource departments of the companies was quite difficult. Therefore, the snowball sampling was used in order to get in touch with employees of the companies. Snowball sampling was utilized by using different networks of friends, colleagues etc. (Bryman & Bell, 2013). The snowball sampling is also used to choose the companies and also find the repatriates, by receiving valuable information from existing employees of the companies who have contact with their ex-colleagues. This method has functioned well to find the people who are willing to participate, answer the written questionnaires and also take part in the personal interviews. Anonymity has been offered throughout the whole thesis period in order for the respondents to involve themselves and answer the questions freely.

According to Bryman and Bell (2013), a big sample of interviews offers more information and gives thus a wider scenario to analyze. By keeping this in mind, written questionnaire were sent by email to the HR managers of IKEA and Electrolux, while the HR manager of SEB agreed on a face to face interview for the research. The questions involved the repatriation process, and were asked in order for us to get a clear scenario of how they handled the process. Another part of this research was to find out how the repatriates experienced the repatriation adjustment. Thus, to investigate this, the six former repatriates from the three multinational Swedish companies were interviewed either by phone, Skype or face to face. The interviews were conducted accordingly to the interview guide (Appendix 2), and as mentioned earlier, all interviews were semi-structured. Since the main topic for the thesis is repatriation, the priority when choosing the right companies for the interviews was
that they ought, in some extent, conduct global business and have international assignments abroad. The companies were chosen based on previous knowledge and also from the available information on their websites.

3.4 Methodology for empirical data analysis

3.4.1 Execution of analysis

The execution of analysis in the thesis will be that the respondents of each company will be compared to each other, in order to find feasible patterns of similarities and dissimilarities. Furthermore, the repatriation process of the companies will be placed opposite to each other to get the most valid results. During the analysis, it is essential to have the research question in mind to be more determined and also to understand the selected topic. Having the research question in mind is of great significance for achieving a good analysis of the collected data and the empirical evidence. Furthermore, secondary sources and data are also utilized to support and, in some way, clarify the statements of the respondents.

3.4.2 Respondents

The summary of the respondents who participated in this research are shown in the table below. It is based on the numbers of participants who took part in the interviews. The interview part is influenced by the theoretical framework (pre-return term and post-return term) of this study. To protect the respondents’ privacy right, we tried to consider the issue with anonymity and keep it confidential. In this regard, we will not refer the respondents by names. Throughout the thesis, the managers will be referred to as HR manager for the specific company and the employees will be referred to as employee 1 - employee 6.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Employer</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Date of service</th>
<th>Repatriation from</th>
<th>Interview type</th>
<th>Duration of interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HR 1</td>
<td>IKEA</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2016 - ongoing</td>
<td>Email</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee 1</td>
<td>IKEA</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10 months (2018-2019)</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>50 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee 2</td>
<td>IKEA</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2 years (2014-2016)</td>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>45 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR 2</td>
<td>Electrolux</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2018 - ongoing</td>
<td>Email</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee 3</td>
<td>Electrolux</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3 years (2013-2016)</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>On phone</td>
<td>1 h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee 4</td>
<td>Electrolux</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1 year (2012-2013)</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>50 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR 3</td>
<td>SEB</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2017 - ongoing</td>
<td>Face to face</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>45 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee 5</td>
<td>SEB</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Face to face</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>40 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee 6</td>
<td>SEB</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1 year and 6 months</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>On phone</td>
<td>30 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.4.3 Trustworthiness

When writing a thesis, it is of great importance to have a trustworthy research paper. In order to evaluate the trustworthiness, reliability, validity and replication are crucial elements. In terms of reliability, a study must be repeatable and consistent to be acknowledged as reliable (Bryman & Bell, 2013, p. 41). During the research, we have gone through several researchers and compared them, to be as reliable as possible. The answers we have found were quite similar to each other, which explain that this type of study has been done repetitively. Also, to increase the reliability, we repeated some of the questions during the interviews, but with different words so that it could be understood easily. A lot of time was spent on designing the questionnaires and come up with relevant questions, to make the questionnaire more consistent. The other essential term, replication, refers to a study that can be replicable. In order for a study to be replicable, the researcher must describe the process of the study in
detail. Otherwise, the study would consist of a lot of gaps and errors that would make it extremely challenging for other researchers to conduct a new study (Bryman & Bell, 2013, p. 41). Hence, the procedure of the methodology section in our thesis is explained in great detail in order for future researchers to be able to replicate the study.

Lastly, validity in a study measures if the concept truly is measured by the conceived indicator (Bryman & Bell, 2013, p. 159). To implement that concept, we have tried to come as close to the truth as possible behind the repatriation process, by conducting interviews with two of the parties (HR managers and repatriates) involved. Also, since it requires solid and evident theory noted by other scholars (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), we went through old studies to make sure the problem is legit. Nonetheless, it is quite difficult to measure validity because it needs to be accurate in order for it to be valid, which has been done through the thesis by measuring the study and comparing it to other studies. Gathering relevant data creates immense value to the research. It is essential that the information gathered from the written questionnaires and interviews are applicable on the selected topic, since accurately conducted interviews are a requirement to achieve a proper analysis (Ibid). To attain a higher level of validity, the questions that were asked to the interviewees were designed according to the theoretical framework that highlights the elements of the repatriation process. Furthermore, to exclude possible mistakes and avoid misunderstandings, the questionnaires were tested on some of our fellow classmates and revised them afterwards. Despite the differences between reliability, validity and replication, the three terms are linked to each other and necessary to make a research paper trustworthy. Without reliability, validity or replication, the paper would not be valid and vice versa (Bryman & Bell, 2013, p. 161). Therefore, during the thesis writing, we have ensured that our writing would consist of all three parts.

3.4.4 Ethical values

During the writing of the paper, ethical values should be taken into consideration. The ethical guidelines that are usually discussed by researchers are the following: Informed consent, confidentiality, consequences and the role of the researchers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In terms of informed consent, the respondents were fully aware of our research, and received all the necessary information regarding the topic prior to the interview. They were anonymous throughout the whole process to keep the confidentiality in place. Moreover, potential risks and consequences were discussed with the respondents and they were told that they could
withdraw themselves from the interview anytime. Finally, the role of researcher was to ask relevant questions and be unbiased to all companies involved, which was possible due to lack of personal connection to the companies. For that reason, the study was possible to conduct without violating any of the ethical values.

3.4.5 Limitations on methodology

Limitations on the methodology could affect the result of the study a bit. The first limitation was that the respondents made their international assignments in different parts of the world. That means that the cultural distance could have been experienced differently depending on where in the world the respondents were. For instance, the respondents who were in China may have had more difficult to adjust and readjust back in the home country than the respondent who were in Latvia, due to the immense cultural differences and distance. Another limitation is that the respondents were on an international mission during different periods. A lot can change throughout the years, in regards to the industrialized world and changes within the companies. The third limitation is that some of the respondents went on a short-term assignment while other went on a long-term assignment, which may differ a lot. Some people can experience the adjustment process to be easier within the short-term mission, since it involves only a few months. On the other hand, other people could experience the long-term mission to be easier since they would get used to their “new home”, which makes the readjustment process in the home country more difficult. Lastly, more interviewees would probably give us more precise results, since we would have more data to work with. It would have been particularly good to get more perspectives from other HR managers on the issue regarding the repatriation process. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to lack of time in finding more suitable respondents. According to Larsen (2009), the foremost drawback of conducting a qualitative research by interviews is that it is time consuming, and the limitation of the number of respondents. Good time duration and a good number of respondents would give a research more empirical evidence to analyze, which would make the thesis more authentic.

4. Empirical evidence

In this section of “empirical evidence”, the three companies that the study revolves around will be presented. After the presentation, three of the companies’ HR managers’ views from
two time frames will be merged and presented in details. Lastly, the repatriates’ views will also be merged and discussed, but considering two time frames separately.

4.1 Presentation of the companies

**IKEA**

IKEA is a Swedish multinational company which was founded in 1943 by Ingvar Kamprad. The company sells Scandinavian modern “build yourself” furniture, home appliances and accessories. The concepts of IKEA are generated from the southern Sweden more than 70 years ago and it is still growing and improving. There are 422 IKEA stores operating in 50 countries/territories covering Europe, America, Asia, and Australia. During 2018, they had approximately 208 000, employees worldwide (IKEA, 2019).

**Electrolux**

According to the information found in the website, Electrolux shapes the lives with its reinventing taste, care and customized products for everyone. With its all services, Electrolux is making lives more enjoyable and sustainable for millions of people of all over the world. As Electrolux is a leading global appliance company, it places the consumers at the heart of everything it provides. It serves more than 150 markets annually by selling more than sixty million products. From year 1919 until the present, it is one of the Sweden’s largest multinational companies that experiences of large number of expatriates and repatriates, this is well suited for our case study (Electrolux, 2019)

**SEB**

Skandinaviska Enskilda Banken, SEB, is one of the biggest banks in Sweden and was created in Stockholm as the first private bank by the businessman André Oscar Wallenberg in 1856. As the bank was created, it made a lot of revolutionary changes in the banking world, since Wallenberg came up with the concept of having the capital of private persons lead the banks’ capital, in which they receive a higher interest rate in return. However, SEB is now a universal bank with offices all over the world such as Scandinavia, USA, Singapore, Hong Kong and parts of Europe (SEB, 2019).
4.2 HR managers’ views

A qualitative research method was conducted with questionnaires sent to the HR managers for Electrolux and IKEA and a personal interview with the HR manager of SEB. To justify the inquiry and the results extracted from the follow up questions, there answers have been merged in the next section to avoid repetition in the analysis part. All presented results are followed by the two time frames model, which is the pre-return period and post-return period.

4.2.1 Pre-return Period

Expectation

The HR manager from IKEA stated following; “IKEA believes that transferring people across borders strengthens the company’s development. It is a way to develop both the person who has been transferred and the recruiting organization”. According to HR manager, a repatriate can play all kinds of roles within the company, but they will be a key role to the corporation if the person has been on an international assignment. She also mentioned that the company expect the employee to be a resource for the company after accomplishing the international mission. According to the HR manager of Electrolux, “Electrolux sends employees for international assignments and expect that they solve the company’s business need, personal development of the assignee, spread the spirit of the company and to control the international function.” He then continues by saying; “CEO of our company believes that it is important to have international people and it is necessary to increase global mobility. Sending people around the world is an investment and we expect that our selected assignees will do well and want to stay within the company.” Additionally, the HR manager from Electrolux explained that the need to send expatriates abroad is due to lack of critical business skills that cannot always be found in the home country. Thus, the company expects that sending people abroad would help the corporation expand within their business mindset.

During the personal interview with HR manager for SEB, she explained that SEB have approximately 60 expatriates and repatriates every year. Some stay for the short-term assignments while other stay for the long-term assignment. The short-term assignment lasts for about 6 months - 1 year, in which it is often single people or people who do not bring their families on the mission and the long-term assignment is about 2-5 years, in which they bring their families with them and moves to the other country. The HR manager mentioned that the expectations for the expats is mainly that they should be really good SEB ambassadors when
they are abroad. Moreover, they expect them to come back with newly acquired experience and knowledge that they have received abroad, to put it in their daily work and also share with their colleagues.

**Career plan & preparatory training**

Prior to all international assignments, IKEA follows global handbooks and rules to be fair in the treatment of the co-workers, in order to treat everyone equally. This applies to the whole process, before, during and after the assignment and the benefits are connected to the applicable policy. Additionally, the HR manager of IKEA mentioned that they also have a mobility sponsor connected to the assignee, but not as an actual program. The HR manager of Electrolux stated that: “Expatriates are sent to solve a business need and the repatriate is a source of experience that we need to relocate and find a new and suitable position for.” The local HR departments decide how the expatriation and repatriation processes will be conducted and how much time should be invested, but as per HR manager of Electrolux, Global Mobility tracks all active assignments.

Preparations prior to the international assignment in SEB is that they have a meeting with the expatriates; explain to them the process and SEB policies according to the HR. Then they get a digital cultural training, together with the whole family, if they are all going abroad. Later on, the expats meet with a tax consultant, to discuss their finances and taxes when they leave. Also, SEB can provide them with a “look and see” trip, which means that they travel to the country that they will be settling in, together with their family, before the journey begins. This is done to facilitate for the international mission, in which they get familiar with the culture, receive help with finding an accommodation, schools and the office. Moreover, the way the HR manager of SEB and her colleagues handle the dilemmas is by having meetings with the expatriates prior the assignment about how important it is to keep up with the network in their home country and provide them with information about cultural shock. They also advise them to be proactive when it comes to finding the next job role. For some people, it is given to return to the role they had before, but many see the international mission as a career step in the bank and then want to take the next step when they return come home. However, the HR manager continued by saying that in general, expatriates from SEB are usually very satisfied with their experience.
Communication

According to the managers of IKEA and Electrolux, they have recruited employees to communicate with the expatriates. However, they were not interested in discussing further regarding the situation. On the other hand, the HR manager of SEB mentioned that they try to have as much communication with the expatriates as possible to facilitate their stay and help them out if they have any reflections. Nonetheless, it is not always an easy task since SEB is expanding all over the world and their expatriates have different international missions. Hence, the management needs to continue having a good communication with the expatriates in order to track their progress.

4.2.2 Post return period

Adjustment

There are a lot of positive aspects with international assignments. However, according to HRs of three of the companies’ manager, the main challenge they face is when expatriates return home. When an expatriate is abroad, receives a lot of helps from the surroundings. Everyone understands that they are in a new context with a new environment. Nonetheless, it can be very tough for the expatriate and their families to come back home, after they have been away for a long period. They pointed out that the reason for the difficulties with re-adjustment is the reversed cultural shock they face. Reverse cultural shock refers to the difficulties in adapting to the home country, after being away under a longer period of time (Doherty & Dickman, 2008, p. 257). In this context, the HR manager refers to when repatriates return home, people think that they should just unpack and live their lives as usual. But in reality, it takes a while before they have found their way back to their home country and can settle back again. Thus, the reversed cultural shock can be much worse than the cultural shock in the foreign environment (Ibid). However, regarding the supports that the companies provide to the expatriates during the repatriation process is a bit uncertain. According to the HR managers, the supports they provide depend on the designations of the employees and on the performances the expatriates show during the expatriation period.

Promotion and Compensation

As per the HR managers of both IKEA and Electrolux, the position of the repatriate is not guaranteed upon return, even though the repatriate is an employee in the organization. Regarding the career possibilities of the repatriates upon return, the HR manager of Electrolux stated that: “It depends on the individual and the position. Our goal is to provide the
repatriating employee with a new challenging position where he or she continues to develop and provide business value.” He continued by claiming that Electrolux supports the repatriates with the relocation services. Nonetheless, it depends on the individual and the lengths of the assignment. Prior sending an expatriate on an international mission, the employee should discuss and have sessions with an HR Business Partner to discuss the next step in the organization and the employee’s career path.

The HR manager from IKEA claims that: “IKEA is applying different handbooks/rules/policies depending on the assignment and role that are going to be played by the expatriate.” She also mentioned that IKEA is working actively in the competence and personal development of the employees. After the return of the employees, IKEA provide services to the repatriates that depends on the type of policy that the repatriates are on and in which it can be connected to the different repatriation policies or packages. SEB’s HR manager stated that there are different possibilities for the repatriates in all parts of the bank after returning from an international assignment. They can either stay within their roles or upgrade and it is up for the employees to decide the next career move. Many employees constantly change roles within the bank, and the same goes for expatriates. She continues by saying that some repatriates change position because they have been abroad for many years and SEB would have had to hire a replacement. Hence, it would be quite natural for them to change position. However, most people usually want to step up or move on with their career within SEB.

Knowledge transfer
The last part in the questionnaire was regarding knowledge transfer. The questions we had for the managers of Electrolux, IKEA and SEB were mainly about how they obtain the knowledge that the repatriates have gained abroad. Also, we asked how they would handle potential dilemmas of repatriates in terms of knowledge transfer upon their return. The answers of IKEA and Electrolux were quite similar, in which both HR managers stated that the primary way of retaining knowledge is by having the employees share their experiences and knowledge with the rest of the organization. This, however, can always be improved and the organizations are working on finding solutions on how to improve the knowledge transfer. Potential dilemmas in terms of repatriates knowledge transfer can always be challenging, which is why the companies must continue on working with improving the knowledge transfer. The key to a proper knowledge sharing is thus, to plan it correctly according to a
specific time plan and reasonable structure. Nonetheless, the HR manager of SEB explains that after the international mission, the repatriates are put in jobs where the managers want the knowledge to land. The knowledge comes automatically as they do their job. There is no process where the managers can “empty the repatriates brains on information”, but SEB have lots of business trips before and after an employee has been on assignments. Conversely, SEB feels like it is a loss of knowledge if the repatriates resigns from SEB after returning home, but the statistics number are not higher than the normal staff turnover number in SEB.

According to the HR managers of IKEA and Electrolux, international assignments are very beneficial for both the expatriate and the corporation. The corporation receives new knowledge transferred from the organization in the host country simultaneously as the expatriate receive a new social and business environment. They learn to work with new colleagues with different cultural backgrounds and also experience new things from different angles. What they later on add to the organization is the experience and knowledge of working in another location in a different environment, which in turn allows the home office and the host office within the same company, becomes more aligned but by the end HR of IKEA mentioned that they actually do not follow any specific ways to transfer the knowledge to the home office and Electrolux mostly depends on the global mobility.

4.3 Repatriates’ views

4.3.1 Pre-return repatriation

Expectation
The respondents had different views in terms of their expectations regarding the process of being expatriates. Employee 1 moved to India, which had one of IKEA’s headquarters among all Asian countries and his assignment lasted for a year. The reason why he became an expatriate was because IKEA wanted to open a new store in India. Despite him being in charge of the operation of the new IKEA set up, he was “overwhelmed” by the responsibilities. He mentioned that his primary expectation was to experience new culture of a new branch in a different country. Also, he expected to meet new people that could be beneficial for his future work, even though it was short time duration of the international assignment. In regards to the home country, he did not expect any salary rise or promotion as a reward for his international experience, but appraisal from the management and colleagues
would be appreciated. However, he was nervous before homecoming and the nervousness was increasing during the expatriation period. He was responsible for a big team, the working hours were lengthy, and the working environment was totally opposite to Sweden. Nevertheless, he did not consider the situation as burden. Employee 1 stated: “My expatriation period was not as smooth that I thought it would be, but I enjoyed every challenge and all responsibilities I faced there.” When returning to the home country office, he was disappointed with the negative attitude that came from the management. The management said that employee 1 should not expect anything from the company only because he has gone for an international assignment. He described his hesitant feelings as: “Should I still feel committed for this job?”.

However, employee 2 went for an international assignment for two years in Romania, where he worked with other international assignees from diverse countries. Compared to employee 1, employee 2 had a lot of expectations, in which he was very positive about the mission and eager to move. The main purpose of his international assignment was to develop the networks between the two companies’ employees, cope with new challenges in a different environment and share his newly achieved knowledge after homecoming. In return to providing the knowledge to the company, he expected a promotion with a good salary rise. Nonetheless, he was uncertain about the future status of his job after repatriation. He hesitated a lot if the company would upgrade him after the international mission or not.

Employee 3 claimed that she was really enthusiastic for the international assignment because her main motive was to experience something new and challenging and explore a different culture. She mentioned that she was waiting for this opportunity for a long time because she was bored of working in the same position and started to lose her confidence. Employee 3 was expecting that this international experience would take her to the next hierarchical ladder with a good salary increase after homecoming. In contradictory, employee 4 opened up with a different view regarding his expectations from the home country office. He was aware about the upcoming repatriation process of the company. Earlier, his colleague went on an international mission and was downgraded in the job position when he returned home. Therefore, employee 4 did not expect a higher position in the home office, nor a warm welcoming after the repatriation. Despite the awareness he still wanted to do the international assignment, but was very stressed about the upcoming repatriation process that was waiting.
Employee 5 has been an expatriate several times due to the fact that she always signs up when her manager offers an international assignment. Her expectations when moving from Sweden to Latvia on a short-term assignment (6 months) was exciting, since it was a new country that she has never been to before. She was taught that all SEB offices looks the same and they work in the same way so she was expected the work to be similar to her home country. Nonetheless, despite the work being almost similar, she expected the culture to be very different. In regards to bonuses and wages, employee 5 expected a higher wage when she would return because, as she stated: “I provide new knowledge to the company and new knowledge costs”. Employee 6, however, was very keen to work in Singapore on a long term assignment (1.5 years) for the first time. He wanted to develop himself personality wise and operationally and also explore a new culture. Employee 6 did not expect a higher wage, but would obviously not turn it down if he would be offered a higher wage.

**Career plan**

Both employee 1 and 2 had career planning meetings with the human resource department before their expatriation periods. Before repatriation, both of them were uncertain about their career growth in their old offices, due to uncertain changes in the decision making that was taken before. According to the statement of employee 1, “My contract was for 1 year but I finished in 10 months”. That was the main reason for his uncertainty regarding the career planning process. Employee 2 claimed: “I finished my assignment according to my contract and the home office was aware of my repatriation date”. But he experienced himself being “one in the crowd” after the return because there was a new management that was planning the repatriation process differently. Hence, he had to arrange a meeting with the new management to be updated regarding his case. The result of the meeting was not that satisfactory as he expected it to be. He summarized by saying that: “It seemed like they had nothing to do except telling me to adjust.”

Both employee 3 and employee 4 had career planning meetings just before their repatriation with the human resource department and their assigned contact persons. Both of them mentioned that the information they got from the meetings were so clear and they knew beforehand what would happen after the repatriation. During the expatriation period, both employees got job offers from different companies from the home country. However, they were not convinced enough to take the job because the offers were from startup companies. Even though both of them were in positions to change companies due to their international
experiences and newly acquired knowledge, they did not want to because of the brand value of Electrolux that convinced them to rethink. Neither employee 5 nor employee 6 did expect immense changes within their career after moving back home. Both of them wanted to be expatriates mainly for personal reasons and to expand their experiences. Also, since both employees are adventurous, they wanted to travel and experience the world, simultaneously as they would help SEB. Being expatriates would be seen as a win-win situation for both parties. Nevertheless, a move in the careers would naturally be a positive aspect.

**Communication**

Employee 1 was happy with the communication throughout the international mission. He had a constant communication with his contact person to inform about his progress. As he was updating about his job, the contact person provided him with updates about what was going on in the home country office. Employee 2 claimed that his contact person was good at the beginning but after 6 months it became hard to get in touch with him. He came to know later that the contact person became busy with other international assignees. At that time, he was in an ‘out of side, out of mind’ condition. Additionally, he mentioned that he had once a sporadic journey back home when he had a meeting with the management about the mission. Hence, the manager offered him a salary rise but not the promotion that he expected, which turned out to be a disappointment for employee 2.

Both of the respondents from Electrolux had assigned contact persons who guided them during their stay abroad and facilitated their practical issues. Employee 3 was very grateful to have a contact person who provided her with a lot of valuable information that helped her to adjust in the new environment. However, she found her contact person to be a bit lazy sometimes. Employee 4 also had an assigned contact person in the home office who updated him with global news and changes within the organization. Nonetheless, he complained that after the first year abroad, the communication was interrupted due to the change in the management team. Employee 5 experienced the communication not to be sufficient, since there were 12 employees going on the same mission. Thus, there was communication between the managers and employees prior the departure and a bit during the assignment, but in general, the communication was vague. Nonetheless, employee 6 believed the communication to be good pre-and during the assignment. He was well prepared before going abroad and whenever he encountered any dilemmas or problems, he would get in contact with the
manager and receive help. The reason for the great communication could be that he was the only employee from that department going on a long-term assignment.

**Preparatory Training**

As mentioned by employee 1, he did not receive any preparatory training. He was self-taught and learned about the country by himself. During the expatriate period, he met an expatriate from the same country, in which he gathered some ideas about the new country’s culture, people, lifestyle etc. He also tried to educate himself to learn their basic language. Employee 2 had almost the same experience. He did not receive any preparatory training from the home office but appreciated that the host country had some training arrangements for the employees.

Both employee 3 and 4 mentioned that they participated in the preparatory technical training that helped them during the expatriation periods. Employee 3 was involved with the technical team during her expatriation period, so she was focused on developing her technical skills before. Nonetheless, employee 4 went to China and had to contact local people to get basic Chinese lessons during the international assignments. He mentioned that: “I was so curious about their culture and started to self-educate me from different sources. The funniest part is that I learned how to eat with chopsticks from YouTube.”

Since SEB only has digital cultural training as a preparatory training, both employee 5 and employee 6 went through a digital cultural training. Besides, employee 5 had also workshops and “team building” trainings, which was very helpful since they work a lot in teams. However, as the HR manager of SEB mentioned, SEB do not have a mentoring program, but since there are many expatriates and repatriates each year, they “mentor” each other. Employee 6 got in contact with two other expatriates who were in Singapore a few years ago who helped them with all the questions and reflections regarding the cultural differences, work and living environment. Getting in contact with other repatriates was, according to employee 6, very helpful. Besides, he was offered a “look and see” trip, in which he declined, since he wanted to explore everything from the beginning by himself and did not want to waste time and money on the trip.
4.3.2 Post-return repatriation

Adjustment

In regards to adjustment, employee 1 did not face any adjustment problems. This may depend on that he was on a short time assignment and was constantly updated by his colleagues and friends from the home office. Furthermore, he mentioned that: “I was overwhelmed that I got back my own office desk after homecoming”. On the other hand, employee 2 claimed that after homecoming he had a few adjustment problems, in which he stated: “Some of my ex-colleagues had already changed the company and some went to other countries for international assignments”. When he returned to the home office, he felt that he was not welcomed properly.

Employee 3 stated that a lot of the adjustment process depends on the HR manager. She was satisfied with her manager from the beginning of the process. However, during the end of her expatriation, she had a felt that her manager abandoned her so she felt isolated and neglected. When she went back to the home office, she found out that the previous management was completely changed and new changes were still occurring in the office. It took time for her to adjust during the repatriation period. Also, employee 4 mentioned that the re-adjustment in the home country was very difficult because a lot had changed in the home office, and he felt a constant anxiety about his career. He had previous knowledge regarding the process of post-return, which made him even more concerned. Thus, he experienced the adjustment process as challenging.

According to employee 5, the digital cultural training helped a bit since she already had some information regarding the country and the culture. Employee 6 stated that the digital cultural training did not help whatsoever. However, both employees had a few “cultural differences” days in their respective countries, where the repatriates met the respective colleagues and got to learn about each other’s cultures and the differences between them. This is a common thing that SEB provide for expatriates. The “cultural differences” days facilitated the adjustment process for the expatriates, and they got more familiar with their new colleagues. Nonetheless, employee 6 had a bit more difficulties in adjusting in the new environment in Singapore, while employee 5 found the adjustment process very easy, since she went with 12 other colleagues and has been an expatriate before.
**Promotion**

Regarding the promotion, both employee 1 and 2 stated that they did not receive any promotion after returning to the home office. As mentioned previously, employee 2 was very disappointed and that disappointment provoked him to search for a new job but he was convinced by the management to not to leave the job. The situation for employee 1 and 2 were quite similar regarding the promotion. Employee 1 was the leader of a big team in the Indian office and the management of India was very satisfied with his performance. He mentioned: “my words were the conclusive words during decision making.” After the return home he claimed: “I got back everything I left here in the home office but nothing additional.” Employee 2 thought that he did such a good during his time as an expatriate, in which he expected a promotion. Nonetheless, after the return, he did not receive any endorsement or any promotion from the company to reach to a hierarchical position. According to employee 2, “I started to look for other jobs in different companies by using my own networks. I was so de-motivated and found myself very limited that the first solution that came to my mind was to quit the job”, he added. “But I did not change the job because the management convinced me to stay.”

Neither employee 3 nor employee 4 did receive a promotion in the home office after repatriation. Nevertheless, employee 3 had good technical skills and was thus offered a promotion for another city, but she found that to be inconvenient and rejected the offer. Employee 4 did not expect a promotion but was disappointed with the company due to how they handled the whole repatriation process. Also, employee 5 and employee 6 did not get a promotion post the return. As mentioned earlier, they did not expect a promotion since they went on the international missions for their personal development. However, it would obviously be a bonus for them if they would receive a promotion as well as personal life experiences.

**Compensation**

As mentioned previously, employee 1 was not compensated financially from the home office but he was satisfied due to a warm welcome that he received from his management and colleagues of the home office. That initiated him to “engage more in the management team”. Employee 2 was compensated financially, but had to wait for a long time for the compensation, since he had to prove to the managers that his international experience was valuable for the company. Employee 3 received compensation in terms of a bonus added to
her salary. Despite the small bonus, she believed that she deserved more due to her knowledge and skills added to the company and the fact that she turned down another job offer to stay with the company. According to employee 4, he did not receive any compensation from the company which de-motivated him and he started to look for other jobs. As a result, he resigned. Employee 5 received a high salary increase. According to her, it was well deserved, because she believed that she was a huge asset for the company. Employee 6 also received a bonus for the grateful help after the mission accomplishment. Besides the monetary part of the compensation, both employees received a warm welcoming and the colleagues and managers were curious about their international experiences. However, that lasted for a day before they continued on with their ordinary works.

**Knowledge transfer**

Employee 1 was satisfied with the arrangement of the home office because when he came back after a successful international assignment, the management arranged one seminar where he had the opportunity to share his “newly achieved knowledge”. At the same time he played a good role in the training sessions arranged by the company where he trained the future international assignees. Hence, from his part, he thought that his international knowledge was not wasted but successfully transferred. Nonetheless, employee 2 thought from the beginning that his international knowledge has no value in the home office. These thoughts crossed his mind due to the unusual behavior of the management that made him feel like he was neglected. However, after some meetings with the new management, his “international knowledge” got recognition.

Both of the employees mentioned that during these periods of time, the company had no structured knowledge transfer within the organization. The knowledge and skills that they obtained from the international assignments seemed to be useless in the home country office. Despite the lack of structure of knowledge transfer, employee 3 claimed that she took initiatives to share the technical knowledge that she achieved during expatriation. She made a technical team and once in a week, during the lunch breaks, she organized small question and answer sessions. That initiative led her to arrange full day seminars once in a month, where she invited other technical people who were expatriates or repatriates in different companies to share and train their technical skills. Due to employee 4 resigning, he claimed that Electrolux lost valuable knowledge when they lost him. As Nerv-Kjerfve and McLean (2012)
stated earlier; if a repatriate resign after an international mission, it is a huge loss of knowledge for the company.

Knowledge transfer within SEB occurs while working on the respective department. The department of employee 5 was planning on developing and improving the working process in Riga. When in Riga, the expatriates had a few seminars with their new colleagues to teach them their process ways. After the return to the home country, the knowledge transfer was, however, not transferred in a specific way, but the managers believed that the knowledge transferred through communication and in the daily work would be sufficient. Employee 5 disagreed and believes that the seminars were more useful way to transfer knowledge. Employee 6, on the other hand, believed that it was quite difficult in the beginning to obtain the knowledge from Singapore due to language and communication barriers in order to transfer it to Sweden. Nonetheless, when employee 6 returned to Sweden, the way of knowledge transfer was through him communicating and teaching his colleagues, what he has been taught in Singapore.

5. Analysis

In the fifth chapter of the thesis, findings and analysis will be discussed. This part begins with an analysis of the data collection, which includes the answers we have collected from the HR managers and the repatriates. The analysis will be divided in two parts, pre-return repatriation (career plan, communication, preparatory training) and post-return repatriation (promotion, compensation, knowledge transfer).

5.1 Pre-return repatriation

Career plan

Regarding the career plan, repatriates from IKEA and Electrolux knew beforehand, what would happen with them upon return to home country offices. As per the HR managers of both Electrolux and IKEA, the position of the repatriate is not guaranteed upon return, despite the fact that the repatriate is an employee in the organization. According to the HR manager of Electrolux, the career plan possibilities for the repatriates depend on the individual, the position and the duration of the assignment. The repatriates from SEB were unaware of the career plans that the company had before their repatriation. Hence, they did not expect immense changes within their career after moving back home, since they wanted to go on an
international mission mainly for personal reasons and to expand their experiences. The fact that four out of six repatriates had career plans prior the departure and two were uncertain, indicates that this specific part of the repatriation process should be improved, in order to facilitate the repatriation adjustment process.

Absence of proper career plans affects the careers of the expatriates during the international assignments. Also, it becomes more difficult to have realistic expectations about the future after the repatriation. The reasoning made by Cox et al. (2013) supports the importance of career plan that will facilitate the repatriation adjustment. According to Stroh et al. (1998), absence of career plan can lead to a negative shock, which in turn can hinder a successful readjustment. Feldman (1991) also pointed out the value of a clear career path for repatriates as a prerequisite for adjustment. For instance, a respondent repatriate from IKEA expected to get a promotion after the repatriation. He did not receive a promotion, but was instead offered a small amount of salary increase, which resulted in him leaving the job. To sum up, lack of proper career planning interrupts the repatriation adjustment process and can lead to employees leaving the company as a consequence of lack of commitment. This reason supports the theory of Stahl et al. (2002) who claimed that lack of career plan can lead to lower commitment towards the company which makes the repatriates want to leave the organization.

**Communication**

The respondents of Electrolux mentioned that some of the expatriates had the opportunity to have a contact person while in the host country to facilitate their lives and also to facilitate their upcoming process of the repatriation during their stay. The HR manager from Electrolux mentioned that the global mobility tracks all active assignments nowadays. IKEA has a mobility sponsor connected to the assignee but it is not an actual program. Employee 6 of SEB had positive opinions, in which he mentioned that whenever he encountered any dilemmas or problems, he contacted the manager and received help. The reason for the good communication could be that he was the only employee from that department going on a long-term assignment. This contradicts the situation of employee 4 from Electrolux who also went on a long term assignment and due to the changes in the home office management; his communication with the home office was interrupted. He then found himself abandon during the expatriation process, which affected his career too. Lack of communication makes the employees feel that they are forgotten and unaware of the changes in the home office.
Thereby, it supports the theory of Allen and Alvarez (1998) who state that the reason to keep a constant contact person for the employee overseas is to avoid the loss of visibility. The theory made by Hyder and Lövblad (2007) adds value on the previous theory. They argue that, in order to keep constant contact, updates towards the expatriates regarding the changes in the organization facilitates their expectations. Thus, companies should improve their communication with the expatriates to make their lives easier and facilitate the repatriation adjustment process.

**Preparatory training**

Since SEB has digital cultural training as a preparatory training, both employee 5 and employee 6 went through a digital cultural training. However, as the HR manager of SEB mentioned, SEB do not have a mentoring program as IKEA, who use their handbooks to facilitate for their employees. According to the HR manager of Electrolux, the local HR departments decide how the expatriation and repatriation processes will be conducted and how much time should be invested on it. The respondents from Electrolux stated that they had preparatory technical training, but most of the knowledge they acquired was by self-training. The HR manager of IKEA mentioned that they mostly depend on their handbooks, when it comes to preparatory training. Nevertheless, the type of training depends on the positions of the employees. According to both Stroh et al. (1998) and Black et al. (1992), preparatory repatriation training is important in order to make the future repatriate aware of, for instance, new values and codes. This preparatory training also reduces the risk for reverse culture shock because they would be aware of the changes and the repatriation adjustment would be smoother. When expatriates re-enter their home country, they might experience a foreign sense of feeling. At that specific moment, preparatory training could be useful.

**5.2 Post-return repatriation**

**Promotion**

As mentioned earlier, many people who become expatriates expect to receive some types of promotion. However, it takes a lot for a company to promote an employee merely for being an expatriate. During the interviews with the repatriates, most of them shared the same feeling regarding the disappointment of not being promoted. Besides, some repatriates mentioned that the immense de-motivation led them to resign from their jobs. Resigning from a job, after being on an international mission, is obviously seen as a loss for the company, according to
the HR manager from SEB. Therefore, not satisfying the repatriates with a promotion would be a waste of resource, time and capital. Hammer et al. (1998) support the perception of the employee’s dissatisfaction and state that going from a high hierarchical level to the lower level may cause lack of motivation. Nevertheless, after the repatriation, employees receive similar positions as they had prior the departure. This statement supports the theory which indicates that if a promotion will not be given to the repatriate, they should at least be offered a role that is comparable to their previous role in the company (Allen & Alvarez, 1998; Black et al., 1992; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001).

Compensation
In regards to the compensation part, a lot of miscommunications occur between the companies and repatriates. Most of the repatriates that we interviewed were very disappointed with the lack of compensation. This could also be a reason for employees to resign from their jobs, which in turn would also be a loss for the company. Nevertheless, the HR managers of the companies state that compensations are not needed because the international missions can be seen as compensation itself. They believe that repatriates already gain a lot of new knowledge and experiences, as compensation. Also, since most MNCs send lots of expatriates abroad every year, it would be a big loss for the company to provide compensation to everyone. Thus, companies and employees have different views regarding the compensation issue, which leads to an increased disagreement between the two parts. This issue could be an indication for companies to realize that they ought to provide the repatriates with compensation in order to improve their job satisfaction. Researcher claim that in long-term, this could lead to increased turnover rate (Dowling et al., 1994; Dulebohn and Martocchio, 1998; Feldman, 1991).

Knowledge transfer
None of the companies involved had a clear structure of how the knowledge would be transferred. Some of the repatriates took their own initiatives to share the obtained knowledge by conducting seminars. Others simply continued with their daily work, hoping that knowledge would be transferred to their colleagues while working. In order for the repatriates to feel like the international mission was not a loss for the company, a more accurate way of transferring the knowledge should be developed. Returning to one’s home country after several months abroad is not an easy task. Therefore, it is essential for the repatriates to be satisfied with their experience of having accomplished the goals they were initially intended
to complete. Besides, even if the knowledge has not been transferred as anticipated, the personal experiences and development can be counted as a victory for the repatriate. All the respondents who were expatriates emphasized the importance of taking responsibilities and wished to take the roles where their gained knowledge could be utilized. Knowledge transfer can be facilitated by giving the repatriates a higher job responsibility after homecoming and higher job responsibility to improve their effectiveness (Ratnam & Sansom, 1995; Adler, 1986). Since knowledge transfer is an essential part of the international assignment, more focus should be on improving the transfer.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The last part of the thesis will conclude our findings and results in order to answer the research question. The conclusion will be a summary of all the parts from the theoretical framework, methodology, empirical evidence and the analysis. Also, some recommendations for future research will be mentioned at the end of this section.

6.1 Conclusion

This thesis will provide an enhanced understanding of the repatriation process and examine the phenomenon of the repatriation adjustment among the Swedish multinational companies’, managements and the repatriates, involved in international assignments. This will be conducted by utilizing a qualitative case study approach. The formulated research question of the thesis is: “What factors should be improved in the repatriation process, in order to facilitate the repatriation adjustment process?” In order to reach the purpose of the study and come to a conclusion towards the research question, one has to understand the whole process that companies go through when acquiring an employee on an international mission to the homecoming of the repatriate.

During the research, we have examined the repatriation process from the companies’ and repatriates’ viewpoints. The different point of views on the diverse factors mentioned in our theoretical framework hamper the repatriation adjustment. According to Black et al., (1992) the result will be beneficial if the repatriation process is handled properly. The lack of contact with the home office can affect the repatriation process significantly. For instance, important factors of the repatriation process can easily be forgotten, such as career planning and preparatory training. Therefore, companies must improve their communication with the
expatriates, since it is as important part of the process as any other. Career planning is also an important factor of the repatriation process, so the repatriate would know what to expect when returning home. Absence of this factor may create unrealistic expectations for the repatriate about the homecoming, which can hinder a smooth repatriation. Additionally, if the communication between the both parties was conducted regularly, the repatriates would constantly be updated with changes in the home office, which would increase their sense of belonging. Thereby, these factors should be improved in order to achieve a smooth adjustment during the repatriation.

According to our findings, the repatriation is also a problematic phase for an employee because cultural shocks still exist when a repatriate comes back from the host country after long period (Doherty & Dickman, 2008, p. 257). It has been observed that lack of preparatory repatriation training create problems for the repatriate with the adjustment to the new culture. Preparatory repatriation training should be considered as an essential factor in the repatriation process and should thus be practiced within the company to facilitate the expectations of the repatriates. This factor prepares the repatriates for potential cultural shocks and helps to plan for future adjustment. Also, another issue we observed was that repatriates were not always placed in the same level of job position as before the mission, but downgraded. It is important that repatriates receive a position where they would feel appreciated after their international assignment. Not being rewarded or acknowledged may also lead to that the repatriate resign. What supports our findings is that the respondents who received a good compensation upon return seemed more satisfied than the other repatriates who did not get any compensation. Therefore, promotion and compensation goes hand in hand and further motivates the repatriates to stay in the company. Thereby, these two factors should be handled properly and taken into account by the companies for a successful repatriation adjustment.

Another obstacle that occurs on the way to a successful repatriation process is the challenges that repatriates face with transferring their newly gained knowledge to the home office. Majority of our repatriates are more or less unsatisfied with the knowledge transferring process arranged by the companies. They may even feel discouraged to continue with their jobs. As noted from our observations, this structure can be improved by the companies. Otherwise, the whole repatriation process would be incomplete and they would not be able to reach the purpose with the international assignment. Consequently, the companies would lose both the international knowledge and the resources they invested for the repatriates. Hence,
this factor should be improved to assure a well-functioning repatriation adjustment process. As a conclusion, in order to ensure a successful repatriation adjustment, companies need to be aware of the repatriates’ point of views regarding the international assignment and the repatriation process. Accordingly they should develop their repatriation process.

6.2. Recommendations for future research

Multinational corporations constantly try to find new ways to expand in. International assignments are a great way to develop their organization and reach new markets globally. However, if they way of expanding is not handled correctly, the company may experience great financial losses. Based on old studies and our current research, future researchers could investigate this matter more deeply. Recommendations for future research is to conduct a larger sample size, consisted of more respondents from a wider range of companies. Having a wider range of people to interview from more companies would give the researchers more data to analyze, which would increase the accuracy of the thesis. Also, a larger variety of countries would point out if there are any indications of a global pattern of similarities and dissimilarities regarding the repatriation process. Moreover, there could be more potential obstacles that have not been mentioned during our interviews, which could be significant for future research. Hopefully, companies will take our recommendations for improvement seriously in order to develop and improve their repatriation process.
References


Appendix 1

Questionnaire (For the HR managers)

Name:

Designation:

Job responsibility:

Joining year within the organization:

Number of international assignments:

1. What are the roles of the expatriates and repatriates in your organization?
2. What type of preparations do you follow prior to the international assignment?
3. Do you have any mentoring program for the international assignees?
4. What are your expectations from the assignees on how they should handle the assignments?
5. How do you work together during the assignment?
6. If a repatriate experience any problem, how do your organization handle it?
7. How do you handle the adjustment process of the repatriate?
8. Do you provide career counselling?
9. What are the career possibilities of the repatriates after returning home?
10. Do you provide any facilities to the repatriates after they return home?
11. Why are international assignments necessary for your organization?
12. What does a repatriate add to the organization?
13. Do you have any suggestion for future repatriates?
14. How do you handle possible dilemmas of repatriations in terms of knowledge transfer upon return?
15. How do you obtain the knowledge that the repatriate have gained abroad?
Appendix 2

Interview guide (For the repatriates)

1. Where and when did you go for the international assignment?
2. How long were you there?
3. How was your experience as an expatriate?
4. What was your responsibilities?
5. How was the monitoring system between you and the home country office during your expatriation period?
6. Did you receive any preparatory training?
7. How did you experience the repatriation adjustment process after homecoming?
8. Do you think that your company have a well-structured repatriation process?
9. Did you have any career planning before going abroad as an expatriate?
10. Do you think that your company has utilized your knowledge that you gathered during your time as an expatriate?
11. How did you transfer your knowledge to your company that you gained from the international assignment?
12. How were you treated by your colleagues or managers after homecoming?
13. Did you receive any compensation/promotion after homecoming?
14. Did your expectation match the reality of your current situation?
15. Are you with the same employer with whom you were working before expatriation?
   a. If yes, did you think of changing after homecoming?
   b. If no, why did you change your previous job?
16. Do you have any suggestions to your company to make the repatriation adjustment smoother?